

State details subsistence concerns

JUNEAU — The state of Alaska earlier this month formally expressed its concern about the federal government's proposed subsistence regulations, saying the rules give federal bureaucrats too much latitude over Alaskans' hunting and fishing.

In formal comments submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the state says the interim regulations give too much authority to federal land managers who have little experience in Alaska fish and game issues.

The regulations also will create confusion because of differing rules for hunting on federal and state lands and the lack of adequate maps will leave Alaskans uncertain about where they can hunt this fall.

"Even assuming the most cooperative relationship possible with the federal government, these rules are certain to lead to confusion, mismanagement and serious disruption to Alaskans," said Gov. Steve Cowper.

"I'm especially concerned about Alaskans whose way of life depends on subsistence fish and game. While urban Alaskans argue about legal nuances, I'm worried that rural Alaskans may be left out in the cold when it comes to recognizing their unique needs.

"I'm concerned that the insensitivity shown some Alaskans, such as the Eskimo woman who wanted to testify in Fairbanks in her Native language, is a preview of how the federal government will treat other Alaskans," he said.

The U.S. Interior Department on June 8 gave Alaskans 10 days to comment on more than 80 pages of interim regulations designed to regulate subsistence management of fish and game on federal lands in Alaska. They were issued after the Alaska Supreme Court found the state's subsistence law unconstitutional and after the Legislature failed to fix the problem last month.

The state's comments on the proposed regulations came in a three-page letter, including attachments from state Fish and Game Commissioner Don Collinsworth to U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service Regional Director Walter Stieglitz, Collinsworth said.

•A federal subsistence board composed of the heads of federal agencies in Alaska and given final authority over hunting and fishing decisions affecting Alaskans "is not likely to engender confidence in subsistence regulations by the Alaska public." For example, Collinsworth said the board appears inexperienced in fish and game issues and may be more responsive to national groups than Alaskans. Instead, he proposes the board be composed of respected Alaskans.

•Too much discretion is left to the federal board to define "rural" for fish and game purposes. "If different decisions are made by the federal board, resource allocations on state managed lands could be affected," he said.

•The lack of maps for the upcoming hunting season will lead to public confusion. Because of confusion over

who owns and manages so much of Alaska's land, "the general public needs detailed maps of land ownership in order to understand which rules apply to their activities and to minimize conflict and misunderstanding during the transition period to dual management."

•Different management philosophies between the state and federal governments "will make sustained cooperation between all of the agencies involved difficult." Collinsworth said lawsuits are likely to result, which will lead to yet more federal intervention.