

Natural Resources

The Natural Resources transition team identified five priority issues that the incoming Administration should address for a successful approach to the management, development and conservation of natural resources in Alaska. Ensuring **public involvement** topped this list, followed by increasing **permitting efficiency and effectiveness** and facilitating **economic/resource development**. Also discussed were the needs to **balance multiple users** and appropriately **staff** state agencies. In evaluating these priorities, some of the more impactful recommendations should be given early consideration. These have been ranked from easiest to hardest to implement:

1. Reinforce the DNR mission statement that reads “The mission of the DNR is develop, conserve, and maximize the use of Alaska's natural resources consistent with the public interest.”
2. Establish effective communication between the Governor’s office, cabinet and state agency staff, building an atmosphere of teamwork with clear vision, mission and goals
3. Develop a statement that demonstrates commitment from the Administration to public involvement in its processes
4. Establish a healthy line of communication with all state employee unions
5. Hold and review special area management plans for re-evaluation of process
6. Engage in the Tongass planning process
7. Develop a formal training for conductors of public hearings
8. Explore universal water reservation for fish through a stakeholder workgroup
9. Launch a task force that explores a “mitigation bank”
10. Continue a process to achieve gas line
11. Implement digital records and data management
12. Implement loan forgiveness for students committed to state employment

Public Involvement

Ensuring that the public is included and respected in government decision-making, and that government decisions are informed by public input, should be crucial elements of state planning processes. To this end, the Team suggests a formal public statement by the incoming Administration along the lines of the following:

It is the policy of the Walker/Mallott Administration and the State of Alaska to welcome and respect the participation of citizens in the development of policies and actions of State government. The Alaska Constitution, in Article I, affirms the Rights of the People to participate in government, and also places on citizens a corresponding obligation to participate in good faith in our government. To honor these rights and responsibilities this Administration affirms an open and transparent process for public involvement in government decisions. We humbly ask that you, the public, assist with this by participating in the process to the maximum extent possible.

Meaningful public involvement can be facilitated through open government actions such as: factors influencing state decisions, consistent and geographically appropriate public notice to all stakeholders, notification of receipt of comments, formal responses to ranges of comments, the appropriate use of public hearings and technology to facilitate public engagement, and employee training in and sensitivity to culturally appropriate methods and timing of communications. The state could also consider involving the public in community forums, such as those Jay Hammond conducted. The Team discussed whether local residents and communities affected by a decision should have weighted consideration in their comments on activities that could have a disproportionate effect on local people or communities. The group did not reach consensus on this issue, with some advocating for an Alaska Coastal Management Program-type approach while others believed in equal input by all Alaskans. The establishment or strengthening of Local Advisory Committees (LACs) could be considered, as they relate to DNR’s local area plans. The Team did agree that the State should have a goal of assuring meaningful dialogue between state and local interests above and beyond strict hearing and comment processes.

Permitting Efficiency, Enforcement and Effectiveness

The state's permitting process should be trusted, fair, transparent and predictable. The state should work to add efficient and effective to this list, though both will need to be defined and scaled appropriately to encompass clarity of project stipulations, stakeholder engagement, and timeliness of permit acquisition. This is complementary to the discussion around public involvement, in that all user groups must be offered the opportunity to actively participate at the appropriate scale.

Opportunities for public involvement must occur early and throughout the planning and decision-making process, with increased public access to meetings and records. To increase efficiency, the Team recommends data management that is spatially specific, stakeholder engagement tracking, eliminating unnecessary permits, properly allocating agency resources for most impact, and leveraging technology. The state should explore the opportunity to grant 1) general permits for similar actions, and 2) field permits for minor actions. Additional actions would include prioritizing anadromous stream cataloguing in areas likely to see development and establishing post public process timelines for issuance of permits. The creation of a universal reservation of water for fish may provide sufficient protection of the minimum water levels required for fish survival and reduce the need for expensive in-stream flow reservations and adjudications. The Team recommends establishing a task force of stakeholders to explore the concept. A robust state enforcement program should be associated with permitting, at the same time.

Resource Related Economic Development

Alaska is fortunate to have rich natural resources that support its people and economy. Looking forward, oil and gas, commercial fishing, tourism, logging, mining and alternative energy technologies provide Alaskans with a continued opportunity to rely on our natural resources as the mainstay of our economy. However, challenges remain in the state's ability to access those resources, increase development where possible, and work with federal agencies to ensure future prosperity. To reverse declining oil production, there are four priorities for future development. The state should continue to advocate for opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge 1002 Area with appropriate stipulations; exploration on the Offshore Continental Shelf (OCS) with revenue sharing for adjacent communities; and fewer hurdles in accessing the National Petroleum Reserve Alaska (NPRA). Natural gas development, with access for Alaskans, benefits to rural Alaska and export to markets is also vital. For its part, the state should examine opportunities to increase state leasing.

Oil, gas and mineral development is critical to the current economic health of Alaska. Federal regulations such as the Clean Water Act (CWA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA) that are intended to protect the health of Alaskans and our environment are important, but the state could evaluate the assumption of federal regulatory programs, the possibility of a wetlands mitigation bank, and the use of science, traditional knowledge, and alternative management tools. Stronger relationships and communication with federal land managers will be a necessary component of this. The state can also work to help keep species off of the ESA list, quickly recover species that are on the list, and minimize the risk that the ESA could successfully be used as a roadblock to development.

Care should also be taken to ensure state and federal fisheries are sustainably managed to protect fishing jobs and the local and state-wide economies that benefit from those jobs. The state should also engage in the Management Policy planning process in the Tongass National Forest, where it can determine the likelihood of success in its participation. Further, the state should encourage private enterprise to pursue alternative energy projects in Alaska as a way of providing cheaper and cleaner energy sources to Alaskans and new businesses, and strengthening our economy through the development of technology and expertise needed to exploit such alternatives.

Balancing Multiple Users

A goal of “long-term, sustainable and resilient” framed this conversation. The Team defined long-term as addressing the needs of future generations; sustainable as balancing economic activity with subsistence, a healthy environment (the protection of water, flora and fauna), and community services; and resilient as promoting the ability of the system to bounce back. While sustainability is hard to define, difficult to come to consensus on, and challenging to operationalize, it is clearly important as a principle or value of governance. The team proposed that resource agencies should have a common mission or vision statement recognizing the principle of sustainability. Restoring DNR’s mission statement is an important first step toward inter-agency agreement. These terms, too, could be factored into best interest findings.

Subsistence is a priority and should be part of the “multiple use” balancing act. The state has an obligation to overcome any institutional barriers within the state to address this and, if necessary, address the conflict between ANILCA and the state constitution. To address subsistence challenges, short of constitutional amendment, the Team proposes three potential resource resolutions: 1) Articulate the importance of subsistence consideration in permitting and land-use planning and decision-making; 2) Administrative direction to state agencies about the importance of subsistence health to ensure that subsistence is addressed when decisions are made about land-use and commercial harvest of fish and game resources; and 3) an internal review of regulations and statutes to ensure that subsistence policy can be implemented. The state should have explicit goals of critical habitat area management and public land management, perhaps using creative co-management as a tool. Expanding and emphasizing early participation at the “scoping” level for public and private projects/plans will help. All of this will require competent staffing.

Staffing

The retention of highly qualified staff at state agencies requires clear communication, standardized and consistent staff training, pride in mission and effective recruitment. Further, the state must be willing to assess employee roles and public function, evaluating efficiency, compatibility and capacity; while increasing public confidence in directors and management. It was anticipated that there might be a general public reluctance to compensate staff for what they’re worth.

The basics in management will be important in this fiscal environment. There should be clear and consistent communication from top down and bottom up regarding the fiscal situation and how it relates to current and future benefits. Having a defined mission and vision for agencies will help staff understand that they are part of something bigger. Agency directors should identify low morale quickly, and consider creative non-monetary incentives for staff. Furthermore, the state should consider: open recruitment regardless of location; flexible staffing; contracting; assessing competitive compensation; cross-training for fewer people with more responsibilities; marketing state employment; and developing mechanisms to cut non-essential or underperforming staff.