

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE RESOURCES STANDING COMMITTEE**

January 24, 2025

1:01 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Robyn Niayuq Burke, Co-Chair  
Representative Maxine Dibert, Co-Chair  
Representative Carolyn Hall  
Representative Donna Mears  
Representative Zack Fields  
Representative Dan Saddler  
Representative George Rauscher  
Representative Julie Coulombe  
Representative Bill Elam

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

PRESENTATION(S) : ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH & GAME OVERVIEW

- HEARD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

No previous action to record

**WITNESS REGISTER**

DOUG VINCENT-LANG, Commissioner  
Alaska Department of Fish & Game  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented the Alaska Department of Fish & Game Overview.

**ACTION NARRATIVE**

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**CO-CHAIR MAXINE DIBERT** called the House Resources Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:01 p.m. Representatives Coulombe, Fields, Saddler, Hall, Mears, Elam, Dibert, and Burke

were present at the call to order. Representative Rauscher arrived as the meeting was in progress.

**PRESENTATION(S): Alaska Department of Fish and Game Overview**

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CO-CHAIR DIBERT announced that the first order of business would be an overview presentation by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game Overview presentation.

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DOUG VINCENT-LANG, Commissioner, Alaska Department of Fish & Game, presented a PowerPoint, titled "Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) Overview" [hard copy included in the committee file]. He started his presentation by commenting that oil and gas fuel the state economy, but fish and game resources feed Alaska's culture and families, saying "while oil and gas are important, fish and game is really about who we are as Alaskans." Fish and game are the second or third largest sector of Alaska's economy. The department was founded in the state constitution in the natural resources sustained-yield clause which is unique in the United States. Most states and nations do not recognize the importance of sustained yield management. The writers of the state constitution recognized the value of fish and game resources and the importance of sustaining them not only for the current generation but also for future Alaskans. He referred to the statutes which defined the roles of the ADF&G as well as the department's mission statement.

COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG explained that core services have been built around managing the resources; providing hunting, fishing, and trapping opportunities; protecting and improving habitat; improving access to hunting and fishing opportunities; and protecting the state's right to manage the fish and game resources. In order to accomplish these goals, ADF&G needs to do stock assessment and research. He observed that investments in new technologies have been a key component for counting animals and assessing how climate change is impacting the fish and wildlife resources. He also described the department's focus on public service and involvement such as teaching people how to hunt and fish, promoting outdoor activities, encouraging involvement on boards, and licensing and permitting. As resource development occurs, the department ensures that the

fish and wildlife populations are sustained. He showed slide 4 which described the ADF&G leadership team.

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG moved to slide 5 which provided a snapshot of the ADF&G budget for Fiscal Year 2025 (FY 25). He then discussed slides 6 and 7 which outlined the return on investment funds, pointing out that the department turns approximately \$250 million dollars of investment into almost an \$11 billion dollar return to the state. He outlined the number of people employed and the sources of funding for the department including federal funds, general funds, dedicated matching funds, and the fish and game fund. He said the divisions include Commercial Fisheries, Wildlife Conservation, Sports Fish, Subsistence, and Habitat. He delineated the economic return in specific categories including sports fisheries, wildlife, commercial fisheries, and subsistence, which represented replacement value of the wild food harvest. He moved to slides 8 through 12, which described specific duties and core services of the Office of Commissioner and the Divisions of Commercial Fisheries, Sport Fish, and Wildlife Conservation.

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG moved to slide 11, regarding the Division of Sport Fish. The slide read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

o Major Fisheries

- Salmon
- Freshwater fisheries
- Groundfish
- Personal Use Fisheries

- Structure

- Houses three management regions
  - Southeast, Southcentral, Interior
- Houses Sport Fish Hatchery Operations
- Houses one chief fisheries scientist
- Houses Department Invasive Species Program
- Houses Sport Fish Access Program

COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG called the committee's attention to the line item labeled "groundfish" and specified that halibut are managed through an international treaty with Canada. He then showed slides 13 and 14, titled "Division of Wildlife Conservation." Slide 13, concerning core services and personnel, read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Contribution to Department Mission  
Conserve and enhance Alaska's wildlife and habitats and provide for a wide range of public uses and benefits

Core Services

- Maintain and enhance opportunities to hunt, trap, and view wildlife
- Provide opportunities for Alaskans to gain knowledge of and appreciation for Alaska's wildlife, its management, and ways to safely and ethically interact with wildlife
  
- FY2025 Budget & Positions
- \$70.3 million
- 244 permanent full-time positions
- 44 permanent part-time positions

Slide 14 outlined the division's structure and major activities and read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

- Major Activities
  - Management of hunting and trapping across the state
  - Management of Special Areas
  - Participation in Board of Game process Structure
  
- Houses five management regions
  - Southeast, Southcentral, Interior/Northeast Arctic, Central/Southwest, Western/Northwest Arctic
- Houses the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act and Statehood Defense programs
- Houses the Hunter Education and Shooting Range program
- Houses the Threatened, Endangered, and Diversity program
- Houses Waterfowl, Small game, Lands and Refuges programs
- Houses Wildlife Health and Veterinary Services program
- Houses the Marine Mammal program

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG responded to a question from Representative Rauscher regarding how the severity of winters has affected caribou and other wildlife. He discussed snow depth and icing events as a factor for the loss of moose and wood bison in the Delta and Nelchina areas and the caribou populations farther north. He commented that if 2024 and 2025 mild winter conditions continue, it would help calf and cow survival. He responded to a series of questions by Co-Chair Burke and Co-Chair Dibert concerning the populations of caribou and mountain sheep, how the winter temperatures affect those populations, and the amount of money sheep hunting brings to the state. He discussed the ages of male sheep for hunting purposes and the balancing act between reproductive cycles and providing opportunities for hunters. He mentioned that a recent bid for a sheep tag went for a quarter of a million dollars. With part of that money, ADF&G was able to fund three sheep research projects.

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG moved to slides 15 and 16, titled "Habitat Section," pointing out that the Habitat Section of ADF&G deals with Title 16 permits; natural resource development projects; and monitoring and cataloging the waters. He discussed how the department works with other agencies to coordinate the permits. He explained that slide 16 summarizes the work undertaken by the division of subsistence, pointing out that subsistence is defined by statute and is a priority for the state. He responded to a question from Co-Chair Dibert regarding hiring the Subsistence director who was funded by the Thirty-Third Alaska State Legislature. He described how resource specialists travel to communities to talk about customary and traditional use.

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG responded to a question from Representative Saddler about federal, state, and international jurisdictions. He explained that under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, Alaska has fishery jurisdiction up to three miles out, and federal jurisdiction applies to three to 200 miles out. A group of California anglers has challenged bag limits, saying non-residents are being discriminated against because of the difference between residential and non-residential limits. The

limits will be equalized in federal waters to comply with Magnuson-Stevenson, but resident priorities will be recognized in state waters for personal and subsistence use. Two exceptions to the rule occur when international treaties apply such as the International Pacific Halibut Act and the Pacific Salmon Treaty.

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG addressed a question by Co-Chair Dibert concerning the decline of salmon and subsistence fishing in the Yukon River by referring to the transboundary treaty with Canada. He acknowledged that the Canadian-origin salmon have not been making it to the Canadian waters and pointed to the issues of warm water, less healthy fish, and smaller fish. Alaska responded to this challenge by curtailing salmon harvests to rebuild the stocks. Responding to the question regarding whether the ADF&G FY 26 budget could include a hatchery in the interior, he said the Yukon Panel, an international panel between the United States and Canada had been working on a restoration plan which would include a hatchery on either side of the border. Although Canada supported the plan, there was mixed support for a hatchery in the United States. Canada had been looking at hatcheries because some of their stocks reached critical levels, and the genetic integrity of those stocks should be preserved. On a related topic, he mentioned that work to reduce bycatch in the Bering Sea would continue.

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG responded to Representative Saddler's question regarding ADF&G funds which are "dedicated" despite Alaska's constitutional prohibition on dedicated funds. The commissioner explained that when Congress passed the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson Acts, dedicated matching funds were required from licenses for fish and wildlife restoration. He then responded to a question by Representative Fields concerning whether hatcheries would solve escapement issues, explaining that even a small number of fish reaching the tributaries increases the number of fish. Regarding a question by Representative Elam, he explained that salmon travel almost 1,200 miles of the Yukon on the fat content they had when they entered the river because they do not feed in fresh water.

COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG responded to a question from Representative Saddler regarding two or three takeaways regarding ADF&G, stating that first, the department takes fish

and game management seriously and involves a lot of people because these are the public's resources. Second, he acknowledged that climate change needs to be factored into the department's management decisions. Third, the department is struggling to maintain a workforce of dedicated people. He expressed pride in the people who are dedicated to the work. Additionally, he pointed out the department's work with subsistence which includes culture camps and cultural awareness while rebuilding the runs. Finally, he reiterated that oil and gas feed the economy, but fish and game resources are "who we are as people."

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG responded to questions by Co-Chair Burke and Representative Fields regarding the caribou herds. He discussed the different caribou herds and the balance between herd numbers, predator management, available feed, and calf survival. He also commented that the Federal government manages much of the northern Alaska land, so ADF&G has less impact there. In addition, species distribution is likely to change because of changes in the tundra with less grass and lichen for browse and more brush which moose like. He acknowledged the importance of "the Arctic Ambassador" and the University of Alaska Fairbanks' grant regarding the Arctic climate. He mentioned a proposed research project with Canada about whether the Beaufort Sea polar bears are moving to other areas.

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG called the committee's attention to slide 20, concerning the fish and game advisory boards and committees. He moved to slide 21, the administrative services section, and described the department's centralized support services for programs and projects as well as the fish and game licensing program. Moving to slide 22, he addressed some of the challenges the state faces going forward, specifying the following as primary concerns [original punctuation provided]:

- Challenges Facing the Seafood Industry
- Defending Against Federal Erosion of State Management Authority
- Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act Challenges
- Recruitment and Retention
- Vessels and Aircraft Maintenance

- Maintaining Sustainable Fisheries & Opportunities
- Bering Sea Crab
- Coastal Western Alaska Salmon Fisheries
- Intercept and Bycatch
- Federal Fisheries/Upper Cook Inlet Salmon Fishery
- Implementation of the Pacific Salmon Treaty
- Changing Habitat and Weather Events

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG responded to a question from Representative Rauscher concerning intercept and bycatch issues explaining that the first challenge would be figuring out the composition of the stock. The ADF&G research has identified the stock composition of the chinook salmon caught in the Gulf of Alaska, specifically the origin of chinook salmon being caught by Alaska fishermen, and the temporal and spatial distribution of those fish. The department is identifying the proportion of Asian fish and Russian chum being caught. After identifying the fish, Alaska can take targeted action through the regulatory process to reduce the interceptions of other species. He pointed out that the ADF&G lab has led the world in gene conservation and genetic identification in Alaska catches. Regarding bycatch, he explained that changing the process takes time, but some action can be taken in the short term, and the department can evaluate how many fish in Western Alaska would be saved in the process.

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COMMISSIONER VINCENT-LANG responded to a question from Representative Hall who referred to slide 6 of the presentation regarding the economic value of sports fishing and hunting and why the information is over 10 years old. He agreed that it is time to update the information but referred to a lack of funding for the studies.

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#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Resources Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 2:28 p.m.