

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

April 12, 2022

10:09 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Geran Tarr, Chair
Representative Louise Stutes, Vice Chair
Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins
Representative Andi Story
Representative Dan Ortiz
Representative Sarah Vance
Representative Kevin McCabe

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S) :

Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council

Clay Benzenek - Ketchikan

- CONFIRMATION(S) ADVANCED

PRESENTATION: ALASKA FISHERIES SCIENCE CENTER PANEL

- HEARD

PRESENTATION: COMMERCIAL FISHERIES ENTRY COMMISSION

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

CLAY BENZENEK, Appointee
Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council
Ketchikan, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as appointee to the Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council.

VELMA THOMAS, Fund Administrator
Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony during the confirmation hearing for Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council.

TRACY WELCH, Executive Director
United Fishermen of Alaska
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the confirmation of Clay Benzenek to the Fisherman's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council.

JERRY MCCUNE, President
Cordova District Fishermen United
Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of the confirmation of Clay Benzenek to the Fisherman's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council.

ROBERT FOY, PhD, Director
Alaska Fisheries Science Center
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented a PowerPoint, titled "Alaska Fisheries Science Center Science Update," during the Alaska Fisheries Science Center Panel presentation.

ELIZABETH SIDDON, PhD, Fisheries Research Biologist
Alaska Fisheries Science Center
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented a PowerPoint titled "Alaska Fisheries Science Center Science Update" during the Alaska Fisheries Science Center Panel presentation.

MARYSIA SZYMKOWIAK, PhD, Research Social Scientist
Alaska Fisheries Science Center
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Co-presented a PowerPoint, titled "Alaska Fisheries Science Center Science Update," during the Alaska Fisheries Science Center Panel presentation.

MELVIN SMITH, Commissioner
Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced the work of the commission.

JON HAGHAYEGHI, Executive Director
Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint, titled "Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission."

ACTION NARRATIVE

[10:09:21 AM](#)

CHAIR GERAN TARR called the House Special Committee on Fisheries meeting to order at 10:09 a.m. Representatives Story, Vance, McCabe, and Tarr were present at the call to order. Representatives Ortiz, Stutes, and Kreiss-Tomkins arrived as the meeting was in progress.

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S):

Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council

[10:10:05 AM](#)

CHAIR TARR announced that the first order of business would be Consideration of Governor's Appointees to the Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council.

[10:10:49 AM](#)

CLAY BENZENEK, Appointee, Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council, stated that he was first appointed to the council in 2007 by then Governor Sarah Palin. He said that the fund is unique because it is entirely funded by fishermen paying into it. He has worked to keep the fund in line with insurance payments and added that this would be his final term on the council if he were to be confirmed.

[10:13:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked how many fishermen utilize the fund and what challenges the council currently faces.

MR. BENZENEK answered several hundred, although the number of claims is fewer than 500. He said that many fishermen have private insurance and that the fund is a payer of "last resort." He stated that the council is working to modernize and protect

the fund. Some of the challenges that face the council are fishermen not being aware of the fund and how it works. He said that the council sometimes visits fishermen that have been injured in order to help them make claims and receive help from the fund.

[10:20:13 AM](#)

CHAIR TARR asked Velma Thomas for her thoughts on the appointment.

[10:20:24 AM](#)

VELMA THOMAS, Fund Administrator, Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council, stated that that she supports the reconfirmation of Mr. Benzenek to the council due to his long history serving.

[10:21:08 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS asked what effect the regulation change for boat owners' deductibles would have.

MR. BENZENEK answered that half of a deductible is currently eligible for repayment, up to \$10,000. He added that due to the decrease in large claims made in recent years, the council feels as though the fund is able to support payment of that full amount up to \$10,000. In response to a follow-up question, he stated that insurance for boat owners comes in many different forms, and the council emphasizes the importance of having insurance. He added that the council has also worked directly with the insurance industry to improve coverage.

[10:27:58 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS asked what type of payments would be covered by the \$10,000 amount.

MR. BENZENEK answered that the fund would pay up to \$5,000 for boat captains, and that the \$10,000 is for medical expenses. He added that other expenses, such as damage from running aground, are up to the insurance coverage an owner has on their boat.

[10:30:07 AM](#)

CHAIR TARR opened public testimony on the confirmation hearing for the Fisherman's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council.

[10:30:21 AM](#)

TRACY WELCH, Executive Director, United Fishermen of Alaska, stated that she was representing United Fishermen of Alaska (UFA) in its support of the reconfirmation of Mr. Benzenek. United Fishermen of Alaska is an organization that represents 37 commercial fishing organizations across the state. She said that UFA supports Mr. Benzenek's long history of service to the commercial fishing industry.

[10:32:24 AM](#)

JERRY MCCUNE, President, Cordova District Fishermen United, testified in support of the confirmation of Clay Benzenek to the Fisherman's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council. He stated that he has worked with Mr. Benzenek in the past and said that he has done a good job in ensuring that the fund will be around for future generations of fishermen. He emphasized the importance of the council as a whole to the commercial fishing industry.

[10:34:03 AM](#)

MS. THOMAS stated that Mr. Benzenek does a fantastic job at ensuring that injured fishermen are taken care of by the fund. She added that the council increased the time period for injury treatment to 120 days to ensure that injured fishermen are not left behind.

[10:36:47 AM](#)

CHAIR TARR closed public testimony after ascertaining nobody else wished to testify.

[10:37:16 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS stated that Mr. Benzenek is a great example of statewide service.

[10:37:35 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY stated that the House Special Committee on Fisheries has reviewed the qualifications of the governor's appointee and recommends that the following name be forwarded to a joint session for consideration: Clay Benzenek, Appointee, Fishermen's Fund Advisory and Appeals Council. She said that signing the report regarding appointments to boards and

commissions in no way reflects an individual member's approval or disapproval of the appointee, and the nomination is merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.

PRESENTATION: Alaska Fisheries Science Center Panel

[10:38:32 AM](#)

CHAIR TARR announced that the next order of business would be the Alaska Fisheries Science Center Panel presentation.

[10:39:53 AM](#)

ROBERT FOY, PhD, Director, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, began the presentation, titled "Alaska Fisheries Science Center Science Update" [hard copy included in the committee packet], on slide 2, and stated that the mission of the center is "to provide science and services in support of productive and sustainable fisheries, recovery and conservation of protected resources, and healthy ecosystems in the marine waters of Alaska." He said that the presentation would focus on climate change and the effects it has on the community, and he added that the success of the center relies on the federal government working with state governments that make up these fisheries.

DR. FOY continued to slide 3 and said that the center is made up of 314 federal employees and 131 contractors. The Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) has facilities in Seattle, Washington, Newport, Oregon, and the following locations in Alaska: Juneau, Kodiak, Anchorage, Dutch Harbor, Baranof Island, and St. Paul Island.

[10:43:18 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS asked what proportion of employees work in Seattle.

DR. FOY answered that he does not have the exact number, but the majority are in Seattle. He added that the complexity of the mission requires the center to have locations in the Lower 48. In response to a follow-up question, he said that he is based in Juneau and was previously based in Kodiak.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS asked for elaboration on the Little Port Walter facility on Baranof Island.

DR. FOY stated that AFSC continues to support the facility, and more details would be provided later in the presentation.

[10:46:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked how much usage the facility in Kodiak is receiving.

DR. FOY answered that AFSC is in the Borough owned facility, along with other tenants. In response to a follow-up comment, he said that he agrees that the focus of fishery work should be on Alaska.

[10:49:03 AM](#)

DR. FOY continued to slide 4 and stated that Alaska has an economic exclusive zone (EEZ) of approximately 1.5 million square nautical miles. Alaska has five different large marine ecosystems, in which 60 percent of seafood in the United States is caught. He said that Alaska's EEZ is responsible for \$13.8 billion in economic output and has the top three fishing ports in the U.S. in terms of volume. The seafood industry contributes \$73 million in taxes and fees to the state of Alaska yearly. He added that the complexity and scope of AFSC's mission is increasing due to climate related issues.

[10:52:21 AM](#)

DR. FOY moved to slides 5 and 6 and stated the need for a balanced research portfolio. He gave examples of those research areas, including climate modeling for fisheries, bycatch reduction, marine mammal stock assessments, and fishery monitoring. He stated that funding for research on salmon bycatch and food habitats continues to be necessary. He added that the needs of AFSC are increasing due to the increasing complexity of its mission.

[10:56:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS asked how the council processes information on the economic effects that will occur for communities that have an economic reliance on fisheries.

DR. FOY answered that socio-economic factors are considered by the council, and more in-depth information on the subject would be presented later.

[10:59:27 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked how much research is done before action is taken.

DR. FOY answered that a large amount of information on the number and type of salmon being caught is available. He said that although the precise economic effect of bycatch for every community is not known, information on bycatch is being communicated to the fishing industry. He added that that AFSC is continuing research on the Yukon River to study the survivability of fish before they return to the rivers to spawn. The majority of the effect being had on King Salmon is due to climate change and the process of catching salmon.

[11:04:51 AM](#)

DR. FOY continued to slides 7-10 and gave a brief overview of ecosystem response to climate change in Alaska. He displayed a chart with data showing that the surface of the sea in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea has risen, which has in return caused a change in the fisheries. He stated that from 1980 until 2020, the amount of sea ice in the Bering Sea has shown a downward trend. He said that the increased ocean temperatures have caused a sharp decrease in the number of Pacific cod in the Gulf of Alaska.

[11:08:05 AM](#)

DR. FOY moved to slides 11 through 13 and stated that the populations of snow crab and sockeye salmon have also been affected by changes in ocean temperature. He showed a map with temperatures being represented by different colors; he said that 2019 was much warmer than average. He added that as temperatures stabilize, the hope is that fish populations will begin to increase again, and there is some evidence showing that this is occurring. He stated that although the number of sockeye salmon being caught in the Gulf of Alaska has decreased, the number of sockeye being caught in Bristol Bay has increased. Some species, such as black cod, have shown increased growth despite the increase in temperatures.

[11:12:04 AM](#)

ELIZABETH SIDDON, PhD, Fisheries Research Biologist, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, as co-presenter of the PowerPoint, continued to slides 14-17 and stated that ecosystem status

reports are used to manage federal fisheries in Alaska to ensure their sustainability now and in the future. She said AFSC produces a synthesis of ecosystem status by region, which is reviewed in tandem with stock assessments through the annual fisheries management process. On slide 16, she showed the partner agencies that work with AFSC on creating the fishery reports. AFSC's primary job is to take the information gathered by the reports and create something that is usable by fishery managers to make decisions regarding fishery management.

[11:15:32 AM](#)

DR. SIDDON continued to slides 18 and 19 and stated that extreme environmental changes are challenging the ability of AFSC to use its scientific data to manage Alaska's fisheries. From 2014 through 2016, a marine heatwave occurred in which the ocean stayed warm, which caused a drop in Pacific cod biomass of 83 percent from 2013 through 2017. She said that there was not enough food available for the cod, and the loss of such a significant number of cod also resulted in population decline of seabirds, whales, and sea lions.

[11:19:04 AM](#)

DR. SIDDON moved to slides 20-22 and stated that the 2017 stock assessment of Pacific cod used an increased mortality parameter to account for reduced prey and increased mortality. The decision was made to reduce the quota of Pacific cod as a result of the evidence supporting lower cod populations. She stated that reduced temperatures in 2021 led to the regrowth of shrimp, forage fish, copepods, and pink salmon, although some populations are still recovering, and the Western and Central Aleutian Islands experienced record high temperatures in 2021.

[11:23:32 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS asked how AFSC is collecting biological information on Arctic species.

DR. SIDDON answered that Dr. Foy would speak to it later in the presentation. She said that she consistently works with those who are in the Arctic to create the reports on its ecosystem.

[11:25:15 AM](#)

DR. SIDDON continued to slide 23 and stated that the Eastern Bering Sea has seen persistent warm phases since 2014, with low

sea ice levels in the winters of 2017, 2018, and 2019. The warmer temperatures have resulted in reduced snow crab populations in the Northern Bering Sea and reduced Tanner and Red King Crab populations in the Southern Bering Sea. He stated that the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim (AYK) region saw poor salmon returns, and Bristol Bay saw very high salmon returns. The high temperatures also resulted in seabirds having lower reproduction rates and even dying off in the Northern Bering Sea and Bering Strait.

[11:28:28 AM](#)

DR. SIDDON moved to slides 24 through 27 and showed various graphs depicting the amount of sea ice in recent years compared to the median since 1978. The overall extent of sea ice during the winter of 2020 through 2021 was lower than the median, while in 2021 through 2022 it was higher. She stated that the thickness of the ice in the Bering Sea during March 2022 was much greater than the median in some areas and much less in others. He concluded his part of the presentation by reiterating AFSC's role in fishery management and the challenges it faces due to climate and environmental changes.

[11:33:07 AM](#)

MARYSIA SZYMKOWIAK, PhD, Research Social Scientist, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, co-presented a PowerPoint, titled "Alaska Fisheries Science Center Science Update," during the Alaska Fisheries Science Center Panel presentation. She stated that her research focuses on the social impacts of climate change. She began on slides 28-30 and said that the Economic and Social Sciences Research Program (ESSRP) provides social and economic data that helps stewardship of fisheries with respect to fishing communities. Climate change in coastal regions is causing changes in subsistence practices, shipping, maritime risks, and other aspects of life in fishing communities. She showed a graph depicting fishery disaster declarations in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea.

[11:35:46 AM](#)

DR. SZYMKOWIAK continued to slides 31-35 and stated that ESSRP creates annual economic engagement and participation reports, integrated ecosystem assessments (IEA), climate integrated modeling projects, and other economic and social research. The reports address how changing conditions will affect the fisheries, how those changes will affect fishermen and fishing

communities, and how fishermen will adapt to the changing conditions. She stated that the research includes interviews with fishermen and discussions of ecosystem changes, responses to those systems, and what is needed for adaptation.

[11:37:28 AM](#)

DR. SZYMKOWIAK moved to slides 34-37 and stated fishermen are on the frontlines of climate change. It causes there to be fewer fish, smaller fish, and reduced health of the stock. She said that in addition to the economic impact, the mental health and physical well-being of fishermen is put at higher risk. Adaptation happens on a spectrum from maintaining the status quo to transforming communities in a way that allows them to find a place in their new surroundings. She stated that short-term coping strategies can have a negative impact on long-term resilience. She noted that there is a current absence of adaptation planning and limited discourse about the effects of climate change on fisheries.

[11:42:05 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS asked for information regarding a climate plan and who would promulgate the plan.

DR. SZYMKOWIAK answered that it comes from the communities themselves and is implemented based on the efforts of the community.

[11:44:05 AM](#)

DR. SZYMKOWIAK continued to slide 38 and stated that in order for fishermen to build resilience, they need clear and collaborative science, networks for climate discourse, workforce development, consistency in regulations, expedited and flexible policymaking, and funding for local resilience efforts.

[11:46:21 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked what fishermen involvement in resiliency looks like.

DR. SZYMKOWIAK answered that there is not enough discourse on resiliency, and that increased discourse would lead to community solutions.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked about the usage of sails to help reduce the amount of greenhouse gases emitted in the fishing process.

REPRESENTATIVE KREISS-TOMKINS responded that there is ongoing work on reducing emissions from fishing vessels.

[11:50:00 AM](#)

DR. SZYMKOWIAK concluded with slides 39-40 and reiterated that climate change is altering the sociocultural and economic relationship between Alaskans and marine ecosystems. Coping should be avoided, as it impedes future progress on solutions that will allow communities to become resilient.

PRESENTATION: Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission

[11:51:53 AM](#)

CHAIR TARR announced that the final order of business would be the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission presentation.

[11:52:16 AM](#)

MELVIN SMITH, Commissioner, Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, stated that the presentation would cover the activities of the commission. He stated that it would include the policy objectives and daily tasks of the commission.

[11:54:20 AM](#)

JON HAGHAYEGHI, Executive Director, Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, presented a PowerPoint, titled "Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission," [hard copy included in committee packet]. He began on slides 2 and 3 and gave an outline for the presentation. He stated that in 1948, only 9 percent of traps were owned by Alaskans. Canneries were largely controlled by companies in the Lower 48, and production dropped to its lowest level in 60 years following Alaska becoming a state. He said that two laws were enacted in an effort to curb the problem but were later repealed due to being unconstitutional.

[11:57:07 AM](#)

MR. HAGHAYEGHI skipped to slides 7 and 8 and gave a list of 2021 outcomes for the commission, including all pending applications being completed, 16,161 commercial fishing licenses being

issued, and 8,290 vessel licenses being issued. He concluded the presentation by stating that the commission continues to work on research pertaining to economic reporting within the fisheries.

[12:02:05 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Fisheries meeting was adjourned at 12:02 p.m.