

From:

Date: March 20, 2014 at 6:16:06 PM AKDT

To: <Sen.Cathy.Giessel@akleg.gov>

Subject: HB 161

We are 100 percent opposed to HB 161. We agree 100 percent with Mark Richards article in Alaska Dispatch:

<http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20140320/legislature-should-slam-pandoras-box-shut-and-reject-governor-tag-hunting-permit>

I ask that you vote against it.

Sincerely,

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Alaska Dispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

Published on *Alaska Dispatch* (<http://www.alaskadispatch.com>)

[Home](#) > Legislature should slam Pandora's box shut and reject 'governor-tag' hunting permit program

Mark Richards
March 20, 2014

Main Image:

[Moose in Rut Powerline Pass 12](#) ^[1]

Main Image Caption:

OPINION: There are benefits to nonprofit sporting organizations partnering with the state of Alaska through donated hunting permits, but Alaska lawmakers should take great care to avoid opening Pandora's box.

It started in Utah. Like Alaska and most other western states, Utah had it's own "governor-tag" statute, whereby a very limited number of special hunting permits are allocated to private non-profit sporting groups. The groups apply for these governor permits and typically auction them off at their conventions to wealthy nonresident hunters. They keep a small percentage of the profits, with the remaining money going back into the game department's coffers.

It's considered a win-win. Very few permits are allocated away from resident hunters, the non-profit groups can raise revenues to support wildlife conservation projects and hunting education, and more money comes back to the department that manages the game. And it has, with a very limited allocation of tags, been a win-win.

But these governor tag statutes were always ripe for expansion when legislators could be lobbied by influential sportsmen's organizations with their own best interests in mind. That's exactly how it started in Utah, with a bill similar to Rep. Lynn Gattis' [HB 161](#) ^[2]. The legislation passed. Expansion of governor permits and increased revenues to organizations and the state was so wildly profitable that it was easy to lobby the Utah Legislature again and get them to allocate more permits and expand the program -- further privatizing the wildlife resource. Today in Utah, nearly 500 special permits are allocated away from resident hunters to non-profits for auction or raffle. And it's virtually impossible to get a truthful and accurate accounting of where the money the non-profits retain is really going and how it is being used.

Which leads us to the most interesting aspect of Gattis' legislation, the canard we heard so often during hearings about the need to provide more "incentive" to non-profits to participate. Non-profits were, according to Gattis, telling her that the 10 percent organizations could currently retain to use as they saw fit was not enough. If that was tripled and more permits were allocated, it would provide much more incentive for organizations to participate.

Gattis also added a new "donated" Dall sheep tag from which the organization could keep 100 percent of the profits. At the same time, her bill deleted language in current statute that all of these governor permit hunts had to be conducted according to "applicable law," inserting new language giving authority to the commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to determine how and when these hunts were conducted. What this means is that the commissioner could authorize, for example, a new Dall sheep hunt outside normal seasons. Or allow the use of helicopters for transportation. The rationale we heard was that this would make such a hunt much more valuable, and more organizations would apply for that permit.

But then it came out that the organizations couldn't actually keep any profits from the auction or raffle of these expanded permits. According to amended language in the bill, if an organization's share of the profit was \$30,000, or an organization made \$500,000 dollars on that new donated Dall sheep permit, those monies could only be spent in consultation with Fish and Game on approved wildlife conservation, protection, or education projects. Which led to the question: So what's the real incentive here for organizations to participate?

Someone purporting to be a representative of Safari Club International in Alaska answered that recently on [an online hunting forum](#) [3].

The real incentive, he said, was that it would give his organization and other organizations "more say" in how these monies were spent.

Isn't our Alaska wildlife management already overly politicized? Has everyone forgotten [Corey Rossi, the disgraced former director of the Division of Wildlife Conservation](#) [4], and his own ties to a sportsmen's organization? Do we really want, say, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, having "more say" in how we spend funds that really only Fish and Game should control?

What "more say" would actually mean in the real world is hard to quantify, though [Gattis, in a rebuttal](#) [5] to Rick Sinnott's [Alaska Dispatch commentary on HB 161](#) [6], says that if the measure becomes law, "the language becomes statute and is not open to interpretation by the department or any other entity." She is referring to language that dictates what an organization can do with any profits it makes from the auction or raffle of these expanded permits: "Proceeds may be used only to support outdoor tradition education projects and conservation and wildlife protection programs approved by the department."

Political winds

I should note that it was less than 10 years ago that Fish and Game said it did not support the trapping of any brown bears, even as part of an intensive management predator-control program. Neither did the department support the trapping of bears by the public under the guise of increased opportunities. I say this only to highlight that what Fish and Game "approves" has changed drastically in a short time as wildlife management itself had become ever more politicized, especially in the realm of predator control. Who knows what Fish and Game will "approve" down the line when various sportsmen's organizations with various agendas hold the purse strings.

Add to this the fact that Fish and Game is supporting this legislation, when on everything else these days concerning things like sheep hunting allocations -- or for that matter, the public trapping of bears -- they are now neutral, and one wonders what is going on at Fish and Game. In some areas of the state, nonresidents harvest 60 to 80 percent of the Dall sheep taken. The Board of Game continues to hear (and fail to act on) numerous proposals asking that nonresident sheep hunters be limited. Fish and Game claims that this is an "allocation issue," they have no resource concerns, and on allocation issues they must remain neutral. So what really is going on Director Doug Vincent-Lang? I would ask the same of Ted Spraker, chairman of the Alaska Board of Game. How the hell can Fish and Game and the Board of Game support allocating an additional Dall sheep tag to wealthy nonresident hunters? Why is the Fish and Game not neutral on these particular allocation issues that clearly take allocations away from residents? And if Fish and Game is willing to support taking allocations away from residents for the ostensible purpose of raising more revenues for itself, where does it end? How far will it go? This is exactly how it began in Utah.

I do want to stress that, yes, there is no doubt that some good could come out of public-private "partnerships" between Fish and Game and various sportsmen's organizations in accord with this

legislation. There are some great sportsmen's organizations that I'm sure would want to carry out science-based projects and education efforts in consultation with Fish and Game. But we all need to admit that is only one side of the coin, and the flip side has some very serious negatives -- especially when there are large sums of money involved.

The bottom line, though, is if we assume that all sportsmen's organizations have the best interests of the resource and hunters in mind, it still is not in their purview to be dictating or deciding what projects and what education efforts should be conducted using funds derived from the reallocation and sale of our public resource.

Alternatives

And speaking of our public resource, it's ironic that Gattis and proponents of this legislation touted the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (NAM) in pushing this. NAM was mentioned in her sponsor statement, in support letters, and even in the initial legislation. Any mention of NAM, however, has since been stricken from the bill. Maybe that's because one of the basic tenets of NAM is a democracy in hunting; the wildlife resource is a public trust belonging to all equally. Expanding allocation of our wildlife resource to the wealthy is the exact opposite of what NAM calls for.

In her sponsor statement, Gattis also mentions that NAM is based on a user-pay system of licensing fees. Everyone contributes to hunting licenses and tags that fund wildlife management. Well, if the primary goal of Gattis' legislation is to increase funding to the Division of Wildlife Conservation, the best way to do that is increasing hunting license and tag fees for both residents and nonresidents. That is what NAM would call for if game management was under funded.

Alaska Backcountry Hunters & Anglers has been proposing just such an increase since 2008 ^[7]. The last hunting license increase came in 1993, and it's hard to believe Alaska residents pay only \$25 for a hunting license that gives them the opportunity to harvest several caribou, a moose, a sheep, several deer, several black bear, and a grizzly bear, at no extra cost. Nonresident license and tag fees also need to be more on par with what other western states charge. With increased fees, the federal matching funds would also increase substantially.

We understand that legislators are wary of sponsoring or supporting legislation to increase fees for resident and nonresident hunters, over fears it would be construed as a tax increase or growing government. Ironically though, many legislators don't seem to see a problem in sponsoring and supporting legislation that would take allocations away from residents and give them to wealthy nonresident hunters, opening a Pandora's box whereby we give more say to in-state and Outside sportsmen's organizations on how best to manage Alaska's wildlife.

We urge Alaska senators to halt HB 161.

Mark Richards is co-chair of the Alaska chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers.

The views expressed here are the writer's own and are not necessarily endorsed by Alaska Dispatch, which welcomes a broad range of viewpoints. To submit a piece for consideration, e-mail [commentary\(at\)alaskadispatch.com](mailto:commentary(at)alaskadispatch.com) ^[8].

Source URL: <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20140320/legislature-should-slam-pandoras-box-shut-and-reject-governor-tag-hunting-permit>

Links:

[1] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/image/moose-rut-powerline-pass-12>

[2] http://www.akleg.gov/basis/get_bill.asp?session=28&bill=HB161

[3] <http://forums.outdoorsdirectory.com/showthread.php/139609-Article-on-Auction-Permits>

[4] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/corey-rossi-and-30-bear-weekend>

[5] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20140314/gattis-responds-sinnotts-sheepish-argument-against-big-game-hunting-permit-changes>

[6] <http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/20140307/bill-sell-alaska-wildlife-highest-bidder-gains-momentum>

[7] <http://www.alaskabackcountryhunters.org/AK%20BHA%20Hunting%20License-Tag%20Fee%20Increase%20Proposal.html>

[8] <mailto:commentary@alaskadispatch.com>