

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES

March 18, 2025

10:06 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Louise Stutes, Chair
Representative Bryce Edgmon, Vice Chair
Representative Rebecca Himschoot
Representative Chuck Kopp
Representative Sarah Vance
Representative Bill Elam

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Kevin McCabe

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE BILL NO. 125

"An Act relating to membership of the Board of Fisheries."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 125

SHORT TITLE: BOARD OF FISHERIES MEMBERSHIP

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) JIMMIE

03/05/25	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
03/05/25	(H)	FSH, RES
03/18/25	(H)	FSH AT 10:00 AM GRUENBERG 120

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE NELLIE UNANGIQ JIMMIE

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, introduced HB 125.

RACHEL GUNN, Staff

Representative Nellie Unangiq Jimmie

Alaska State Legislature

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of the prime sponsor, Representative Nellie Unangiq Jimmie, she gave an introduction of HB 125.

RICHARD PETERSON, President
Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribe
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of HB 125.

JERRY MCCUNE, representing self
Cordova, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave testimony on HB 125.

MOSES OWEN, Chief
Akiak Tribal Organization
Akiak, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of HB 125.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[10:06:05 AM](#)

CHAIR LOUISE STUTES called the House Special Committee on Fisheries meeting to order at 10:06 a.m. Representatives Vance, Kopp, Himschoot, Edgmon, and Stutes were present at the call to order. Representative Elam arrived as the meeting was in progress.

HB 125-BOARD OF FISHERIES MEMBERSHIP

[10:07:04 AM](#)

CHAIR STUTES announced that the only order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 125, "An Act relating to membership of the Board of Fisheries."

The committee took a brief at-ease.

[10:07:44 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE NELLIE UNANGIQ JIMMIE, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, introduced HB 125. She said that the bill would bring an equal voice to the table for subsistence users. She opined that it would be a positive step forward for the state.

[10:08:22 AM](#)

RACHEL GUNN, Staff, Representative Nellie Unangiq Jimmie, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of the prime sponsor, Representative Unangiq Jimmie, presented HB 125. She said that HB 125 would seek to reform Alaska's Board of Fisheries by ensuring fair stakeholder representation. She said that Alaska's Board of Fisheries makes critical decisions about fishing regulations, sustainability, and conservation. She discussed the current statutory language and remarked that bringing designated seats to the board would be good. She said HB 125 proposes that the Board of Fisheries consists of two commercial fishing seats, two sportfishing seats, two subsistence seats, and one seat from the scientific community. She said that restructuring would ensure that no one group can dominate decision making. She said this would align Alaska with models that foster sustainability.

MS. GUNN remarked that there is a sense of urgency regarding addressing problems in Alaska's Fisheries. She opined that recent collapses in various fisheries that stem from climate change, mismanagement, and overfishing. A few of these collapses include Western Alaska salmon, Bering Sea crabs, and Gulf of Alaska Pacific cod. She remarked that this has impacted the Alaska economy and there has been a 50 percent decline in economic activity from 2001 to 2023. This represents approximately a loss of 38,000 jobs and a considerable decrease in lost revenue. She said that having a balanced governance approach would help protect livelihoods and conserve the fisheries.

MS. GUNN said that Alaskans rely on subsistence fishing practices, and it is an integral component of Alaska Native culture. She remarked that wild foods can constitute up to 92 percent of daily protein and 33 percent of daily caloric needs for rural communities. She said that 1 in 9 Alaskans struggle with hunger and rates are higher in rural Native communities. She said replacing wild foods would cost approximately \$184 million to \$368 million dollars annually. She said rural communities consume almost 37 million pounds of wild food and over half is salmon. Given salmon collapses, subsistence communities face starvation.

MS. GUNN said that similar models exist internationally with success. In New Zealand there is a Māori concept that involves guardianship, protection, and preservation of the environment.

The concept is rooted in the view that humans are integral to nature and emphasizes a deep responsibility to maintain natural resources for future generations. She said in New Zealand there is a quota system that gives the Māori significant control of marine resources. She said that a treaty ensures their fishing rights. She said that integrating traditional knowledge with science has led to successes in fishery rehabilitation and success. She then discussed that similar models have been seen in Canada and Finland as well. She said the bulk decision in Washington State reaffirmed Tribal Treaty rights which granted tribes up to 50 percent of annual fish harvest & established them as co-managers in certain areas. Some of these fisheries operate as a co-managed fishery with both state and tribal interests at play.

MS. GUNN concluded by saying that HB 125 is not just about the fisheries, but about fairness, sustainability, and economic stability. She said that it brings all stakeholders together and would generate more effective boards. Without this legislation, current fisheries management would continue to favor one sector over another. This bill would allow for more inclusive and data-driven board decisions.

[10:13:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON asked Ms. Gunn how the seven members of the Board of Fisheries are appointed today.

MS. GUNN responded by reading a section of the selection criteria that is currently in statute. She noted that "the governor shall appoint each member on the base of interest in public affairs, good judgement, knowledge, and the ability in the field of action of the board with a viewpoint to provide diversity of interest and points of view." She said that these are the only selection criteria that are currently in statute. She said that the intent is to not take the governor's appointing power but change the representation of the stakeholders. She reiterated the economic value of subsistence practices.

[10:15:03 AM](#)

CHAIR STUTES said that currently the way the appointments can be made is that the board can be weighted, whether sport, commercial, or anything the present administration deems is appropriate.

MS. GUNN responded that this is correct but currently there is no structure for appointments.

[10:15:45 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE asked about Page 2, Paragraphs 1-9, and Paragraphs 3 and 4 of the bill specify where the appointees should be selected from. She asked why the bill sponsor chose to go in this direction and why the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which is a federal organization, would be selected for a state board.

MS. GUNN responded that Representative Vance was correct, and it was difficult to come up with criteria for where the appointees would come from. She said that in this statute, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) is the only state affiliated organization that would be a good candidate. She said that NOAA is a federal organization but what has been seen is that Alaska has not done a good job managing its rivers. She said the state is in current litigation about this. She said a neutral science voice would be good. She said areas like Norway used Indigenous knowledge but also scientific knowledge regarding fishery management. She said the intent is not to have the federal government manage the waters.

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE asked whether there were any legal limitations for requiring a federal employee to serve on a state board.

MS. GUNN responded that she was not aware of any but would follow up with an answer.

REPRESENTATIVE VANCE said that it is felt that the seats are appointed by traditional means. Typically, there are representatives from various areas. She asked how the proposed bill would make changes to the current structure of the board.

MS. GUNN said there would be faith in the public process; right now, the language is vague to aim for appropriate stakeholder representation.

[10:19:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT said that she comes from a region with a strong tribal voice. She said this voice is not necessarily included with the Alaska Federation of Natives. The free-for-

all amongst the tribes may be the best way to do it. She said she would take a closer look at this section. She asked if there was anything she needed to understand regarding the bill's preference for AFN appointees.

MS. GUNN responded that the prime sponsor would welcome a discussion about this and was receptive to a friendly amendment.

[10:20:20 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE EDGMON said that he appreciated the bill being brought forward and it is a good discussion item. He said anything with the Board of Fisheries is a hot topic. He said that he was discussing with a Bristol Bay constituent earlier that morning about the Board of Fisheries. He said what the prime sponsor brings forward is something that would restructure the board and modernize it. It would bring the board on par with other regulatory bodies around the globe. He reiterated that regardless of directionality of the bill, discussions are important.

[10:21:28 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM said that one thing he has found is that someone who is into fishing is interested in multiple areas of it. He asked how selection criteria would be made with individuals who participate in more than one area of fisheries.

MS. GUNN responded to Representative Elam that the hope is that the board appointees would need to pass through the body and the joint body would be able to judge the qualifications based on this statute.

REPRESENTATIVE ELAM said that state and federal subsistence are different and yet similar, Alaska is a large state with varying areas. He inquired how this would be addressed.

MS. GUNN responded that in the Alaska State Constitution, federal law supersedes state. She talked about the qualifications for what is subsistence, but from a state perspective and following the state constitution, all user groups have equal access.

[10:24:24 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT said an issue with her region is the absence of representation on the Board of Fisheries. She asked

if the bill could be modified to strive for regional representation.

MS. GUNN responded that this was discussed, and the current structure is maintained because any way the bill could pass would be an improvement over the current environment and its poor outcomes.

[10:25:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE KOPP said that he came from a commercial fishing background but one thing he appreciates, as a life-long Alaskan who was initially raised in subsistence villages around Lake Iliamna, is Alaskans making these decisions. He said that many people he commercial fishes with care nothing about the fishery other than commercial purpose. He said he appreciates the balance that is needed, he said the proposed legislation would bring forward an important discussion. He realizes that the spirit of the bill is codifying what Alaska has been trying to practice politically. He reiterated that he was glad it is Alaskans making the decisions and there is a balance to everything.

[10:27:52 AM](#)

The committee took a brief at-ease at 10:27 a.m.

[10:28:19 AM](#)

CHAIR STUTES, after ascertaining that there were no additional questions from committee members, opened public testimony on HB 125.

[10:28:52 AM](#)

RICHARD PETERSON, President, Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes ("Tlingit & Haida"), testified in support of HB 125. He said that Tlingit & Haida is the largest state and federally recognized tribal councils in Alaska with over 30,000 tribal citizens. He said that Tlingit and Haida strongly support the bill as it would bring a much-needed balance to the Board of Fisheries. He said the people have relied on these resources throughout their history, and it is only fair they are represented on the Board of Fisheries. He said that he grew up in the village of Kassan and the mainstay was the subsistence way of life. He said it is important to note that tribal science is real. He said that traditional tools used were done

so in a way to foster sustainable management of the fisheries. He said that many people are proud to have a 300-pound halibut but without realizing that they killed an entire generation of halibut. He reiterated that the tribes care deeply about the fisheries. He said that the reason fish are around today is the successful stewardship by tribal members throughout history. He said that modern fisheries management must recognize and incorporate Indigenous science. He said that for too long subsistence users have failed to be included in fishery management decisions. Establishing designated seats for subsistence fishing is a meaningful step forward and ensures equitable management decisions. He remarked that Tlingit & Haida citizens are deeply woven into their region's commercial fishing industry. He said that based on Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission data, there are large proportions of commercial participants with a tribal background. He said that there is an opportunity to strengthen the bill by ensuring that every tribe has the ability to put forth candidates for the subsistence seat. Recently through the governors' work, tribes have been working on an education compact and the proposed bill would strengthen the relationship with the state. He said Tlingit & Haida appreciate the work developing the legislation and they look forward to working in close coordination with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

[10:34:30 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT asked Mr. Peterson if the bill was open to tribal citizens across the state, then who would make the final selection.

MR. RICHARDS responded that he believes it would be the governor.

[10:35:15 AM](#)

JERRY MCCUNE, representing self, gave testimony on HB 125. He thanked the sponsor for bringing it forward and he had been working on opening these discussions across the state to get a better idea of how to form the Board of Fisheries. He said that AS 16.05.221 needs some work, no matter what is done, the pick is up to the governor and those selections are not always on the various boards & commissions list. He said the Board of Fisheries is still stuck with governor appointments and legislative confirmation. He said that looking at the bill, the first thing worth looking at are the definitions. He asked what exactly sportfishing or commercial fishing means and who

qualifies. He said that he does subsistence fish, and it was a big part of the Cordova community. He noted that he does not think anyone would agree to have a federal employee on the state board. However, he opined that a science component would be a good thing to add. He said the bill would take some work and said that 90 percent of people won't agree but if 70 percent did agree on how to move forward then it would be good.

[10:38:14 AM](#)

CHAIR STUTES, after ascertaining that there was no one else who wished to testify, closed public testimony on HB 125.

[10:38:31 AM](#)

The committee took a brief at-east at 10:38 a.m.

[10:38:42 AM](#)

CHAIR STUTES announced that the committee would now hear invited testimony.

[10:40:14 AM](#)

MOSES OWEN, Chief, Akiak Tribal Organization, gave an invited testimony in support of HB 125. He said that he was both born in Akiak and the tribal chief and lived on the Kuskokwim River. He said that his life is entirely subsistence oriented, and 95-98 percent of the community is subsistence living as well. He said members in his community primarily subsist on fish that came up the river. He said that he appreciates the bill that aims for equal representation from all stakeholders on the Board of Fisheries. He said that every summer his family fishes on the river and has a smokehouse shared between three households. He said that most communities that are subsistence communities depend on the resources. He said that the elders have encouraged a continuation of fishing since there is nothing else. He remarked that he has no problem with commercial fishing and his community previously commercial fished on the river when there were more salmon available. He concluded by stating that HB 125 would give equal representation across the board.

[10:44:14 AM](#)

CHAIR STUTES remarked that public testimony would remain open until the next committee meeting.

[HB 125 was held over.]

10:44:31 AM

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Special Committee on Fisheries meeting was adjourned at 10:44 a.m.