



American Fisheries Society

ALASKA CHAPTER
PO Box 672302
Chugiak, AK 99567-2302

March 22, 2013

Alaska State Legislature,

The Alaska Chapter of the American Fisheries Society (AFS-AK) supports protection of Alaska fish and fisheries; therefore, we are opposed to SB 26 / HB 77 as written because it is likely to be detrimental to Alaska fishes and fish habitat.

The AFS-AK represents fisheries scientists and biologists employed in government, academia, and the private sector throughout Alaska. It is one of the largest local professional fisheries chapters in the country. Reflective of the diverse program of professional activities and accomplishments, the Alaska Chapter received the Outstanding Chapter Award from the parent society in 1995 and 1999.

The parent American Fisheries Society (AFS), founded in 1870, is the oldest and largest professional society for fishery scientists and it represents more than 9,000 fisheries scientists, worldwide. The AFS promotes sound scientific research and enlightened scientific management of fishery resources and fish habitat for optimal use and enjoyment by the public. The mission of the AFS is to improve the conservation and sustainability of fishery resources and aquatic ecosystems by advancing fisheries and aquatic science and by promoting the development of fisheries professionals.

The AFS-AK is not an advocacy group but we occasionally bring important issues to the attention of policy makers and the public when deemed necessary. We advocate for fish, fisheries, and sustainability when our position is well grounded in science.

Alaska fisheries is one of our most important natural resource and requires knowledgeable, informed management and careful habitat protection. Protection of fish habitat and reservations of water are the primary means of ensuring the long-term health of our commercial, sport and subsistence fisheries.

While there are various aspects of SB 26 that are cause for concern, as AFS-AK interprets SB 26, it is likely that, with fewer groups eligible to apply for instream reservation, there will be fewer instream flow reservations to protect fish and fish habitat. The proposed changes would also relax requirements for the periodic reassessment of instream water needs, from a 10 year requirement to at the discretion of the commissioner. Watersheds regularly change, however, as do the distribution and spawning locations of anadromous fish such as salmon. Plus, as a result of ongoing climate change, these changes can happen suddenly. Periodic review ensures that up-to-date environmental

circumstances are taken into account when electing to continue or modify water reservations, with this maximizing the likelihood that streams important for anadromous fishes will be protected. As such, we urge you to reject the proposed changes to Section 40 AS 46.15.145 of SB 26.

Why is this important? Both anadromous and nonanadromous fishes depend on the quality and quantity of freshwater for reproduction, growth, and survival. Salmon and steelhead require good quality and quantity of fresh water to complete their life histories. In fact, some spend half or more of their lives in fresh water. Other fishes, such as Dolly Varden, cutthroat trout, and most whitefishes, can also have anadromous life histories, spending much more of their life in fresh water. Freshwater species, such as Arctic grayling and rainbow trout, of course, are entirely dependent on freshwater habitats. Nearly all of our fishes are valuable to Alaskans in some way through our recreational, commercial, or subsistence uses. These fishes and their fisheries will be sustained only if their habitat is preserved.

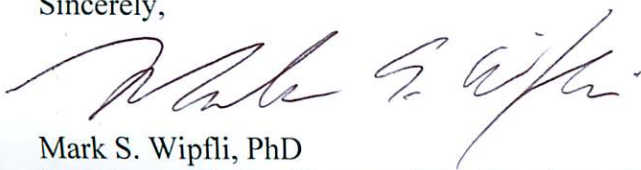
Why is water important for fish? Fish need ample, clean water for spawning so eggs will not desiccate, freeze, or become smothered by silt. After hatching, young fish need gentle habitat for living and cover and ample food supply. As they grow, most fish use deeper, faster moving waters with bigger food items. Interconnectivity is important— ample quantities of water must be available so fish of different sizes and swimming abilities can migrate between different parts of watersheds to take advantage of feeding, spawning, and overwintering habitats. In fact, most tributaries, even the very small fishless streams, are important in some way for the survival of fish populations because each tributary influences habitats downstream where fish rear and spawn. Tributaries also serve as critical corridors for fish movement throughout the year.

Ultimately, the surest way to protect fish and fish habitat would be to reserve flows in all state waters for fish as the first priority rather than applying for a reservation, one stream at a time. In lieu of that, it is very important that “persons” (e.g., private nonprofit organizations) continue to be allowed to apply for reservations of water as well as agencies because they are adept at acquiring grants and other funding to accommodate costs of personnel, logistics, analyses, reporting, and applications. Meanwhile, agencies are already faced with diminishing numbers of trained personnel and shrinking budgets and are likely to make fewer, rather than more, applications for reservations. No increased budget is included in this bill for state agencies to do additional reservations of water but would be needed to properly handle the increased workload.

Fish are important to Alaskans, to our economy, and to the structure and function of freshwater ecosystems throughout the state. Alaskans have a right to fish, and fish need sufficient water. The AFS-AK urges you to support fish, fish habitat, and fisheries for Alaskans. We urge you to not enact SB26 as written.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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