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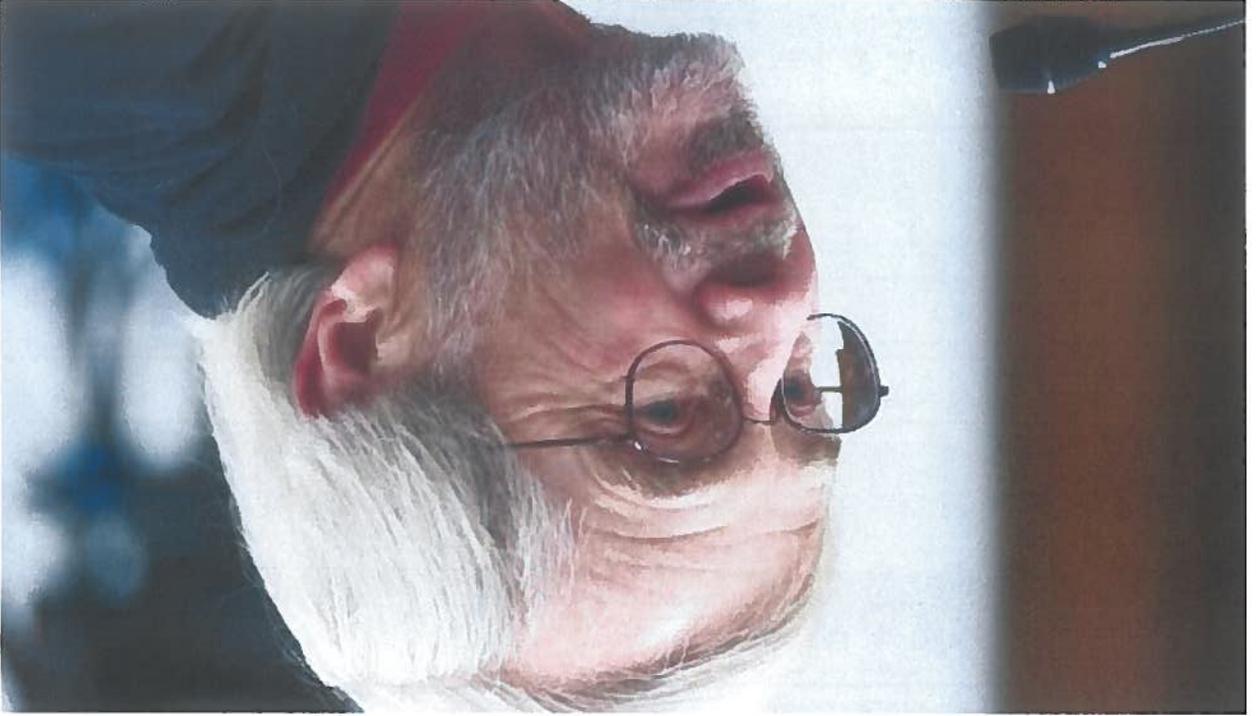
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Invasive species bill advances in House

HB 89 will be heard next in House Resources

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Rodger Painter, president of the Alaska Shellfish Growers Association, gives public testimony on House Bill 89 in front of the House Fisheries Committee at the Capitol on Tuesday. HB 89 would provide for response to and control of aquatic invasive species.

A bill requiring the state to create a rapid response and management plan to deal with invasive aquatic species moved out of the House Fisheries Committee Tuesday and will now come before the House Resources Committee.

House Bill 89, introduced by Rep. Paul Seaton, R-Homer, would authorize the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to control or eradicate invasive species in Alaskan waters, following the plan it would craft in conjunction with the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation and other entities. In his sponsor statement, Seaton, who chairs the House Fisheries Committee, cited the infestation of a Sitka harbor with didemnum vexillumis — an organism often known as “Dvex” — as an example of where state response to curb invasive aquatic species is needed. Dvex is more colloquially known as “Sea Vomit” for its pale orange color and its tendency to carpet exposed surfaces.

Several members of the committee, including bill cosponsor Rep. Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins, D-Sitka, as well as Reps. Lynn Gattis, R-Wasilla, and Craig Johnson, R-Anchorage, stressed the importance of establishing rapid response capabilities to deal with invasive aquatic species.

“I think it’s an oxymoron when we say it’s a ‘rapid response’ when we talk about this question going on for years,” said Gattis. “I am challenged with that verbiage.”

Gattis’ legislative district in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough struggles with invasive

northern pike, she said.

Even Fairbanks, deep inside the interior, has a problem with freshwater invasive aquatic species: the hardy, fast-growing elodea canadensis, to which Seaton, members of the committee, and representatives of the DFG and DNR who addressed the committee repeatedly referred during the meeting.

Marlene Campbell, government relations director for the City and Borough of Sitka, testified on her own community’s struggle with Dvex.

“Sitka is the first Alaska site identified as infested with didemnum vexillumis, an invasive tunicate that has caused immense damage throughout the world in various locations and now is thoroughly entrenched in Sitka’s Whiting Harbor,” Campbell said. “This invasive species was discovered in June 2010, and more than two and a half years later, there has been no cordoning off or marking of the area of infestation.”

Campbell said she is concerned that the tunicate could spread outside of Whiting Harbor if it attaches itself to vehicles whose crew are unaware of the infestation. She said she wants the bill to pass to give the DFG a stronger hand in combating Dvex before the infestation gets worse.

"To completely eradicate the area is probably not realistic now, but at least we can try to get it under control," said Campbell.

One member of the public who testified, Alaskan Shellfish Growers Association President Roger Painter, expressed unhappiness with some of the bill's language, namely a "hold harmless" clause that would give the state more leeway to deal with invasive aquatic species even if private property is affected.

"As shellfish farmers, our crops are in water — our gear, almost all of our assets," Painter said. "And that's all private property."

Painter said language elsewhere in the bill requiring the DFG to "consider" how its efforts could affect private property "seems a little soft."

In response, Seaton pointed to the part of the bill laying out the requirement for the DFG to formulate a rapid response and management plan through consultation with other entities, including private entities.

"Does it give you comfort that the department is required to involve the private property owners that want to participate in the planning process up front, so that those things can be built into the consideration of the plans?" Seaton asked.

Painter replied, "It certainly helps to have the department directed to interact with us from the get-go, you know, instead of us trying to insert ourselves into the process. To be directed to do so is very helpful."

Seaton also asked representatives from the DFG and the DNR if it is reasonable to expect their departments to work collaboratively on a rapid response plan, as his bill directs.

"This bill says that you're going to involve the public and other state and federal public and private entities ... so that when a plan comes forward, you had everybody up," Seaton said. "Does either department have a problem with involving the other agencies and the public in the development of a plan?"

Both Division of Sport Fish Director Charlie Swanton and DNR Deputy Commissioner Ed Fogels said they do not.

"We don't have any problem with being comprehensive in terms of bringing folks to the table, because I think the product at the other end will be that much cleaner for everybody to understand and that much more beneficial for the people in the State of Alaska," Swanton said.

Shortly before the committee passed H.B. 89 along to the Resources Committee on a motion by Rep. Bob Herron, D-Bethel, Seaton circled back around to the "hold harmless" clause.

"One of the things that can delay a response is legal ambiguity," said Seaton. "This is attempting to clear that up. Otherwise, I don't think that we can get to a rapid response if the agencies are always in the limbo of saying, 'Can we do this plan, or do we have to worry about something else?'"

The House Finance Committee is the third committee to which H.B. 89 has been referred. Fiscal notes on the bill suggest the bill would cost \$363,000 in fiscal year 2014 and \$140,900 in FY15. In addition to its other provisions, it would establish an "aquatic invasive species response fund" to which money could be appropriated for the purpose of combating invasive species.

The committee also advanced House Joint Resolution 5, a resolution introduced by Rep. Geran Tarr, D-Anchorage, expressing the Alaska State Legislature's opposition to a petition by Waltham, Mass.-based biotechnology firm Aquabounty Technologies to have its AquAdvantage genetically modified salmon, which opponents have derided as "Frankenfish," deemed safe for aquacultural use and human consumption by the federal government.

Gov. Sean Parnell, all three members of Alaska's congressional delegation and others have expressed opposition to a decision last year that could pave the way for AquAdvantage salmon to compete with Alaskan salmon in supermarkets, saying the move would hurt Alaska's fishing industry and claiming there has not been sufficient testing to determine long-term environmental and health risks from farming GM salmon for human consumption.

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