



Photo by Rashah McChesney/Peninsula Clarion In this March 21, 2013 file photo, Ricky Gease, executive director of the Kenai River Sportfishing Association, former Board of Fisheries member Vince Webster and Karl Johnstone, Board of Fisheries chairman, talk during a break at a Board of Fish meeting in Anchorage, Alaska. Johnstone announced his resignation on Tuesday. Governor Bill Walker appointed Cook Inlet fisherman Roland Maw to replace him.

BOF head Johnstone resigns

By Rashah McChesney

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Alaska Board of Fisheries Chairman Karl Johnstone resigned Tuesday, and a longtime Cook Inlet commercial fisheries advocate has been nominated to replace him.

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Gov. Bill Walker named Roland Maw, of Kasilof, to the fish board after calling Johnstone to express his disappointment with the board's lack of public process during a recent meeting to vet candidates for commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, according to documents released by Walker's administration.

Johnstone's resignation is effective Jan. 27. If confirmed by the Legislature, Maw's term will end in 2018. Maw would be the first Cook Inlet commercial fisherman to serve on the board since 1980.

Walker asked for Johnstone's resignation after a joint Board of Fisheries and Board of Game meeting during which members were supposed to select candidates for the Fish and Game commissioner. The boards were to forward a list of qualified candidates to the governor to select from for the position.

The boards had five candidates but ultimately chose to interview just one, Acting Commissioner for Fish and Game Sam Cotten. Board of Fisheries members voted unanimously to quash Maw's application without interviewing him. Its members gave no indication as to why they were doing so, despite a unanimous vote from Board of Game members to interview the commercial drift fisherman.

The vote prompted House Speaker Mike Chenault, R-Nikiski, to write a letter to Walker requesting a review of the meeting.

"Was the decision to forward Speaker Cotten's name made prior to the meeting? That's how it could be interpreted based on the actions of the Fish Board," wrote Chenault. "I'm just asking the governor to carefully review the Board's actions and think about how their lack of an open and transparent public process looks to us legislators, user groups and the public."

Reaction was swift, the Walker administration contacted Maw on Monday to discuss his appointment. Walker contacted Johnstone on Tuesday as the Board of Fisheries chairmen was heading to Wrangell for a board meeting.

"Today, I spoke with Chair Karl Johnstone and expressed my sincere disappointment in the recent lack of process demonstrated by the Board of Fisheries," wrote Walker in a letter to Chenault.

The resignation will come one day after the board meeting in Wrangell is scheduled to adjourn.

"I expect the Board of Fisheries to hold a fair, transparent, and public process when selecting candidates. ... It is apparent to me that it is time for a change on the Board of Fisheries," Walker wrote.

Johnstone, whose term was set to be up in June of 2015, confirmed in an email Tuesday that he had resigned his position after being told by Gov. Walker that his name would not be submitted to the Legislature for reappointment.

“I offered to step down if it would assist him in getting someone else in place and up to speed,” Johnstone wrote.

Coming right on the heels of Johnstone’s resignation, Walker’s office announced that it had appointed Cotten to the Fish and Game commissioner’s position.

Maw said he has not drawn a salary from the United Cook Inlet Drift Association — a commercial fisheries advocacy group — for months and no longer owns a commercial drift fishing permit in the Upper Cook Inlet.

Johnstone, a retired Alaska Superior Court Judge has been on the Board of Fisheries since 2008 when he was nominated by then-Gov. Sarah Palin.

He wrote that it had been a privilege to serve on the board and that he saw several issues ahead for the remaining six members.

“The (Board of Fisheries) faces significant challenges in helping rural Alaskans in the Interior get their subsistence needs met and will be challenged in deciding whether to develop State water pollock fisheries or continue to use federal regulations in State waters.”

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