

# Alaska Dispatch News

## State review triggers talk of cutting back commercial fishing commission

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February 16, 2015

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WASILLA -- A new state review suggests the three-member state commission overseeing some of Alaska's most lucrative commercial fisheries is prone to inefficiency and ripe for overhaul, with a few employees who are paid but rarely show up at the office.

The review of Alaska's Commercial Fisheries Limited Entry Commission, conducted by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, comes as officials struggling with a forecast \$3.5 billion shortfall look to trim state spending.

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The report was released in early February, about two weeks after the commission's newest member -- former Wasilla Mayor Verne Rupright -- was appointed by Gov. Bill Walker.

Created in 1974 to calm frenzied salmon harvests, the commission now administers 68 fisheries. Nearly half target salmon but the commission also regulates herring, crab, sablefish, shrimp and dive fisheries. Commissioners help decide who gets permits and rule on appeals of hearing officer decisions.

The three commissioners are all attorneys: longtime commissioner and chair Bruce Twomley; one-term member Benjamin Brown; and Rupright. The Legislature still must confirm Rupright's appointment and Brown's reappointment to four-year terms.

Each commissioner earns more than \$100,000 a year plus benefits. The commission employs 28 full-time and three part-time staffers.

Commissioners resolved just three disputed permit applications in each of the last two years, according to the review.

Some say the commission has done its job too well: The state's now-stabilized commercial fishing industry no longer needs such a well-compensated commission and large staff.

Sen. Bill Wielechowski, D-Anchorage, quizzed Brown about the review during a confirmation hearing last week.

“We could realistically save a couple million dollars,” Wielechowski said in an interview Monday. “You’ve got a commission that has 31, 32 employees. They processed three permit applications in each of the last two years, which is an unprecedented low.”

Commission chair Twomley said he couldn’t respond specifically to the review but said it contains numerous errors.

Twomley said Friday that the commission was told the report would go to them for review before it was final. He learned of its release only after a reporter called.

“It’s distressing because there are a number of inaccuracies that could have been cleared up with a conversation,” he said. “But now we’ve got to do a formal response, which we are going to do.”

He said he expected a response from commissioners this week.

Last year, Homer Republican Rep. Paul Seaton proposed repealing the commission and moving its duties to the Department of Fish and Game. He initially intended to start a conversation about potential inefficiencies, Seaton said in an interview Monday.

That was before the price of oil went into a free fall.

“Either way, I think there’s people looking at this saying, ‘Huh. Well it’s been a long time, and has the situation changed and can we do this in a better way?’ ” he said. “We want to let people know we’re not gutting the idea of permits or anything like that. It’s just how do we efficiently do those.”

Tom Lawson, a former director of administrative services for Fish and Game, conducted the commission review. The administration of former Gov. Sean Parnell authorized it in August. Lawson called his study “a snapshot in time” based on interviews with staff, commissioners and other information.

The review recommends five alternatives besides the status quo. One follows Seaton’s proposal to repeal the commission and move its duties to Fish and Game. Four call for fewer or part-time commissioners once a longstanding backlog of judgments is cleared.

By the end of 2014, the commission had whittled a historic backlog of 900 pending cases in the 1990s down to 28, according to an annual report it released last month.

But the ADFG review states that the commission takes too long to decide cases, calling it a “serious issue for a long time.”

Nearly all the 28 cases have been in process for at least 15 years, it says.

Twomley said the commission “faced down almost 23,000 applications” over time. He said the commission made fisheries in Cook Inlet and Southeast a priority until salmon runs began declining in the late 1990s, putting Bristol Bay permits at the forefront.

Today's caseload of 28 simply marks a more “rational” load, he said. “We’ve not run out of critical work to do.”

Staffing issues also receive scrutiny in Lawson’s report.

The payroll includes five state retirees eligible for Public Employee Retirement System benefits in temporary positions, according to the review.

Some of the retirees in temporary positions “work from home and are rarely seen in the office,” the review states. “Others have irregular in-office schedules due to sporadic workload. The operations manager works a very early part-time shift so is not in the office for most of the regular office hours.”

It’s unclear what form any proposals based on the review might take, though both legislators said they didn’t have any legislation in the works. It appears the administration favors changes to the commission, Seaton said.

Sam Cotten, Walker's appointee for Fish and Game commissioner, described the review as “comprehensive and thorough” when he forwarded it Feb. 4 to Walker’s chief of staff, Jim Whitaker, as well as Legislative Auditor Kris Curtis and the commission.

“I agree with the observations of others that CFEC has made valuable contributions to commercial fisheries in Alaska during its 40 years of existence, but there have also been many changes in the industry during this time period as well,” Cotten wrote. “In light of the current fiscal climate facing the state, this review is timely to help ensure that CFEC is operating as efficiently as possible.”