Around the world, coastal communities find themselves in the midst of expanding oil and gas exploration and extraction activities. Alaska’s North Aleutian Basin is the site of a proposed federal oil and gas lease sale. The 2007-2012 Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Proposed Program, developed by the U.S. Department of Interior Minerals Management Service, calls for North Aleutian Basin Lease Sale 214 to occur in 2011.

Across the basin, local community and fisheries stakeholders have been proactive in creating mechanisms for dialogue to learn about energy development plans, discuss concerns and identify impacts, and find common ground.

Abundant Natural and Energy Resources
The North Aleutian Basin is a large geographic area that encompasses the southeastern Bering Sea continental shelf, including all of Bristol Bay. The potential for natural gas and oil makes the basin particularly attractive for exploration.

The basin, the Bering Sea, and the 1,500-mile-long Aleutian Island archipelago contain some of the nation’s richest and most revered fisheries, marine mammal and seabird habitat, and stunning natural beauty. The region also has essential habitat for endangered species including the North Pacific right whale and Steller sea lion. The abundant natural fisheries resources are the foundation of the region’s commercial and subsistence economies and are integral to its people and communities.
Envisioning a shared future
In 2007, many of the region’s fishing groups and seafood processors, Native organizations, community leaders, environmentalists and conservationists, and energy interests launched the North Aleutian Basin Energy-Fisheries Initiative. The collaborative effort among stakeholders and the energy industry seeks to create a mechanism for dialogue, information exchange, and research planning.

To kick off this initiative, a free public meeting called the North Aleutian Basin Energy-Fisheries Workshop is scheduled for March 18-19, 2008, in Anchorage.

An Engaged University
The University of Alaska Fairbanks, through its Alaska Sea Grant College Program based at the School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences, was asked to facilitate this initiative and workshop. Partners include the University of Alaska Statewide and Norway’s Bodø University. Bodø brings firsthand experience to this effort, having assisted similar collaborations among fisheries and energy interests in Norway. The North Aleutian Basin Energy-Fisheries Initiative has more than twenty-two supporters and/or contributors.

More information is available at alaskaseagrant.org.