



Support for Senate Bill 181 – Improving Alaska’s Inter-Agency Data Sharing

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

I am writing in support of Senate Bill 181, “Improving Alaska’s Inter-Agency Data Sharing.”

I am an economist and public policy researcher at the University of Alaska Anchorage. My work focuses on Alaska’s labor markets, resource industries, and regional economic development. A central challenge in conducting policy-relevant research in Alaska is often access to the best information.

While traditional economic data sources (surveys) work well in large urban labor markets but these data are more limited in small and seasonal economies. Many coastal communities have small populations, significant seasonal employment, multi-job households, and a large share of workers whose economic activity does not fit neatly into standard survey categories. Sample sizes are often too small to report with confidence, and confidentiality rules suppress many local statistics entirely. As a result, policymakers are frequently asked to make decisions about fisheries, workforce development, education, and infrastructure in communities where conventional labor statistics cannot describe even basic trends such as whether workers are staying, leaving, or returning each season.

Administrative data collected by state agencies are uniquely capable of filling this gap. Records held by the Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Department of Fish and Game contain detailed and accurate information about employment, earnings, and participation in key industries. When linked, these data allow researchers to measure workforce participation, seasonal migration, retention of local workers, and the effectiveness of training programs in ways no survey can replicate.

Current restrictions create data silos. Under current statute, agencies appropriately maintain strict confidentiality protections. In practice, this means that for university researchers to access these data, bespoke data use agreements must be individually negotiated from the beginning for each project. The process is time-consuming for agency staff and researchers alike, and projects can be delayed for months while agreements are drafted, reviewed, and approved.

The operational constraints also create avoidable costs. Datasets cannot be transferred outside secure Department of Labor and Workforce Development systems. As a result, University of Alaska researchers physically travel to Juneau to work onsite alongside Department analysts in order to conduct work. This arrangement requires state employees and researchers to spend time on logistics and travel rather than analysis. Airfare, lodging, and staff time become part of the cost of answering routine policy questions, even though the relevant data already exist and could be securely accessed under modern controlled-access systems.

SB 181 would allow sharing of disaggregated administrative data between state agencies and the University of Alaska for public policy research.

For rural coastal Alaska especially, better data directly affects workforce planning, education programs, permitting, and industry modernization. SB 181 would allow policymakers to base decisions on measurable outcomes rather than assumptions and would help align state resources with actual community needs.

For these reasons, SB 181 represents an important modernization of Alaska's data infrastructure and a practical step toward more effective and informed governance across the state.

Thank you for your consideration of this legislation.

Sincerely,

Brett Watson
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University of Alaska Anchorage