

Subject: Letter of Support for HB 107

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February 24, 2017

Support For HB 107

My name is Peter Velsko and I live in Homer, Alaska. In 1976 I began a twenty year career as a Fish Culturist/Fisheries Biologist with the Alaska Department Fish & Game's recently established Fisheries, Rehabilitation, Enhancement and Development (FRED) Division. From 1976 until the summer of 1991 I worked at the Tutka Bay state hatchery across the bay from Homer. In July of 1991 after the hatchery was transferred to Cook Inlet Aquaculture Association, I was transferred to Nome. I worked there until I retired 1997.

In 1971 the Alaska Legislature created the FRED division in response to serious declining salmon populations in the state. From a high of almost 130 million salmon in the 1930's the state witnessed a steady decline that hit an all time low in 1974 of under 30 million fish. Bond issues to build public hatchery facilities were passed overwhelmingly. By the mid 1980's Alaska's salmon restoration and enhancement efforts along with the growing number of newly established PNP aquaculture programs made Alaska one of the top salmon producers of the world.

By the late 1980's budget cuts to FRED helped play a roll in the transferring of state hatcheries to the regional aquaculture associations. These PNP hatcheries created by fishermen or transferred from the state to the PNP's now became the state's big producers of millions of salmon mainly directed toward the commercial fishermen.

In 1993/94 FRED Division was combined into the Commercial Fish Division. What remained of on going or planned salmon restoration and enhancement projects once under FRED control pretty much fell out of favor with the new CF Division. FRED personnel were given other duties more directed toward managing salmon as opposed to actually producing more fish. At least that was my experience in Nome.

In 1991 I was transferred to Nome as the FRED Division NW Fisheries Coordinator responsible for developing, coordinating and implementing all fisheries restoration and enhancement activities, including educational projects with local schools. My area of responsibility covered 15 villages in the Norton Sound area and mainly consisted of various small projects, with primary focus on testing the feasibility of using in-stream incubation boxes as a possible way of increasing chum salmon in local area streams. Although we were still in the testing phase, the project was showing good results, but to prove success we needed to go through several life cycles. With the new emphasis now focused more on "traditional" duties of the Commercial Fish Division these kinds of salmon enhancement projects had become low priority and mostly discontinued. We never got to fully evaluate this project because we barely completed one life cycle (3-4 yrs.) of a chum salmon before I was assigned other duties that was given a higher priority. Many of the village people I worked with were disappointed that I no longer would be working on salmon restoration or enhancement projects planned for their areas. How do you explain that to the local folks who were so supportive and encouraged with the salmon restoration projects ADF&G was doing? In 1996 ADF&G drew up the Norton Sound/Bering Strait Regional Comprehensive Salmon plan for the years 1996-2010. This plan outlined all the existing projects (very few) in addition to future projects. Very little of these projects to say the least was ever implemented.

The disappearance of the FRED division has (I believe) over time left a void not readily filled by the PNP aquaculture associations which are

focused more on producing large numbers of fish for their constituents, primarily the commercial fishermen. Who's out there to assist the more rural villages who might want help increasing fishing opportunities in those outlying areas? HB 107 might just be a step in the right direction toward that end.

In summary, I believe that HB 107 would be of benefit to the rural villages and its people by allowing them the opportunity to develop and implement small scale salmon restoration and enhancement projects in their local area.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any additional question or concerns.

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