

# Federal Subsistence Board charts new ground in game management

by Jeff Richardson  
*Tundra Times staff*

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The regional advisory councils which help formulate subsistence hunting regulations on federal land are only a year old, but they are already making their mark. And while it is still awkward having separate state and federal game management systems, fed-

eral officials say they are working hard to maintain open lines of communication with their state counterparts.

The federal government took over management of game on its lands in 1990 after the state failed to provide a harvest priority for rural subsistence hunters, but it was not until August 1993 that the regional advisory councils be-

came operable. Their function is to channel information and concerns from village residents to the Federal Subsistence Board, which actually decides subsistence hunting seasons, bag limits and related issues. The board consists of the regional directors of the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Man-

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agement, U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of Indian Affairs, as well as a chairperson appointed by the Secretary of Interior. The chair is currently held by Inupiat

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Willie Hensley. Board staff, organized into three-member teams, provide technical assistance to the councils. Each team consists of a coordinator, a biologist and a social scientist.

"We experimented with a couple of different approaches to this," says Dick Pospahala, assistant regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for Subsistence Management. "It evolved to the team approach through experience."

Taylor Brelsford, an anthropologist with the USFWS subsistence program, notes: "The team approach provides continuity and consistency. We think it's an important part of effective communication."

Although the board initially adopted state seasons and bag limits, the appointment of regional council members made it

possible for the board to begin a closer scrutiny of subsistence hunting on federal lands and to make regulations more responsive to local needs. Under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980, subsistence hunting by rural residents at customary and traditional levels is allowed in conservation units within the biological limits of game populations. According to Pospahala and Brelsford, because of close coordination between the councils, staff teams and the board, the federal subsistence management system has been increasingly responsive to local needs without sacrificing the viability of resources. Resource

protection is enhanced not only by the counsel of biologists on the staff teams, but by the opportunity that federal biologists have to convey their concerns directly to board members.

One of the key elements of the system is the substantial burden placed on the Federal Subsistence Board to challenge proposal put forward by the regional councils.

"That's where the strength of the system really is," says Pospahala. Taylor, who along with Pospahala, have recently completed an analysis of the effectiveness of the federal subsistence program in Alaska, agrees.

"The level of diligence from these councils is quite impressive and important. The fact that the council chairs sit at board meetings gives them stature and a profile that is different and effective," Taylor says. "Many of the folks on the councils are long time members of (state) fish and game advisory committees, (so) we were able to hit the ground running."

Out of 88 proposals for changes in regulations recently advanced by the advisory councils, the Federal Subsistence Board accepted all but 12. Pospahala and Taylor says this is a strong indication that the process is succeeding.

"It's pretty remarkable how well it's working," says Pospahala. "We've maintained a much higher level of communication than you might expect."

Despite these high marks, some difficulties remain. In their analysis, Pospahala and Brelsford wrote:

"In the four years of effort to date, the Federal Subsistence Board has attempted to strike a balance between meeting the ANILCA mandate to provide opportunity for the continuation of subsistence uses of fish and wildlife on the Federal public lands while maintaining consistency, as much as possible, with state management regimes. This serves the

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practical goal of reducing confusion in the field, since land status is rarely clear in the vast landscape of Alaska. Widely divergent regulations make it difficult for hunters to know which provisions apply on which lands. In addition, ongoing consistency will facilitate the eventual return to unified management under State jurisdiction which the Board continues to support."

Pospahala and Brelsford readily acknowledge that they've had their critics.

"The incremental approach of the Board did not fully meet the expectations of some rural residents who hoped for bold and decisive action to rectify what they saw as lackluster management by

the State," they wrote.

However, they accept this appraisal as encouragement to try harder.

"We want to see the council system work even more effectively in terms of being more efficient in our coordination, in the quality of our communication," says Pospahala. He is also optimistic that the regional councils will become more effective, especially in working our game allocation issues between communi-

ties and regions. "It'll take a little bit of time" for the councils to develop the level of rapport to advance joint proposals in areas of existing or potential conflict, but he says that approach as a distinct possibility.

Brelsford is also optimistic, especially considering the challenge of getting the system up and running.

"We're breaking new ground here," he says.

The federal subsistence program covers about 170 million federal acres, a little more than half the land area of the state, and costs about \$8 million per year to operate.

"This has never happened before," says Pospahala. "It's a very different arena to work in for both the federal and state agencies. They get a lot of credit from me for being able to do this. People work hard at making this program work. And I'm talking about the board and staff level."