

Support Documentation for an Alaska Department of Agriculture and Food
From Ruby Hollembaek 04/07/2011

The History of Agriculture in Alaska and Support for a Department of Agriculture and Food (DAF)

In 1945 the Territorial Legislature created the Alaska Department of Agriculture for the purpose of promotion and development of agriculture. Agriculture is specifically identified in the State constitution. Prior to statehood, there was a Territorial Commissioner of Agriculture (George W. Gasser) who headed the Alaska Department of Agriculture. (<http://www.litsite.org/index.cfm?section=Digital-Archives&page=Industry&cat=Agriculture&viewpost=2&ContentId=2710>) Certain functions in agriculture were established prior to statehood, such as a creation of the Agricultural Revolving Loan Fund in 1953 with a \$1 million authorization.

"The funds have dwindled because ARLF was set up to revolve, but it hasn't. It has not received general funding since 1986 and \$12 million total has been siphoned from the coffers to supply the Alaska Division of Agriculture's operating expenses since 2004."¹ It should also be noted that funds have been siphoned off for other purposes other than funding the Division of Agriculture. There was a sizeable amount taken out for fire fighting. I believe that may have been in the \$2 million mark.

"In Alaska in 1987 there were 1,026,732 acres of agriculture land in production, in 2007 there were 881,585 acres of land in production, a decrease of 15%. When looking at the agriculture we produce here as compared to the rest of the United States we rank 50th in almost all areas. (<http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/>). This is not because of lack of producible land, lack of water or acceptable growing season. There needs to be a change in the political outlook for agriculture in Alaska."²

It has been reported by a speaker at our Alaska Farm Bureau annual meeting held in November of 2010 that Indiana recently created a cabinet level Department of Agriculture and Food. Prior to this, I believe that there were only a few states (one of which is Alaska) who did not have a cabinet level department of agriculture. Vermont was another; they (in the last decade) were also successful in creating an Agency of Agriculture which is at the cabinet level. Upon review of the agricultural agencies in the United States, it appears that Rhode Island and Alaska may share the distinction of not having a cabinet level agency or department. I believe that Rhode Island and the Anchorage area are near the same size.

In a 147 page Ten-Year Plan for Alaska's Agricultural Development submitted by a committee in 1983, Alaska Agricultural Action Council (AAAC) members (Richard Lyon, Chairman Commissioner of the Department of Commerce and Economic Development; Richard Neve, Commissioner of Department of Environmental Conservation; Peter McDowell, Director Division of Budget and Management; Paul Huppert, Palmer farmer; and Steve Hamilton, Palmer Farmer; James Drew, UAF Dean School of Agriculture and Land Resources Management; and Weymeth E. Long, State Conservationist, USDA) for Governor Bill Sheffield sited that "The responsibilities of the AAAC and the Division of Agriculture either frequently overlap or fail to provide a necessary service. The AAAC was responsible for the Delta Project and for subsequent projects and has taken advocacy positions on behalf of the Alaska agricultural

¹ Alaska Business Monthly, March 2011 "Banking on Agriculture" p.64

² <http://www.adlinc.blogspot.com>

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industry. Because the Division of Agriculture is a part of a large department (DNR), it has been unable to devote its complete attention to planning or administering projects."

"Coordination between financing and farm development is a serious problem. The ARLF is responsible for credit programs that are critical to the success or failure of agricultural projects, even though the AAAC has overall project responsibility. The ARLF is administered by the Division of Agriculture, with no coordination or responsibility shared with the AAAC."

"Several options for administrative reorganization should be considered. These include combining the functions of both groups into one agency or the other, are combining the functions of both groups, along with other functions, into a Department of Agriculture."

"At the very least, more coordination between the AAAC and the Division of Agriculture will be required as agricultural development continues. This would become easier if both were in a single organization. Ultimately, if the State of Alaska is to have a relatively larger agricultural industry, a Department of Agriculture should be considered."

"The Resources Committee offered on 05/18/81 HCR 29 in the House for House concurrent resolution No. 29 (Finance) relating to the development of a plan for Alaska agricultural development. Whereas, the legislature determines that the agricultural development goals of the state are to:

1. **Promote self-sufficiency and to decrease dependency on imported foods;**
2. **Provide opportunities for Alaskan to produce their own food individually and collectively;**
3. **Provide employment for Alaska;**
4. **Provide nutritional food products from local sources for Alaska;**
5. **Develop a self-supporting agriculture industry in Alaska;**
6. **Encourage the export of surplus agricultural products; and**
7. **Ensure that agricultural development proceeds with sound environmental practices and energy efficiency;"³**

The Alaska Farm Bureau 2010 Resolution Platform was approved by those voting members (delegates) attending the annual meeting where they unanimously supported a cabinet level Department of Agriculture. The Alaska Farm Bureau submits Alaska's Long-Range Plans on a regular basis. These include agricultural entities of transportation, standards, marketing, land sales, tax issues, renewable energy, etc. Testifying for HB 191 in support of a Department of Agriculture and Food was Bryce Wrigley, Alaska Farm Bureau President; Lyall Brazler, Delta Farm Bureau President; Ruby Hollembaek, President Alaska Diversified Livestock Association, Inc.; and several producers from around the state. Testifying was Paul Huppert who was also an AAAC member with the 10 year report submitted in 1983. Another testimony was from a rancher who remembered the transition from a Department of Agriculture to a division under the Department of Natural Resources. I believe she was from Kodiak. Kodiak Game Rancher, Bill Burton, read her testimony if my memory serves me correctly. I believe that

³ Ten Year Plan for Alaska's Agricultural Development, p.108-114

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the transition from Department to Division occurred the early 1960's while changes were made in the state government system to ensure ANSCA and the expedience of the Alyeska Pipeline venture.

"In a report prepared for President Barack Obama and Secretary of the US Department of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, and based on forums conducted by State USDA Alaska Farm Service Agency Danny Consenstein and Alaska State Direction USDA Rural Development Jim Nordlund the following facts were derived from meetings held across Alaska (Fairbanks, Kotzebue, Juneau and Anchorage) to provide input on what works and what does not work when it comes to job creation and retention, especially in rural Alaska. Three areas for potential job growth emerged from all four meetings:

- Food Systems
- Renewable energy/energy efficiency
- Rural Infrastructure"

"Even in Alaska's urban areas, most purchased food has to travel thousands of miles just to reach grocery store shelves. To arrive in Alaska's remote communities, the journey is even farther. Spoilage rates and prices are both high, especially in rural villages. This challenge provides opportunities for innovation in developing methods for growing, processing and transporting food more locally and efficiently. These opportunities tie in directly to energy costs, training and infrastructure. "⁴

In an open letter to all Alaska Farmers, Bryce Wrigley says it best when he states:

"Farmers and ranchers are thwarted by regulations that prohibit the growth and expansion of the industry. Agencies providing inspection services, veterinary services and the oversight of land issues are currently functions of several different agencies. Locating these basic agricultural services in a single Department of Agriculture will increase efficiency by focusing all the resources on the mission of providing food for Alaska."

As the former Department of Natural Resources retired land director, Glen Franklin, walked by my table at the Delta Farm Forum this last February, he asked who was behind the move to create a Department of Agriculture. I explained that I supported such a move. He stated, "It's about time." After dialogue, he said a commissioner would probably be paid half again as much as the division director is paid but he didn't see where the extra cost would be in creating such a move back to the original intentions of our state founding fathers. After all, DNR is housed in Fairbanks so a DAF could be located as is in Palmer.

When asked what the legislature and Governors' office can do for Alaskan agriculture, my answer is: "The same thing you do for oil, gas, fisheries, and other resources in our land. We want to sit at the table with and conduct business about our product and available food, fiber and fuel for all Alaskans. We simply want a seat. **We want a cabinet level seat.** We don't want to be a division under a department. It hasn't worked. Nearly every state in the union has a cabinet level department or

⁴ Alaska Forums on Jobs and Economic Development, February 15, 2010 USDA, Rural Development Farm Service Agency, pgs.4-5

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agency. With our unique geographical location, it is paramount that we return to the original Department of Agriculture that was in our first State Constitution in 1945."

Respectfully and with high regards I submit this plea to continue with the movement of HB 191 for a Department of Agriculture and Food. Thank you for supporting Alaskan agriculture and regards to all who care.



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