

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE LABOR AND COMMERCE STANDING COMMITTEE

March 1, 2024

1:42 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Jesse Bjorkman, Chair
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson
Senator Kelly Merrick (via teleconference)
Senator Forrest Dunbar

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Click Bishop, Vice Chair

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

SENATE BILL NO. 173

"An Act requiring school districts to grant qualified persons an assigned duty to carry a concealed handgun on school grounds under certain conditions; relating to standards, training, and continuing education in firearms training for qualified persons granted an assigned duty to carry a concealed handgun on school grounds; relating to communication of school districts with state and local law enforcement; and relating to school crisis response plans."

- MOVED CSSB 173(L&C) OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL NO. 211

"An Act relating to the powers of the board of agriculture and conservation; relating to loans and limitations under the Alaska Agricultural Loan Act; relating to federal crop insurance contributions; relating to municipal and state procurement preferences for agricultural products harvested in the state and fisheries products harvested or processed in the state; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 173

SHORT TITLE: AUTHORIZE HANDGUNS SCHOOL EMPLOYEE/VOLUNT

SPONSOR(s) : SENATOR(s) HUGHES

01/16/24 (S) PREFILE RELEASED 1/12/24
01/16/24 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/16/24 (S) L&C, JUD
01/24/24 (S) L&C AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
01/24/24 (S) Heard & Held
01/24/24 (S) MINUTE(L&C)
03/01/24 (S) L&C AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

BILL: SB 211

SHORT TITLE: AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS/LOANS/SALES

SPONSOR(s) : RULES BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNOR

01/26/24 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/26/24 (S) L&C, FIN
03/01/24 (S) L&C AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

WITNESS REGISTER

SENATOR HUGHES, District M
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Sponsor of SB 173.

JOHN CLOUGH, Representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

MIKE COONS, Representing self
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

ANA GIFFORD, Representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

TOM BOUTIN, Representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

FRANK BERGSTROM, Representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

DAVID HANNA, Representing self

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

SALLY DONALDSON, Representing self

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

CHARLIE FRANZ, Representing self

Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

HEATHER BENNET, Representing self

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

CHRISTINE EVERETT, Representing self

North Pole, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

PATTY OWEN, Representing self

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

ROBERT MATTHEWS, Representing self

Delta Junction, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

ODETTE EDGAR, Representing self

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

RYAN PETTY, Representing self

Parkland, Florida

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

JOHN SONIN, Representing self

Douglas, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

JIM IRVINE, Co-Director

FASTER Saves Lives

Cleveland, Ohio

POSITION STATEMENT: Available to answer questions on SB 173.

JOYANNE BLOOM, Representing self

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

SHANNAN GREENE, Representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

JOEL SIGMAN, Representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

DOUG WALRATH, Director
Northwestern Alaska Career & Technical Center
Nome, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

LIN DAVIS, Volunteer
Moms Demand Action
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

WILLIAM LUCE, Representing self
Retired Member of Alaska National Guard
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

MICHAEL GARHART, Representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

ROCHELLE PARKER, Volunteer
Moms Demand Action
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

TAMARA KRUSE ROSELIUS, Representing self
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

JANEL DOCKENDORF, Representing self
Wasilla, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

CHERI RUIZ, Representing self
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

ALEX KOPLIN, Representing self
Homer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

STEVEN RETTKE, Representing self
Eagle River, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

DR. MAUREEN LONGWORTH, Representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

GERALD VOSS, Representing self
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SB 173.

MICHELLE VASQUEZ, Representing self
Soldotna, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in opposition to SB 173.

BRENT GOODRUM, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented SB 211 on behalf of the administration.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:42:05 PM](#)

CHAIR JESSE BJORKMAN called the Senate Labor and Commerce Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:42 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Gray-Jackson, Dunbar, Merrick (via teleconference) and Chair Bjorkman.

SB 173-AUTHORIZE HANDGUNS SCHOOL EMPLOYEE/VOLUNT

[1:43:10 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 173 "An Act requiring school districts to grant qualified persons an assigned duty to carry a concealed handgun on school grounds under certain conditions; relating to standards, training, and continuing education in firearms training for qualified persons granted an assigned duty to carry a concealed handgun on school grounds; relating to communication of school districts with state and local law enforcement; and relating to school crisis response plans."

1:43:52 PM

SENATOR HUGHES, District M, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, sponsor of SB 173, explained that the bill provides a back-end stopgap in the event of an active school shooter incident. While schools work hard to prevent these incidents with a variety of front-end measures (e.g. providing mental health support, locks on doors, etc.), this does not keep shooters from entering schools. After a series of school shooting incidents across the country, she was approached by a retired teacher who suggested that arming teachers would deter shooters from entering school grounds. She noted that this teacher was working in Bethel in 1997, when a shooting occurred at Bethel High School. She pointed out that several states across the country have similar laws in place and said that more school shooters are stopped by armed school personnel than by law enforcement. This is because it takes law enforcement longer to arrive at the school. She emphasized that in Alaska, where many villages do not have armed law enforcement and/or are not on the road system, it can take troopers anywhere from an hour to five days to respond to an emergency call.

SENATOR HUGHES asserted that SB 173 is a precautionary measure that will save the lives of students and teachers. She acknowledged that there is opposition to arming school staff. However, she has received more messages in support of than in opposition to SB 173. She suggested that this is because of a shared goal to protect children and school staff. She pointed out that, while there is concern about having guns in schools, there is little risk of a negligent discharge (ND) when staff are highly trained. Additionally, the guns would be carried rather than left in a desk drawer, which further reduces the risk of ND. It is not feasible to have School Resource Officers (SRO) at every school. She asserted that the only person who can save a child in an active shooter situation is someone on-site who is able to respond immediately. She added that this is not about whether people are pro-gun or anti-gun; rather, it is about keeping children safe. She said that she has asked both anti-gun and pro-gun parents if they would want someone on-site who could stop an active shooter from hurting their child. No one has replied "no". Referring to an incident when a moose on a playground could have harmed children, she added that biometric lockers or keeping a rifle at school are additional measures that can be taken. She opined that, if SB 173 is not passed and there is a school shooting, the state will regret not having put these added safeguards in place.

[1:49:20 PM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES briefly summarized the requirements for individuals to fill the role put forth by SB 173 which include [firearm] training, passing the Alaska Police Standards psychological assessment and medical screening, and ongoing training that would be determined by individual school boards. She stated that she is in support of the State of Alaska covering the costs incurred as a result of implementing these changes. Additionally, school districts would coordinate with local law enforcement to ensure that law enforcement is aware of which school personnel are armed.

[1:50:13 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON referred to a petition provided to the committee in support of SB 173 and pointed out that more than half of the signees are not from Alaska. She asked how the petition was generated.

[1:50:44 PM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES answered that the petition was posted online. She stated that the majority of signatures are from Alaskans while some are from other states. She surmised that the latter group heard about [SB 173] and were interested in supporting this legislation.

[1:52:09 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN opened public testimony on SB 173.

[1:52:28 PM](#)

JOHN CLOUGH, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. He said he has lived in Alaska for 50 years and has children and grandchildren who live in the state. He stated that he owns multiple firearms and in 1983, he apprehended two armed and dangerous felons using his personal handgun. He received recognition from the Legislature and the Alaska Peace Officers Association (APOA) for this act. He asserted that SB 173 has many flaws. First, it is mandatory. Local school districts, teachers, parents, etc. should have input. What works for one district may not work for another. Second, it is not funded. There is a crisis in education funding; schools will not be able to hire full-time employees to hold this position. He expressed concern that this will result in volunteers filling these positions. Finally, the training requirements are grossly inadequate. He emphasized that the issue is not whether a person knows how to load, unload,

operate, and lock up a firearm; rather, the issue is whether they are able to discern when the use of deadly force is appropriate, especially when working around children. He pointed out that police officers in Juneau, Alaska are required to complete 17 weeks of training at the State Trooper Academy. This training includes firing range, classroom work, computer simulations, and live-action training exercises. He insisted that this type of training is what is needed before allowing someone with a concealed weapon in Auke Bay Elementary in Juneau, Alaska where his grandchildren attend school. Referring to his own experience apprehending dangerous individuals, he explained that he can discern the difference between knowing "how" to use a gun and knowing "when" to use a gun.

[1:54:48 PM](#)

MIKE COONS, Representing self, Palmer, Alaska, Testified in support of SB 173. He said he is a member of the National Rifle Association (NRA) and has taught hunter safety for several years to help young people become safe firearm owners. He said SB 173 enables school employees to take personal responsibility for the safety of their fellow staff and the students who are under their care. He challenged those who oppose guns to only enter buildings that do not allow firearms. He stated that, if he had children in school, he would gladly enroll them in a school that addresses immediate safety concerns. He invited those who oppose SB 173 to enroll their children in gun-free schools. He opined that in this case, [parents and school staff] are taking on the responsibility for the harm caused by an active shooter while waiting for law enforcement to arrive.

[1:57:22 PM](#)

ANN GIFFORD, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She said she is a parent of three children who went to Juneau schools, worked as a school volunteer, and is a retired school attorney. She spent over 25 years working with Alaska school districts. Drawing on this experience, she warned that SB 173 would make schools more dangerous, not less. She explained that school personnel do not have the extensive training and experience required to successfully use a gun in an active-shooter scenario. She pointed to the Parkland, Florida and Uvalde, Texas shootings and commented that even the police did not have the appropriate training to properly handle these incidents. She said that assigning minimally trained school personnel to carry guns is "a recipe for disaster." Possible everyday scenarios include accidental weapon discharge and curious students getting access to guns. Possible crisis

scenarios include school staff accidentally shooting the wrong person and school staff being mistaken for the active shooter by law enforcement. She pointed out that current statute allows school districts to authorize staff members to conceal-carry; therefore, SB 173 is not needed. She urged the committee to vote no.

1:59:35 PM

TOM BOUTIN, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He referred to a variety of statewide economic and social issues, suggesting that these could potentially drive some individuals to become school shooters. He opined that SB 173 provides an "honest and constructive" response to this concern. He contrasted the current laws disallowing weapons in schools to the past, when weapons were allowed. SB 173 addresses the changing educational/social landscape. He said, "no one wants the task of telling the families of murdered students that we looked at the risks and saw that nothing could be done."

2:01:49 PM

FRANK BERGSTROM, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He said this is not about arming teachers with "scary guns" but "empowering defenders." He defined a "defender" as "someone who is willing and able to defend themselves and others - especially those that are in their protection, i.e. children." He outlined the following three aspects of a defender: a defender's attitude and the desire to be a defender; the skills, training, and tools required to perform the job of a defender; and to have a plan for all situations in which a defender might find themselves. He opined that SB 173 does all these things. He commented that SB 173 empowers individuals who have the desire to defend those in need of protection.

2:03:14 PM

DAVID HANNA, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He commented that SB 173 is well thought out and addresses the concerns that have been raised. He asserted that all measures to protect children must be embraced. He surmised that an accidental weapon discharge is unlikely and contrasted this with the increasing possibility of a school shooting. He indicated that this is evidence that SB 173 is needed. He added that, in the event of a school shooting, law enforcement would likely arrive too late. He posited that [the

state] should enable responsible individuals who are willing to take on the duty of protecting students.

2:04:24 PM

SALLY DONALDSON, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She expressed concern that SB 173 creates a mandate. She questioned whether the training included in SB 173 would be adequate and opined that it is too much of a responsibility to charge school staff with confronting an active shooter. She added that arming staff would increase the risk of students and fellow staff being harmed. She suggested that there are other ways to make communities safer. She clarified that she is not denouncing guns; however, she believes that having guns in school is not the right solution.

2:06:10 PM

CHARLIE FRANZ, Representing self, Homer, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He said he supports SB 173. He emphasized the importance of addressing the issue of school shootings, rather than ignoring the problem in the hope that it will go away.

2:06:50 PM

HEATHER BENNET, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. She commented that gun-free schools leave students unprotected and pointed out that children trust adults to keep them safe. She reasoned that staff want to protect the students but cannot and indicated the SB 173 enables school staff to better protect students. She emphasized the importance of training armed personnel who must be mentally prepared to [take a life]. She surmised that, even with a concealed-carry permit, most individuals do not want to [take a life]. She suggested that the only reason someone would be willing to do so is to protect those who are vulnerable.

2:08:42 PM

CHRISTINE EVERETT, Representing self, North Pole, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She said she is a mother and a grandmother who has lived in Alaska for 36 years. She expressed concern that SB 173 creates a mandate rather than allowing local districts to determine whether it is appropriate for them. She pointed out that SB 173 is not funded, which would add to the financial strain that schools in Alaska are experiencing. She asserted that SB 173 does not contain adequate training requirements. She drew attention to the language in SB 173 that provides immunity to program participants, unless the standard of "gross negligence" has been met. She reasoned that

this would result in program participants not being held accountable in the event of an accident that results in injury. She opined that this lack of accountability will lead to increased risk of accidents. She drew attention to HB 164 (Misconduct Involving Weapons) and HB 162 (Gun Violence Protective Orders).

2:11:03 PM

PATTY OWEN, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She is a lifelong Alaskan with children and grandchildren in the state. She is also a school health and safety advocate. She noted that she is not anti-gun; however, she does not believe that arming teachers or volunteers will increase school safety. Even if they receive training, these individuals will not serve as an adequate replacement for trained law enforcement. She said that, across the country, law enforcement agencies oppose arming school personnel, as it creates confusion for first responders as they try to distinguish between the active shooter and armed school personnel. She commented that there is no evidence to show that arming school personnel would reduce school violence.

MS. OWEN pointed out that an estimated two out of three children in Alaska have experienced trauma - and one quarter of high school students consider suicide. She suggested that lawmakers seek a more comprehensive approach to school safety. This would include supporting and funding school health and safety coordinators, additional school counselors, mental health services in schools, school social workers, and school nurses. It would also include training staff in trauma-engaged practices, providing suicide prevention programs and mental health education, as well as developing emergency operations plans and providing funding for school security equipment. She remarked that suicide by gun is common in Alaska and opined that there are more "common sense" gun violence prevention strategies available. Examples of these include safe-storage laws and the Extreme Risk Protective Order (ERPO) law enacted in Florida following the Parkland shooting.

2:13:12 PM

ROBERT MATTHEWS, Representing self, Delta Junction, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He said he is a retired military police officer who currently works with a police force to develop response plans and procedures. With respect to school response plans, he stated that the police will never be there when the shooter starts. He surmised that an armed and trained

individual who is present in the school would be able to deal with the shooter before the police arrive.

2:14:15 PM

ODETTE EDGAR, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She stated that she has lived in Alaska for 54 years and her parents were teachers. She currently volunteers at community schools teaching folk dance. She contrasted the training proposed in SB 173 to the training received by law enforcement. Referring to Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team training, she stated that these individuals are professionals who are intensively trained in tactics and marksmanship. Additionally, SWAT teams depend on key leaders to strategize and coordinate efforts. School staff are unlikely to have this level of training or strategic support. She surmised that they also lack the conditioning required to override the body's natural response when confronting extreme danger. She explained that these reactions can include heavy adrenaline rushes; tunnel vision; impaired hearing and speech; shaky arms and hands; and physical paralysis. She opined that SB 173 creates a scenario that is likely to fail and has the potential for tragic consequences. She expressed agreement with the sponsor's statement, "if we want to prevent the deaths of school children in Alaska, we need to act." She urged the committee to adopt "front-end" methods which are proven to protect children in the place where they are most at-risk: in the home. She recommended endorsing safe gun storage laws such as HB 164 (Misconduct Involving Weapons) and SB 229 (Gun Violence Protective Orders), which address the most common sources of child gun deaths in Alaska. She added that states where these types of laws have been implemented have seen a decrease in the number of child death and injury.

2:16:27 PM

RYAN PETTY, Representing self, Parkland, Florida, testified in support of SB 173. He said he is the Vice Chair of the Florida State Board of Education and a Commissioner on the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission. The latter has been tasked with investigating the shooting that occurred at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (Parkland shooting). He explained that his path to offering testimony on SB 173 is marked by the loss of his 14-year-old daughter, Alaina, who was killed in the Parkland shooting. He described the ways in which this loss has impacted his life and directed his path toward a "relentless pursuit of

ensuring the safety and security of [children] in schools across the nation."

MR. PETTY stated that his support of SB 173 is based on the success of the [Coach Aaron Feis Guardian Program] (Florida Guardian Program). He explained that he is familiar with this program, having experienced its impact first-hand. He is an honorary Florida school guardian and has completed the training required by the program. He explained that the Florida Guardian Program was created in response to the pressing need for increased security in schools and to reduce response time during active-shooter incidents. He pointed out that response times are critical during active-shooter events and SB 173 addresses this. He stated that, when faced with an active shooter, an immediate response is crucial to minimize harm and save lives. He acknowledged that, in Florida, there was concern that the presence of firearms on school campuses would make students less safe; however, these fears have not been borne out. He emphasized that the Florida Guardian Program has been a success. He reasoned that the program serves as both a deterrent to - and a way to stop - an active shooter.

[2:18:50 PM](#)

JOHN SONIN, Representing self, Douglas, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. He cautioned against binary thinking with respect to the issue of guns and gun violence. He reasoned that one does not need to be "anti-gun" to be "anti-gun violence." He suggested that SB 173 would lead to "Wild West" thinking. He opined that everyone having guns does not create equality. He asserted that more guns in schools would destroy the minds [of youth], thereby making a peaceful and tranquil future impossible and urged legislators to consider the consequences of SB 173.

[2:21:10 PM](#)

JIM IRVINE, Co-Director, FASTER Saves Lives, Cleveland, Ohio, stated FASTER Saves Lives was mentioned in SB 173 and he is available to answer questions.

[2:21:40 PM](#)

JOYANNE BLOOM, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She stated that she is a gun owner and offered additional facts to provide more context for the discussion. She stated that according to advocacy research by Save Our Schools a student has a 0.2 percent chance of being involved in a school shooting during their entire K-12 career. She outlined the various areas of study covered by the 17-week

Alaska law enforcement training and contrasted this with the 3-day training offered by the FASTER program. She stated that SB 173 is unnecessary, adding that the state should be working harder to keep guns away from children and those who exhibit dangerous tendencies.

[2:23:46 PM](#)

SHANNAN GREENE, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. She is the mother of three children who have attended K-12 in Juneau, Alaska and a retired 32-year military first responder. She emphasized the importance of response time in an emergency. She commented that the changes put forth in SB 173 are a "responsible offensive posture in today's environment." Without these changes, students are "sitting ducks." She pointed out that senior government officials and celebrities are among those who rely on armed protection. She stated that responsible school staff are the first stopgap measure and defenders in an active shooter incident, adding that there are active shooter training teams available. She shared her belief that SB 173 is a better option than expecting teachers to defend students with chairs and tables.

[2:25:43 PM](#)

JOEL SIGMAN, Representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He opined that more guns in schools would increase school safety by deterring shooters from entering the building. He pointed out that the rules related to guns in schools have changed over time and reiterated that allowing trained teachers to carry guns would deter any potential threats.

[2:26:51 PM](#)

DOUG WALRATH, Director, Northwestern Alaska Career & Technical Center, Nome, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He said that he is the parent of two children in middle school and that he has been a school administrator for 15 years. He stated that he is also a combat veteran and a former teacher. He shared that he was a teacher in Idaho in the 1990s when the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO occurred. He expressed concern that 25 years later, nothing has changed. He said he walks school halls daily with a unique perspective due to his military training. With respect to timing in an emergency, he relayed a recent experience with a student who needed immediate medical attention. He pointed out that it took 12 minutes for emergency medical services (EMS) to arrive. He commented that this was a relatively quick response. In contrast, he can access

all areas of the school within two minutes. He expressed his willingness to be an armed staff member and pointed out that his past training and current position as a school administrator make him an ideal candidate.

[2:29:04 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR noted that current statute allows schools to employ armed staff, should they choose to do so. He asked if the Nome School District currently has armed and trained school personnel.

[2:29:38 PM](#)

MR. WALRATH clarified that he is employed by the Bering Straight School District and is working in Nome. He answered that he is not aware of either school district's position on the current statute. He further clarified that, while he is in support of SB 173, he is not in support of creating a mandate. Rather, he supports having the opportunity to create these positions within schools. He added that, as a school administrator, he is separated from the student population, which would alleviate some of the concerns around students' access to guns.

[2:31:05 PM](#)

LIN DAVIS, Volunteer, Moms Demand Action, Juneau, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She stated that she is a 30-year Alaska resident and is retired from the Department of Labor. She taught High School for ten years prior to moving to Alaska. She asserted that SB 173 brings too many risks and increases costs for schools that are already struggling to maintain funding. She suggested that the focus shift to strategies that have demonstrated strong safety records and lower death rates, including HB 164 (Misconduct Involving Weapons) and HB 162 (Gun Violence Protective Orders). She commented that most law enforcement are strongly opposed to SB 173, as lay-people with weapons can be overcome in stressful situations. She added that most parents strongly oppose arming teachers. She pointed out that teachers and law enforcement officers have different skillsets and suggested that training teachers will not bridge the gap in their innate abilities.

[2:33:19 PM](#)

WILLIAM LUCE, Representing self, Retired Member of Alaska National Guard, Palmer, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He said he is a retired Alaska schoolteacher who came to Alaska as a veteran. He shared that in 1997 he was a teacher at Bethel High School and was present during the shooting that occurred.

In the shooting, principal Ron Edwards, a Vietnam veteran, and student Josh Palacios were shot and killed by student Evan Ramsey. He reasoned that, if Mr. Edwards had been armed, he would have been able to protect both himself and the students. He surmised that there are other teachers who are retired veterans who would step forward to fill these positions, adding that their experience in the armed forces makes them good candidates.

[2:35:52 PM](#)

MICHAEL GARHART, Representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He emphasized the importance of a fast response in life-threatening situations. He stated his belief that having trained and armed school personnel would save time and lives.

[2:36:37 PM](#)

ROCHELLE PARKER, Volunteer, Moms Demand Action, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She said she is a parent of elementary school children. She asserted that guns do not belong in schools. She noted that school shootings have become too common and expressed shock that lawmakers have not enacted "common sense" gun reform to make schools safer. She shared her belief that measures should be taken to fortify schools and keep students and faculty safe; however, she argued that arming teachers is not the answer. She expressed concern that allowing guns in schools would increase the risk of students accessing weapons and harming themselves or others. She pointed out that firearms are the leading cause of death for children and teens in Alaska and nationwide. Additionally, Alaska has the highest rate of youth suicide in the nation. She questioned how teachers can be expected to take on the role of law enforcement in a chaotic active-shooter situation - even if they are trained to use a firearm. She indicated that this would be even more difficult if the shooter was a student or former student. She said arming teachers increases the risk of students getting caught in the crossfire. She acknowledged that teachers are willing to protect their students; however, she opined that adding more guns will not increase student safety. Instead, she suggested focusing efforts on other measures that prevent gun violence and gun suicides, such as HB 164 (Misconduct Involving Weapons) and SB 229 (Gun Violence Protective Orders). She emphasized the importance of secure gun storage and referred to a study of targeted school violence by the United States Secret Service which showed that most school shooters acquired their weapons from the home.

[2:39:13 PM](#)

TAMARA KRUSE ROSELIUS, Representing self, Fairbanks, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She stated that she is a mother of four and expressed that she is not anti-gun. She offered four reasons to oppose SB 173. First, it creates a mandate, rather than allowing local schools to decide what is best for their students. Second, there is no funding provided for schools to implement the required changes. She stated that schools are already facing a deficit crisis. Third, the mandate is unnecessary, as Alaska law already provides that a school's chief administrator may allow school personnel to carry a firearm on school grounds. Finally, she stated that SB 173 creates a safety concern. She implied that the training requirement included in SB 173 is inadequate, stating that the 17-week training required to become law enforcement in Alaska is the necessary amount of training to appropriately respond in the event of an active-shooter incident.

[2:40:38 PM](#)

JANEL DOCKENDORF, Representing self, Wasilla, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. She stated that, provided the individuals receive extensive training and the firearms are safely locked away, SB 173 is a necessary safeguard to protect students. She recommended having security guards at each school entry point; however, she acknowledged that there are not enough people available to do this.

[2:41:45 PM](#)

CHERI RUIZ, Representing self, Palmer, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. She stated that SB 173 adds an extra layer of protection for students. Pointing to the number of active-shooter events that have occurred at schools in the United States, she said gun-free zones do not keep children safe. She argued that firearm storage is also ineffective and asserted that most gun crimes are committed with stolen firearms. She explained that her nephew was murdered with a stolen firearm. She commented that firearm storage may be beneficial but asserted that it would not stop someone who was intent on entering a school as an active shooter. She expressed concern that children are attending schools without the extra protection SB 173 would provide.

[2:43:47 PM](#)

ALEX KOPLIN, Representing self, Homer, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. He stated that he has been a teacher for

over 45 years and has taught hunter safety courses. He said that he has been in two lockdowns due to firearm threats in the area and that he has two grandchildren. He expressed agreement with the previous testimony that having security guards in schools would be ideal. He opined that having teachers carry firearms is "a recipe for disaster." He pointed out that teachers would need a great deal of training to be able to adequately respond during an active shooter incident, adding that even SWAT team personnel - who receive tactical training for these kinds of events - can develop tunnel vision. He noted that SB 173 would create an additional expense for school districts that [already struggle to maintain adequate funding].

MR. KOPLIN questioned what might happen if the individual holding this position in a school was sick or absent. He expressed concern that someone may be unwell and come to school anyway. He indicated that SB 173 places unfair responsibility on individuals who are not trained to deal with these scenarios. He suggested that funding schools should be a priority so that faculty are better resourced and can identify red-flag behaviors. This would enable them to potentially stop shootings before they occur.

[2:46:12 PM](#)

STEVEN RETTKE, Representing self, Eagle River, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He stated that he is a retired maintenance supervisor. He said that when there is an active shooter, there needs to be an immediate response. Armed school personnel would be faster to respond than law enforcement.

[2:47:03 PM](#)

DR. MAUREEN LONGWORTH, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She said she has practiced medicine in Alaska for 31 years. Prior to this, she worked in inner-city emergency rooms, where she saw many gunshot-wound victims. She commented that her work experience has taught her to view evidence and identify what programs foster health and safety within a community. She stated that evidence has shown that arming school personnel has failed in other schools, bringing more risks to those communities. She shared her belief that that using limited school funding to pay for a program that the evidence does not support would be devastating. In contrast, the evidence supports changes like those included in HB 162 (Gun Violence Protective Orders). She commented that more violence and guns in schools are not needed.

[2:49:23 PM](#)

GERALD VOSS, Representing self, Juneau, Alaska, testified in support of SB 173. He opined that the state should make changes like those made by airlines after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11). He explained that, after 9/11, there was a federal air marshal on every plane and pilots were allowed to carry weapons in a locked, hard-sided case. He explained that only airline crew were aware of who was armed on the aircraft. In addition, airline staff were trained to identify mental instability which helped to identify potential problems. He proposed that schools could utilize a similar system which would allow school personnel to know who was armed without sharing this information with their students. He surmised that this would help to avoid children getting ahold of the weapons.

[2:51:07 PM](#)

MICHELLE VASQUEZ, Representing self, Soldotna, Alaska, testified in opposition to SB 173. She shared her understanding that current statute authorizes schools to allow staff to carry firearms and expressed concern that SB 173 creates a mandate. She opined that this sends the wrong message. She expressed concern about the limited amount of training required for individuals who would take on this position. She said guns in schools is not the answer and suggested that front-end measures to prevent gun violence would be a better choice.

[2:52:24 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN closed public testimony on SB 173.

[2:52:36 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN solicited a motion.

[2:52:44 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR moved to adopt Amendment 1, work order 33-LS0781\H.1, for SB 173.

33-LS0781\H.1
Bergerud
2/23/24

A M E N D M E N T 1

OFFERED IN THE SENATE

TO: SB 173

Page 4, following line 15:

Insert a new subsection to read:

"(g) Subject to appropriation, the department shall reimburse a school district for training costs incurred under (a)(3) and (4) of this section."

Reletter the following subsection accordingly.

[2:53:14 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN objected for purposes of discussion.

[2:53:20 PM](#)

SENATOR DUNBAR stated that this amendment was brought on behalf of the sponsor of SB 173. He clarified that the fiscal note refers to the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED). He spoke in favor of the amendment and explained that he had been working on a similar amendment that would provide funding for the training required by SB 173. However, he was unable to determine how much these costs would increase the base student allocation (BSA) in time for the day's hearing. He pointed out that the amendment before the committee achieves a similar goal by creating a funded mandate.

[2:54:13 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN [removed his objection]; he found no further objection and Amendment 1 was adopted.

[2:54:45 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN solicited the will of the committee.

[2:54:53 PM](#)

SENATOR GRAY-JACKSON moved to report SB 173, work order 33-LS0781\H, as amended, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

[2:55:07 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN found no objection and CSSB 173 (L&C), was reported from the Senate Labor and Commerce Standing Committee.

[2:55:38 PM](#)

At ease

SB 211-AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS/LOANS/SALES

[3:02:24 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 211 "An Act relating to the powers of the board of agriculture and conservation; relating to loans and limitations under the Alaska Agricultural Loan Act; relating to federal crop insurance contributions; relating to municipal and state procurement preferences for agricultural products harvested in the state and fisheries products harvested or processed in the state; and providing for an effective date."

[3:02:46 PM](#)

BRENT GOODRUM, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Anchorage, Alaska, presented SB 211 on behalf of the administration. He stated that SB 211 is intended to incentivize food production in Alaska. SB 211 was introduced by Governor Dunleavy and boosts state policies already in statute. This will have an immediate impact and will work in tandem with other short, medium, and long-term recommendations and actions. With SB 211, Governor Dunleavy hopes to increase food security and food independence for Alaskans and to expand Alaska's agriculture economic sector.

[3:03:40 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM spoke to points on slide 2:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Agriculture in Alaska: Status Report

- Robust Alaska agriculture is a long-held vision
- Hardy Alaskans are farming
 - 2017 national census: Nearly 1,000 Alaska farms and ranches produced about \$29.6 M in crop value and \$40.8 M in animal production
- So much more potential
 - with the right support
- Why grow agriculture?
 - Greater food security and independence for Alaskans
 - Develop an economic sector (jobs, value chain benefits)

MR. GOODRUM noted that, since creating this slide, more recent national census data has been made available. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) 2022 National Agricultural Statistic Service Census of Agriculture, there are nearly 1,200 Alaska farms and ranches that have produced around \$39.7 million in crop value and \$51.2 million in animal production. He suggested that "a state as large and diverse as Alaska" has an even greater potential for growth in this sector, given adequate support. He stated that "greater food security and independence for Alaskans" requires economic diversification.

[3:04:34 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM spoke to points on slide 3:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Agriculture in Alaska: Key Challenges

- **High cost, high risk business**
- **Often starting from scratch**
- **Market access, supply/demand**
- **Lack of infrastructure**
- **Human challenges: more farmers, laborers**
- **Chicken and egg dynamic: Where can State be a catalyst?**

MR. GOODRUM discussed the many challenges to agriculture in Alaska. For farmers, starting from scratch often means clearing "raw" land. It can be difficult for new farmers to access markets and to meet consumer demand - and the uncertainty of markets often precludes farmers from scaling up. The lack of infrastructure includes the following: transportation to markets; access to state lands suitable for agriculture; access to cheap power; and processing, manufacturing, and production facilities. He added that there is a demand for a skilled workforce, as many farmers are aging out of the profession. He questioned where the next generation of agricultural laborers will come from.

[3:06:16 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM spoke to points on slide 4:

[Original punctuation provided.]

CROP Act

- **SB 211: Capital access, Revenue protection and Open Procurement (CROP) Act**
- **Based on recommendations by task forces, division experts, stakeholders' policy priorities**
- **Selected for ability to get direct support to the industry, quickly (minimal new staff, programs to develop)**

MR. GOODRUM reiterated that SB 211 draws from existing statute. The three main components of the bill - capital access, revenue protection, and open procurement (CROP) - are based on recommendations of [those in the industry]. He clarified that there will be no additional programs to develop.

[3:07:06 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM spoke to points on slide 5:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Capital Access: The 'C' in CROP Act

- **Board of Agriculture and Conservation responsible for Agricultural Revolving Loan Fund**
 - **Key source of capital for farmers/producers**
- **SB 211 responsive to evolving industry needs**
 - **More efficient Board of Agriculture process**
 - **Expand eligible activities, allow refinancing**
 - **\$2 Million capital infusion into loan fund**
 - **Revising loan caps cumulatively and for specific activities (last updated in 1980s)**

MR. GOODRUM said the Board of Agriculture is currently comprised of working citizens. While all seven seats are full, it can be difficult to meet quorum requirements; this, in turn, can delay the loan application and approval process. He suggested that statutorily reducing the quorum requirement from five to four would increase the efficiency of the board. He explained that SB 211 would also expand the list of activities eligible for Agricultural Revolving Loan Fund (ARLF) funding to include shipping and transportation. This change was recommended by recent task forces and will potentially pave the way for agriculture-focused transportation cooperatives. This would help to reduce shipping costs into and throughout the state. SB 211

would also allow for refinancing of ARLF loans, provided that both the applicant and activities are eligible according to ARLF requirements. With respect to the proposed \$2 million capital infusion into ARLF, he stated that this is the first injection into the fund since 1986 and would increase lending capital by nearly 20 percent. This increase would enable ARLF to meet any additional requests for funding that result from changes made by SB 211. He explained that SB 211 also directs the Board of Agriculture and Conservation (BAC) to increase loan caps that are difficult to update over time to keep up with inflation. He noted that, due to inflation, one hundred dollars over four decades ago is roughly equivalent to three hundred dollars in today's economy. He added that the current loan cap is one million dollars to any one borrower. Provisions in Section 3 would direct the Board of Agriculture and Conservation to set new loan limits and ceilings. He said a thorough, public process would be required.

[3:09:29 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM advanced to slide 6 displaying a bar chart depicting Capital Access - Fund Data Points. He explained that there are currently 52 active ARLF loans. The varied loan types reflect the diversity of agriculture in Alaska. He noted that the total principal balance of ARLF loans (\$21.4 million) is equal to the sum of the balance (\$9.3 million) plus authorized (\$12.1 million).

[3:10:09 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM spoke to points on slide 7:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Revenue Protection: The 'R'

- **Concept in statute (AS 03.13), never funded; bill revises support formula**
- **Fiscal note includes capital to pay for State support**
- **Incentivizes production to boost feed supply, support larger herds**
- **Helps offset risk and enables farmer to invest in farm infrastructure, expansions**

MR. GOODRUM elaborated on the above, noting that the fiscal note includes \$2 million that will support crop insurance for current acres under production and allow for additional acres. He stated

that, at current production and 2022 premium levels, the estimated 5-year cost of the program is approximately \$900 thousand. He suggested that, should the program increase in size, additional funding would be available for premium support. Alaska Farm Bureau and task force reports have indicated that state support for insurance would incentivize increased production. Access to revenue protection policies will likewise increase access to capital, thereby lowering farmers' risk while improving equipment - such as irrigation systems - which, in turn, boost production. He explained that SB 211 focuses on three main crops: barley, wheat, and oats - foundational crops that provide food for livestock. He said that securing access to livestock feed is likely to enable larger herd sizes, which would then improve throughput - and therefore the economic status - of slaughterhouse operations. He explained that, in the future, USDA Revenue Protection crop insurance may be required for feed grain farmers to qualify for ARLF loans.

[3:12:23 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM spoke to points on slide 8:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Revenue Protection: How it Works

- **Eligible crops are those with revenue protection policies available: currently barley, wheat, oats**
- **State covers:**
 - 100 percent of premium in years 1-2 sufficient to obtain 85 percent revenue protection
 - 100 percent of premium in year 3 sufficient to obtain 80 percent revenue protection
 - 100 percent of premium in year 4 sufficient to obtain 75 percent revenue protection
 - In year 5 and on the farmer needs to pay the premium to obtain 55 percent revenue protection, state covers additional premium to reach 70 percent revenue protection

MR. GOODRUM said that more details would be fleshed out in regulations, adding that there would likely be no minimum acreage requirement for coverage - [providing that farmers meet the USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA) requirements]. He explained that in years 3-5, the state's coverage obligations are stepped down - and farmers would be able to purchase additional coverage to reach 85 percent revenue protection. He

clarified that the USDA risk management agency subsidizes approximately 62 percent of the revenue protection - the state of Alaska would cover the remainder.

[3:14:32 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM spoke to points on slide 9:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Revenue Protection: How it Works

- **State role: accept applications, verify eligible producers, submit verification to RMA, send funds to RMA**
- **Producer role: selects coverage at desired level from an approved provider, reports acreage, pays any premium not covered by state**
- **State does not adjudicate loss claims or cover losses through federal Risk Management Agency (RMA)**

MR. GOODRUM explained that RMA has a list of "approved insurance providers" (AIP). There are around 14 AIPs nationwide. RMA sets the terms for AIP policies. He clarified that the state will not be issuing insurance policies but will be acting in an enrollment capacity and noted that the State is not getting into the insurance business.

[3:15:21 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM spoke to points on slide 10:

[Original punctuation provided.]

Open Procurement: The 'O' and 'P'

- **Procurement preferences already in statute**
 - **State agencies, school districts and municipalities that receive state funds**
- **Alaska-grown agricultural and Alaska fisheries products**
- **Includes responsible protections**
- **Incentivizes more production by providing access to institutional markets**

[3:17:06 PM](#)

MR. GOODRUM elaborated on the above, pointing out that Alaska Grown and Alaska fisheries products will be given preference. Protections will include providing a full sales and pricing list when responding to solicitation; there will be penalties for submitting inaccurate information. Additionally, an annual report to the legislature will be required. He stated that, excluding Alaska fisheries products, few producers are currently able to provide the quantities that large, institutional buyers require. Thus, a significant increase in spending is not expected. He said that the DOA will continue to work on more effective ways to connect growers and buyers, adding that SB 211 offers an immediate step in that direction. There is support for encouraging retailers to sell more Alaska grown products. He pointed out that greater access to local markets offers producers the opportunity to scale up and increases food security and independence in Alaska.

[3:17:42 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN opened public testimony on SB 211; finding none he closed public testimony.

[3:18:12 PM](#)

CHAIR BJORKMAN held SB 211 in committee.

[3:18:56 PM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Bjorkman adjourned the Senate Labor and Commerce Standing Committee meeting at 3:18 p.m.