

Alaska State Legislature

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Senate Resources Committee

Sponsor Statement SB 97

"An Act establishing a big game guide concession area permit program on land in the state; relating to the duties of the Big Game Commercial Services Board, the Board of Game, the Department of Fish and Game, and the Department of Natural Resources; requiring the Board of Game to establish an initial big game guide concession area; and providing for an effective date"

Senate Bill 97 seeks to solve a long-standing problem on state lands by implementing a constitutionally sound concession program to limit the number of commercial hunting guide operations on state lands in Alaska. While federally managed lands in Alaska have successful hunting guide concession programs, there is no process by which the commercial use of state land is allocated. With no limits on the number of commercial hunting operations, the status quo continues to drive overcrowding and localized wildlife resource overutilization. This program is narrow in scope to hunting guides and does not limit Alaskan resident hunters or any other subset of the hunting community.

For years, in problem areas around the state, chronic overcrowding and overutilization have resulted in decreasing incentives for guides to act as stewards of our public trust resources. The current unregulated situation incentivizes guides to aggressively "race for the game" thereby decreasing quality of experience for guided clients, increasing conflicts between commercial users, and disadvantaging the general public (resident hunters, subsistence users, private property owners) who would not be limited by this bill. The status-quo also increases difficulties and costs for the enforcement of wildlife laws.

From January to October 2023, the Guide Concession Program Workgroup (formed by the Big Game Commercial Services Board) conducted a comprehensive process that included public meetings, a thorough review of numerous past proposals, consideration of the successful elements of the federal concession programs, and robust public consultation with licensed guides, residents, other stakeholders, and various state agencies. Public input played a crucial role in shaping the recommendations throughout the Workgroup's process. The concession program proposed by SB 97 is modeled after the Workgroup's conclusions and recommendations.

Specifically, SB 97 establishes a big game guide concession program on state lands, aiming to add tools to improve wildlife conservation, reduce conflicts and encourage a professional guide industry. The key features of the program include a competitive process that ensures qualified individuals and new entrants to the market are selected; 10-year concession duration that requires all applicants (including incumbents) to compete for each concession area on an even playing field every cycle; carefully crafted transferability conditions; heightened ability for state enforcement of wildlife laws; and an equitable fee structure that will allow the state to adequately maintain the program.

This legislation represents a balanced, well-considered approach to address the challenges in commercial big game hunting on state lands. The passage of this bill will put in place a proven mechanism to improve the quality of hunting on state lands to the benefit of all Alaskans.