

Haste makes waste?

It is interesting to note that a two-and-one-half year old battle to outline a subsistence regulation was ended with a 90-minute discussion on the most important aspect of that regulation — a definition of the key word in that regulation.

That regulation stated, at long last, that "rural" Alaskans must have priority over "urban dwellers" in the event fish or game resources are depleted to a dangerously low level.

The rationale for the regulation is so simple and logical we wonder what took so long. Rural residents don't have supermarkets up the road in case they run out of food. Urban residents, on the other hand, do have another source of food if the going gets rough.

The regulation, then, hinges on a definition of "rural." But instead of heeding the advice of counsel, and giving fair notice that this issue would be discussed — instead of holding public hearings on that definition prior to November — and instead of conducting research into the legality of that definition, the board voted to immediately limit the definition of "rural."

That definition would limit "rural" to communities of less than 7,000 people and which are not on the road system.

That sounds good until you realize that public debate will take place after a November vote on the initiative to repeal the subsistence law.

We can hear the anti-subsistence people — in fact we have already heard them — "the board has cut off 85 percent of this state to our rightful hunting and fishing. If we live here, and here, and here, we don't have any rights. VOTE TO REPEAL!"

And all these outcries will come before the vote in November, and before anybody understands the true factual and legal ramifications of that policy.

A legal representative advised the board that it could wait before defining "rural," and that, perhaps, it should have some factual basis for its definition.

The board, however, wanted to settle this matter there and then. So they voted and their vote will probably be cursed and discussed by residents of the major population centers for some time. And all this before the election.

The problem we have with this entire matter is simple: it went too fast.

We recognize that the board members have spent tremendous amounts of time on subsistence for the past two years and we thank them for their dedication. But we think a 90-minute discussion which was only starting to specify possible drawbacks when the discussion was cut off, is too short to be termed anything but arbitrary and capricious.

It was almost as if the board didn't really want to find out some of the problems.

We won't suggest that this entire affair was a set-up. Many people, after all, are looking at the regulations as a positive thing.

But we are bothered at the apparently intentional brevity of discussion on a very important issue. And we wonder just why that debate was cut off so precipitously.

We feel that these problems could be solved simply by calling a special meeting of the joint boards in mid-summer to discuss this one topic, to hear public comment

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and to get factual information and carefully researched legal opinions.

We are aware of the bad timing and of the fact that the boards already have spent 10 weeks on this issue.

But we feel that for the best interests of all, in the interest of fair public comment and an informed public, this would be the best path to take.