

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES**

February 1, 2011

5:00 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Steve Thompson, Chair
Representative Craig Johnson, Vice Chair
Representative Alan Austerman
Representative Bob Herron
Representative Lance Pruitt
Representative Bob Miller

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Scott Kawasaki

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF FISH & GAME - DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL
FISHERIES

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

SUE ASPELUND, Acting Director
Division of Commercial Fisheries
Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided the overview of the Commercial
Fisheries Division, for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game
(ADF&G).

ACTION NARRATIVE

[5:00:43 PM](#)

CHAIR STEVE THOMPSON called the House Special Committee on
Fisheries meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. Present at the call to
order were Representatives Thompson, Herron, Pruitt, Miller and

Austerman. Representative Johnson arrived while the meeting was in progress.

OVERVIEW: DEPARTMENT OF FISH & GAME - DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

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CHAIR THOMPSON announced that the only order of business would be an overview of the Division of Commercial Fisheries, by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G).

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SUE ASPELUND, Acting Director, Division of Commercial Fisheries, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), paraphrased from a written statement, and projected a power point/slide series, to provide an overview of the division, beginning with the mission statement. The division's mission is grounded in Article 8 of the Alaska State constitution, as well as Title 16 of Alaska statute, subject to allocations of the Alaska Board of Fisheries. She said read the mission statement [original punctuation provided]:

Manage, protect, rehabilitate, enhance, and develop the fisheries and aquatic plant resources in the interest of the economy and general well being of the state, consistent with the sustained yield principle and subject to allocations established through public regulatory processes.

MS. ASPELUND elaborated that the Division of Commercial Fisheries manages all commercial fisheries in state waters, with the exception of halibut, which is managed under an international treaty. Specific salmon runs in the Southeast region and on the Yukon River are also subject to international treaty. The division also manages particular species classified as federal fisheries under delegation from the federal government. She said these are species which are found in waters up to 300 miles off Alaska's shoreline, and include: scallops, crab, and certain groundfish. In addition, the division manages subsistence fisheries in the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim and Southcentral Alaska, and subsistence and personal use fisheries in marine waters in the Southeast and Westward regions. She recognized the commercially important wild species of fin and shell fish in Alaska, which are: five species of salmon, seven species of crab, four species of shrimp, Walleye

pollock, Pacific halibut, Pacific cod, Sablefish, herring, flatfish and rockfish, lingcod, geoducks, sea cucumbers, and sea urchins. Additionally, Alaska based aquatic farms produce oysters, littleneck clams, and geoducks.

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MS. ASPELUND elaborated on four core services provided by the division, which are: harvest management - control the harvest of fishery resources for subsistence, commercial, and personal uses according to plans and regulations, and subject to allocations of the Board of Fisheries (BOF); stock assessment and applied research - maintain ongoing programs for the enumeration, assessment, and understanding of salmon, herring, groundfish, and shellfish stocks; aquaculture - permit and provide regulatory, technical, and planning services to aquatic farmers and private nonprofit hatchery operators; information services and public participation - develop and maintain dissemination of data, analyses, and publish reports. Returning to the topic of harvest management, she said that four other facets of this service include: supporting the BOF in establishing regulations and management plans, opening and closing fishing areas and setting fishing times, collecting harvest and biological data, and writing annual management reports to synthesize information. These four tasks are performed specifically to keep the division consistent with department regulations 5 AAC 39.220 and 5 AAC 39.223; the policies for management of sustainable fisheries and statewide escapement goals respectively. Finally, she said the management required is extremely diverse, extending from small boat near-shore fisheries to high seas locations.

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MS. ASPELUND projected a series of slides to illustrate how stock assessment and applied research is handled showing various weir settings, tag and scale sample activities, underwater transects to estimate abundance via dive surveys, aerial herring spawn estimations, intertidal clam assessments, and crab and prawn pot sampling. Pausing on a slide of the Frazer River fish pass, on Kodiak Island, she said it is home to a successfully introduced sockeye salmon run, supported in a previously barren lake back in the 1950's. Since the mid 1980's, about one million sockeye salmon are harvested from this area annually. Another slide of note portrayed the Port Moller processing plant, on the north side of the Alaska Peninsula. This plant

supports a test fishing operation that provides entry information on the sockeye salmon running into Bristol Bay.

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MS. ASPELUND said the division permits/provides technical assistance and oversight to thirty-four private nonprofit salmon hatcheries, one aquatic shellfish hatchery, and numerous shellfish farms throughout the state. Regarding the information services and public information that the division provides, she said that this function is a means to keep the public and policymakers informed, as well as to share findings with a wide range of scientists, and staff biologists. The department data systems provide salmon forecasts, harvest summaries, fish prices, exvessel values, and wholesale values. To a committee member's question, she explained that the exvessel value pertains to the initial sale price attached to a product as it arrives from the harvest vessel.

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MS ASPELUND, continued, stating that the division has two additional functions that support the core services: laboratory support and data processing. The pathology, coded wire tag and otolith aging, and genetic stock identification labs provide critical information. The data processing aspect is comprised of eight, diverse, primary database systems. She called attention to the innovative eLanding electronic catch reporting system, to explain how the "share-matching" component of this database allows the deliveries in the rationalized crab program individual fishery quotas (IFQs) to be efficiently matched to available processor-held quotas. This represents the most complex quota program the division manages and precise tracking of accounts is required. The successful eLanding program has been expanded into the groundfish harvest, and pilot programs for salmon fisheries began last summer. Expansion of this program will result in real-time reporting of harvest data, reduce manual fish ticket data entry and improve overall efficiency.

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MS. ASPELUND delineated the regions that the state is divided into to accomplish the management tasks, which are: Southeast - Dixon Entrance to Yakutat, with offices in Juneau; Central - Prince William Sound (PWS), Cook Inlet, and Bristol Bay, with offices in Anchorage; Westward - Aleutian Islands, Kodiak,

Alaska Peninsula, and the Bering Sea, with offices in Kodiak; and AYK: Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers, and Norton and Kotzebue sounds, with offices in Anchorage. The department is headquartered in Juneau. She then provided a breakdown of the 767 positions, as well as the offices and vessels, employed/utilized by the division. These include: 314 permanent, 450 seasonal, and 3 intern staff; 20 permanent and 84 seasonal offices/field camps; and 6 large research vessels. She explained that it is through these means that the division accomplishes the division's goals, comprised of four top priorities. The first is to maintain a \$1 billion exvessel value for commercial harvests and mariculture production; a target that has been exceeded every year since 2001. The second priority is to achieve escapement goals for more than 80 percent of the monitored stocks, but, she reported, this has been a challenging target to attain, and projected a slide to illustrate the four year period, 2006-09. Although the division has exceeded the measure for coho and pink salmon, in recent years, the goal has not been achieved statewide for the sockeye, chum, and Chinook species. The department uses an interdivisional approach to developing scientifically-defensible escapement goals for roughly 290 salmon stocks statewide. She reported that it is well known that Chinook stocks have experienced declines throughout much of the state. Contributing factors may include bycatch activities, ocean conditions, and possibly climate change. It is interesting, she noted, that the Chinook decline is not consistent statewide, an example being Chignik where Chinook escapement goals have been met for thirty years running. However, the broad-scale decline points to issues that are not necessarily stock or river-specific, possibly reflecting some larger scale influences. She offered that the sockeye and chum salmon runs are naturally variable and show highly inconsistent trends across the state. To mitigate poor runs, managers allow commercial access to any surplus stocks, and, where possible, monitored escapement activities while fisheries are being processed and prosecuted. Based on the in-season run projections, fishing effort can be adjusted with openings and closures to ensure that adequate numbers of fish are reaching the spawning grounds. However, due to data gaps, many of the goals become post season report cards. This is due to escapement projects being distant from the fisheries, or the species goal in question may not be a target for a specific fishery. She explained that when this occurs it is referred to as a mixed stock fishery; a fishery comprised of a number of individual runs. To manage these fisheries, she said the division employs additional assessment tools including abundance estimates, and stock identification methods to measure

impacts in real time. When goals are not met, it does not necessarily constitute a threat to sustainability. However, she cautioned, that a chronic inability to achieve goals does raise concern; that is not meeting goals for four out of five years. When this happens, in addition to taking restrictive management measures, the department recommends "Stock of Concern" status to the BOF, and implements a series of corrective actions that include more restrictive management measures, research plans, and habitat analysis.

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REPRESENTATIVE AUSTERMAN asked if there was a particular region that did not meet the goals in 2008-09.

MS. ASPELUND responded that AYK has not met fall chum goals and Chinook goals have been down throughout the state. To a follow-up question she said the major sockeye fisheries have done well and offered to provide statewide information regarding this fishery. Ms. Aspelund addressed the third target area, which is to develop baselines of DNA-based markers for 100 Alaska salmon stocks for sockeye, chum, and Chinook salmon, and reported that this goal has been met or exceeded in all areas since 2008.

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REPRESENTATIVE AUSTERMAN asked how much of the stock assessment data reflects information for the Bering Sea.

MS. ASPELUND answered that the Western Alaska Stock and Identification Program (WASIP), is being utilized from the western Gulf of Alaska, as far north as the mouth of the Yukon River. She said she is not able to speak to the remainder of the gulf, but offered that the North Pacific Council is fast tracking an analysis and regulation package in an effort to reduce the large Chinook by-catch occurring in the gulf. Included in that effort are DNA studies specific to state waters. To a follow-up question, she said that the baseline projects are being accomplished and suggested that the person responsible for the project could provide a progress report to the committee. Ms. Aspelund continued to the final target, for missions and measures, which is to ensure that all aquatic farms operate with current permits; a goal that is being met. She presented the FY12 budget request, which totals \$66,159,700; 65.4 percent unrestricted general funds, 5.0 percent designated general funds, 16.3 percent federal funds, and 13 percent from other funding sources. She called attention to a slide

illustrating the economic impact of the seafood industry on Alaska's economy in 2007; the most recent report available. The industry generated 78,519 jobs related to seafood harvesting and processing. Alaskan residents filled about one half of these positions, earning approximately \$237 million, from a total direct labor payout of \$774.7 million. Total product sales of \$3.6 billion, represented more revenue contributions to the state general fund than any other industry, save oil and gas. She continued, stating that in 2008, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service's commercial landing report, Alaska upheld its position as the top ranked fishing state in the nation; harvesting more than 54 percent of the fish taken in the U.S, up 32 percent from 2007, and accounting for 39 percent of the total U.S. exvessel value. She presented a graph indicating the exvessel value for commercial fisheries from 1977 to 2010. Exvessel value refers to the postseason adjusted value at the point of the first purchase of the harvest of commercial fishermen; the amount received by fishermen when selling their catch to processors. The exvessel value of salmon has increased in recent years, while groundfish value has decreased. The preliminary exvessel value of the salmon fishery in 2010 was over \$533 million. In addition to the economic value of the state fisheries, the value to subsistence and personal use harvesters is inestimable, she opined, in both cultural terms and in food replacement costs.

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REPRESENTATIVE PRUITT noted the employment of non-Alaskans to fill more than half of the jobs generated in the fishing industry, and asked for an explanation.

MS. ASPELUND responded that there are a number of non-resident fishermen harvesting Alaskan products, and added that the processing sector hires many non-residents and aliens to fill the seasonal positions.

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REPRESENTATIVE MILLER inquired whether the escapement determinations made by the Division of Commercial Fisheries are used for the management of the other fishery divisions.

MS. ASPELUND responded no. She clarified that the BOF establishes fishery allocations and the divisions of ADF&G implement those allocations. The divisions may collaborate on research findings and share management information.

REPRESENTATIVE MILLER commented that the efforts may be redundant, and asked whether management conflicts occur in areas of overlap, such as during escapement counts.

MS. ASPELUND explained how the divisions work together to come to agreement in areas of shared management. To a follow-up question, she described how the BOF provides directives to the divisions.

REPRESENTATIVE MILLER returned to the topic of non-resident employees and commented that it would be good to see more Alaskans being employed.

MS. ASPELUND said that the Department of Labor (DOL) provides an economic trend report, which would be of interest to committee members.

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REPRESENTATIVE AUSTERMAN concurred that the recent DOL report is available, which provides hiring statistics. Further, he relayed that, historically, the commercial fisheries and fish processing industries have employed non-resident and alien workers to fill the approximate 30,000 seasonal positions; a practice that also occurs in the seasonal tourism industry. Additionally, he said the escapement goal modeling is a difficult picture to follow and opined that every major stream should be counted to establish better base numbers. Providing the effort to establish these counts would require a budget request, something which he recalled having suggested to the department in recent years. He asked whether this will be taken up by the division in the current fiscal year.

MS. ASPELUND said the information will be made available.

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CHAIR THOMPSON announced the up-coming meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Fisheries meeting was adjourned at 5:37 p.m.