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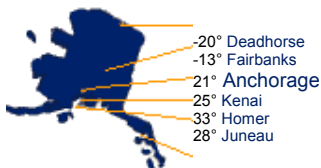
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Web posted Sunday, January 26, 2003

## Peninsula opinions differ on lease sales *Central area residents speak in favor; Homer residents opposed*

**By MATT TUNSETH**  
*Peninsula Clarion*

The battle over two proposed federal oil and gas lease sales in Cook Inlet is shaping up as a struggle between north and south.

The federal Minerals Management Service held public hearings on the proposed sales in Homer and Kenai this week, with testimony sharply divided between the two communities.

Roughly 250 people showed up at Homer High School on Friday night to protest the sales, saying they were against the sales for a variety of reasons.

Some reasons cited by Homer residents included possible oil spills, loss of aesthetic values and the potential negative impacts oil and gas development could have on fishing.

The proposed sales would offer roughly 2.5 million acres of land beneath Cook Inlet for oil and gas exploration. The government currently is in the process of finalizing its environmental impact statement for the proposal and is taking comments on the sales until Feb. 11. After the public comment period, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton will make a ruling on whether to proceed with the sales.

Kenai residents who met at the Merit Inn on Saturday said opposition in Homer doesn't necessarily mean the peninsula is against the sales. The Kenai Peninsula Borough already has endorsed a modified lease sale proposal that would remove 300,000 acres near the southern tip of the peninsula from the sales, and Kenai residents said they supported that position.

Kenai resident Blaine Gilman testified that due to dwindling natural gas supplies in upper Cook Inlet, new development is needed to ensure the economic stability of the area.

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"If they can't find new natural gas supplies, the type of community we have will change," Gilman said.

Concern about potential impacts to Cook Inlet's marine wildlife populations has been cited most often by opponents to the sales. However, not everyone agrees new exploration and development will harm the environment.

United Cook Inlet Drift Association President Roland Maw said his organization represents 585 commercial fishers who operate in Cook Inlet. He said his group believes fishers and oil drilling can peacefully coexist in southern Cook Inlet just as they have for years in the northern part of the inlet.

"We support lease sales 191 and 199," Maw testified. "This support is in recognition that for over 30 years, we as fishermen have successfully commercially fished while many oil and gas developments have occurred both on land and in the waters of Cook Inlet."

Of the 21 people who testified Saturday, only two said they opposed the lease sales.

Kenai's Chris Garcia said he believes natural gas supplies exist on the Kenai Peninsula itself, making drilling in Cook Inlet an unnecessary risk.

"I think the offshore lease is just a very bad thing, and I urge you not to do it," Garcia said.

However, others argued that the oil and gas industry is crucial to the survival of the region. Although petroleum development might not be entirely pretty, they said, it's vital to the economic stability of the region.

Kenai resident Ricky Gease -- saying he was responding to comments from Homer residents -- wore a white trash bag and sang a song as part of his testimony. Gease said he simply wanted to show support for the peninsula's "white trash industry," which is the backbone of the area's economy.

"Natural gas and oil are the underpinnings of the Kenai Peninsula and the state of Alaska," Gease said.

Gease -- who holds a master's degree in marine biology from Stanford University -- also bashed drilling opponents for saying oil drilling in the inlet will have a negative impact on its ecosystem.

"I eat about 200 salmon a year," Gease said. "These (Kenai) fish are not contaminated, and I don't see any health warnings on our Kenai Wild fish," Gease said.

Additional testimony on the proposed Minerals Management Service lease sales 191 and 199 will be taken via teleconference Tuesday, and written comments will be accepted by the government until Feb. 11.

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