

MEMORANDUM

State of Alaska Department of Law

TO: Kristy Tibbles
Executive Director
Alaska Board of Game

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SUBJECT: January 2025
Central Southwest Region
Board of Game meeting

GENERAL COMMENTS

In general, ethics disclosures: Before staff reports begin on any new agenda item, or, if preferred, at the very beginning of the meeting, Ethics Act disclosures and determinations must be made under AS 39.52.

In general, record-making: It is very important that Board members carefully explain and clearly summarize on the record the reasons for their actions and the grounds upon which the actions are based. The Alaska Supreme Court has stressed the importance of a clear record to facilitate the courts in determining that the Board's actions are within its authority and are reasonable. A clear record also assists the public in understanding the Board's rationale. If Board members summarize the reasons for their actions before they vote, it will help establish the necessary record.

In considering each proposal, and the specific requirements that apply in some cases, such as with the subsistence law, it is important that the Board thoroughly discuss and summarize on the record the basis and reasons for its actions. Consistency with past approaches is another important point for discussion. If a particular action does not appear to be consistent, Board members should discuss their reasons for a different approach.

The Alaska Administrative Procedure Act requires that State agencies, including the Board of Game, "[w]hen considering the factual, substantive, and other relevant matter, ... pay special attention to the cost to private persons of the proposed regulatory action." AS 44.62.210(a). This requirement to pay special attention to costs means, at a minimum, that the Board should address any information presented about costs, or explicitly state that no such information was presented, during deliberation of any proposal likely to be adopted. In our view, this requirement does not go so far as to mandate that the Board conduct an independent investigation of potential costs, nor does it require that cost factor

into the Board's decision more than, for example, conservation concerns might. However, it does require the Board to address and "pay special attention to" costs relevant to each regulation adopted.

In general, written findings: If any issue is already in court, or is controversial enough that you believe it might result in litigation, or if it is complex enough that findings may be useful to the public, the Department, or the Board in the future, it is important that the Board draft and adopt written findings explaining its decisions. From time to time, the Department of Law will recommend that written findings be adopted, in order to better defend the Board's action. Such recommendations should be carefully considered, as a refusal to adopt findings, in these circumstances, could mean that the Board gets subjected to judicial oversight and second-guessing which might have been avoided. The Alaska Supreme Court has stressed the importance of an adequate decisional document, or written finding, to a determination that the Board has acted within its authority and rationally in adopting regulations, and has deferred to such findings in the past.

In general, subsistence: For each proposal the Board should consider whether it involves or affects identified subsistence uses of the game population or sub-population in question. If action on a proposal would affect a subsistence use, the Board must be sure that the regulations provide a reasonable opportunity for the subsistence uses, unless sustained yield would be jeopardized. If the Board has not previously done so, it should first determine whether the game population is subject to customary and traditional uses for subsistence and what amount of the harvestable portion, if any, is reasonably necessary for those uses. *See* 5 AAC 99.025 for current findings on customary and traditional uses and amounts reasonably necessary for subsistence uses. The current law requires that the Board have considered at least four issues in implementing the preference:

- (1) Identify game populations or portions of populations customarily and traditionally taken or used for subsistence; *see* 8 criteria at 5 AAC 99.010(b);
- (2) determine whether a portion of the game population may be harvested consistent with sustained yield;
- (3) determine the amount of the harvestable portion reasonably necessary for subsistence uses; and
- (4) adopt regulations to provide a reasonable opportunity for subsistence uses.

Reasonable opportunity is defined to mean "an opportunity, as determined by the appropriate board, that allows a subsistence user to participate in a subsistence hunt or fishery that provides a normally diligent participant with a reasonable expectation of success of taking of fish or game." AS 16.05.258(f). It is not to be construed as a guarantee of success.

The amount of the harvestable portion of the game population that is reasonably necessary for subsistence uses will depend largely on the amount of the game population used for subsistence historically and the number of subsistence users expected to participate. This may require the Board to determine which users have been taking game for subsistence purposes, and which ones have not. Once the Board has determined the amount reasonably necessary for subsistence uses, the Board should by regulation provide an opportunity that allows the predicted number of normally diligent participants a reasonable expectation of success in taking the subject game. The Board may base its determination of reasonable opportunity on all relevant information including past subsistence harvest levels of the game population in the specific area and the bag limits, seasons, access provisions, and means and methods necessary to achieve those harvests, or on comparable information from similar areas.

If the harvestable portion of the game population is not sufficient to provide for subsistence uses and any other consumptive uses, the Board is required to eliminate non-subsistence uses in order to provide a reasonable opportunity for subsistence uses. If the harvestable portion of the game population is still not sufficient to provide a reasonable opportunity for all subsistence uses, the Board is required to eliminate non-subsistence consumptive uses and distinguish among the subsistence users based on the following Tier II criteria:

- (1) The customary and direct dependence on the game population by the subsistence user for human consumption as a mainstay of livelihood; and
- (2) the ability of the subsistence user to obtain food if subsistence use is restricted or eliminated. AS 16.05.258.

In general, intensive management: Under AS 16.05.255 (e), (f) and (g), the Board should assure itself that the steps outlined below have been followed when acting on proposals dealing with ungulate populations.

First - Determine whether the **ungulate** population is **important for high levels of human consumptive use**. The Board has already made many of these determinations. *See* 5 AAC 92.108. However, these past findings do not preclude new findings, especially if based on new information.

– If so, then subsequent intensive management analysis may be required.

– If not, then no further intensive management analysis is required.

Second - Is the ungulate population **depleted** or will the Board be **significantly reducing the taking** of the population? *See* 5AAC 92.106(5) for the Board's current definition of "significant" as it relates to intensive management.

The Board must determine whether depletion or reduction of productivity, or Board action, is likely to cause a significant reduction in harvest.

– If either is true, then subsequent intensive management analysis is required.

– If not, then further intensive management analysis is not required.

Third - Is intensive management appropriate?

(a) If the population is depleted, has the Board found that consumptive use of the population is a preferred use? Note that the Legislature has already found that “providing for high levels of harvest for human consumption in accordance with the sustained yield principle is the highest and best use of identified big game prey populations in most areas of the State ...” In the rare cases where consumptive use is not a preferred use, then the Board need not adopt intensive management regulations.

(b) If consumptive uses are preferred, and the population is depleted or reduced in productivity so that the result may be a significant reduction in harvest, the Board must consider whether enhancement of abundance or productivity is feasibly achievable using recognized and prudent active management techniques. At this point, the Board will need information from the Department about available recognized management techniques, including feasibility. If enhancement is feasibly achievable, then the Board must adopt intensive management regulations.

(c) If the Board will be significantly reducing the taking of the population, then it must adopt, or schedule for adoption at its next meeting, regulations that provide for intensive management *unless*:

1. Intensive management would be:
 - A. Ineffective based on scientific information;
 - B. Inappropriate due to land ownership patterns; or
 - C. Against the best interests of subsistence users;

Or

2. The Board declares that a biological emergency exists and takes immediate action to protect and maintain the population and also schedules for adoption those regulations necessary to restore the population.

Comments on Individual Proposals

Proposal 2 would amend 5 AAC 85.044 and 052 to establish bear baiting seasons statewide where baiting is allowed. This could be done at this meeting for Units 9, 11, 13, 14A, 14B, 16, and 17, or the Board could move this to the March statewide meeting.

Proposal 8 would either recognize that the take of feral reindeer on Umnak Island is currently allowed or would amend 5 AAC 92.990(a)(21) to add feral reindeer on Umnak Island to the definition of deleterious exotic wildlife. If feral, the Board could establish seasons and bag limits. If defined as deleterious exotic wildlife, there would be no closed season and no bag limits.

Proposal 33 would amend 5 AAC 92.085 to allow same-day-airborne (SDA) take of brown bear and wolves in Unit 17. This is a statewide regulation that prohibits taking big game until after 3:00 am following the day flying occurred, except for taking deer, travel on a commercial flight, or for taking bears in specified circumstances. SDA take of wolves is limited by statute; AS 16.05.783 allows the department to issue permits (authorized by the Board under and 5 AAC 92.039) for SDA take of wolves and wolverine in active IM areas. There is currently an active IM program in Unit 17 for Mulchatna caribou so permits can currently be issued for SDA take of wolves in Unit 17. Essentially this proposal would allow brown bears in Unit 17 to be taken SDA as an exception to the statewide regulation.

Proposal 35 would amend 5 AAC 84.270 to shorten trapping season for wolverine in Units 9, 17, and 18 to end the last day of February. Unit 18 is not in the region so this proposal, if passed, would need to be amended to exclude Unit 18.

Proposal 49 would amend 5 AAC 85.025 to close Nelchina caribou harvest for 6 years or until the herd reaches a population of 37,500, in Units 11, 12, 13, 14B and 20E. Units 12 and 20 are included in the proposal but are outside of the region so the proposal would need to be amended to exclude Units 12 and 20.

Proposal 51 seeks to amend 5 AAC 85.055 to open a resident sheep hunt in the Chitina River drainage in Unit 11 (North of the Chitina River, west of Canyon Creek, and south of Young Creek (MacColl ridge)). Currently there are sheep seasons and bag limits established for residents and nonresidents in Unit 11. If adopted, the board will need to amend the proposal to clarify changes in the hunt structure.

Proposal 78 would amend 5 AAC 92.122 to allow SDA take of wolves in an active Unit 16 IM Plan so anyone holding a license can hunt SDA if at least 300 feet from the airplane. Under AS 16.05.783 and current regulations (including 5 AAC 92.039), a hunter must obtain a permit from the department to take a wolf SDA as part of an active IM program.