

CSAW

Campaign to Safeguard America's Waters



Earth Island Institute

3/10/2008

Statement of Gershon Cohen Ph.D., at the S.B. 1582 "Ocean Ranger" Press Conference

I have been working to stop the release of polluted wastestreams into public waters for nearly twenty years. I have been a Project Director for the Earth Island Institute, focusing on industrial wastewater pollution issues, for the past ten years.

In 1999, I became aware through court records of numerous felony convictions against the cruise industry for dumping millions of gallons of toxic, untreated wastes into U.S. waters, including near my home in Haines, Alaska. Hazardous and conventional wastes containing high concentrations of toxic pollutants were being dumped into critical salmon habitat without a discharge permit under the federal Clean Water Act or the State's wastewater discharge permitting program. Pollution control equipment on board the ships was routinely disabled or purposefully circumvented, and logbook entries to the Coast Guard were falsified.

In 2000, former-Alaska Governor Knowles convened a joint panel of the Alaska Dept. of Environmental Conservation and the Coast Guard to investigate and evaluate the cruise ship dumping issue, and I was appointed to the panel to represent the public's interest. In 2000 and 2001, I participated in the development of state and federal laws intended to address the problem, but found in both cases that the industry's influence over the Alaska Legislature and the Alaska Congressional delegation were sufficient to significantly weaken the laws prior to passage.

In 2003, after assisting in the adoption of the California zero-discharge law, I co-authored with Juneau attorney Joe Geldhof, the Alaska Cruise Ship Ballot Initiative (CSBI), to bring the issue directly before the people of Alaska. Despite a multi-million dollar disinformation campaign by the industry designed to scare the public into believing the CSBI would destroy the Alaska tourism economy, our three year grassroots campaign was successful, and the measure passed by popular vote in August 2006. Alaska law now requires strict discharge permits, and the presence of a marine engineer, an "Ocean Ranger", on board every cruise ship while in Alaska waters to independently monitor the industry's environmental performance. The new law also established passenger fees to pay for the Ocean Ranger program and provide communities with funds to offset the industry's significant impacts on local infrastructure.

Working with Senator Simitian to adopt an Ocean Ranger program in California will ensure California's zero-discharge rule is being followed. S.B.1582 is the next step in the adoption of oversight policies along the entire west coast of North America needed to protect our waters, and everything and everyone that lives in them and depends upon them from cruise ship-generated pollution.