

Taking a look at fish, game councils

by Eileen MacLean
for the Tundra Times

BARROW — Earlier this month an interagency team representing the Federal Subsistence Board held meetings in a few North Slope communities and Kotzebue to receive comments on management of fish and game in the Arctic.

Inupiat Paitot
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OPINION

The interagency team included representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Park Service. Similar meetings have been scheduled in other areas of the state in preparation for permanent management on federal lands in Alaska.

The board is scrutinizing existing state decisions, as well as fish and wildlife regulatory practices on federal lands. Also being looked at are possible changes under federal management.

Protection of subsistence rights is crucial in both the North Slope and Northwest area. People of these areas have a long-standing use of the resources.

Besides the traditional and direct dependence on fish and wildlife harvests, rural Alaska does not have alternative sources of food enjoyed by urban Alaskans. It is therefore imperative that residents be assured access to local fish and wildlife resources.

It would be ludicrous for the Federal Subsistence Board to declare this vast region, where the costs of transporting goods and services are staggering and jobs are often seasonal, "non-rural" for subsistence purposes.

The North Slope and Northwest Arctic communities have a "customary and traditional" use of all major fish and wildlife resources in their respective areas and should retain these uses under a federal management program.

People participate in hunting or fishing year round to feed their families and share with others in the community.

The Federal Subsistence Board should not adopt all the state hunting and fishing regulations without first determining whether they are appropriate. Some clearly are not.

What's needed is consultation with local residents most dependent on the resource who know best about its sustainability and if restrictions are needed. This will help identify problem areas.

Problems with the state management have centered around lack of communication with local subsistence users and the increasing influx of sports hunters from urban areas and outside the state competing for the resources.

The advisory committees, established under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act to enhance communication among regulatory agencies and local subsistence users haven't been as active as needed.

These advisory committees would comprise representatives from all communities of the North Slope and Northwest area who hold frequent meetings to make proposals about needed fish and game management changes.

In addition, the committees should



make sure the departments and state government are aware of the concerns of local people.

However, because the majority of these advisory committees are inactive, constituents haven't been effectively represented. Most committees have vacancies and insufficient funds to hold frequent meetings.

Support staff for the committees in some cases are based in a distant location from the area under the committee's jurisdiction, where resources need close management.

The purpose of these committees is to provide a local arena for people to talk about regulations affecting their area so they may recommend needed revisions to better protect the resources.

The Federal Subsistence Board might consider redefining the state's six regional councils, perhaps expanding the number. The state regional advisory councils are more familiar to residents.

Redefinition of regional councils could involve using the regional corporation concept, where regions would include the areas under the jurisdiction of its regional corporation. People of these areas share much in common.

The Arctic could be divided into two separate advisory councils, the North Slope and Northwest region, instead of the current council incorporating Norton Sound. The current regional boundary is so vast geographically, it's too expensive and difficult to get people from all the communities together.

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While this may enhance local participation of fish and game management, the federal government has previously ignored the recommendations of regional councils. The Arctic Regional Council has specific powers under ANILCA which include a direct line to the secretary of the Department of the Interior to voice concerns and recommend changes in management that the council receives from its members, comprised of the chair of each advisory committee.

This is not happening.

For this reason, the Arctic Regional Council is suing the federal government, claiming the new federal subsistence regulations make life difficult for villagers, ignore their advice and are contrary to the law.

Regulations on subsistence hunters should not be inconsistent with the customs and traditions of the people and should not be based on a sport-hunting regime.

ANILCA is set up to provide for local input to follow customs. The problems with the current state system have to be fixed so local people's needs are met.

For those who are unable to attend these meetings, I would urge you to submit comments to the chairman of the Federal Subsistence Board, c/o U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Attn: Richard Pospahala, 1011 East Tudor Road, Anchorage 99503.

The public comment period on subsistence in general is open until Dec. 31.