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Bill Sheffield
Governor

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NEWS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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MARINE MAMMALS TO BE TOPIC OF PUBLIC HEARING

JUNEAU--The Alaska Board of Game will hear public testimony on marine mammals during its upcoming meeting in Anchorage. A public hearing is set for Saturday, April 7 on the topic.

The Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) is considering requesting return of marine mammals management from the federal government, which has had authority over these species since 1972. In December, Governor Bill Sheffield concurred in state plans to begin a year-long process of public meetings, hearings, scientific findings, and consideration of legislation and regulations pertaining to the state's role in management.

Although the board has before it now only three "framework" regulations (not management regulations) which deal with definitions, the board will accept testimony on the entire issue of marine mammal management at the April 7 hearing.

The 10 species under consideration are polar bears, sea lions, sea otters, walrus, belukha whale, and harbor,

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bearded, spotted, ringed and ribbon seals. These species were chosen because they are ecologically significant functioning elements in the coastal zone; are affected by Alaskans through development, commercial fishing or direct harvesting; contribute significantly to regional economic health; and are those for which the state has research background and scientific expertise.

Local fish and game advisory committee meetings, being held this month and next in more than 70 communities around the state, are the first step in a series of public meetings aimed at asking Alaskans what they think about state management, what form it should take, and how it should work. In addition to participating in discussions at advisory committee meetings, the Department has prepared information on marine mammals that will be presented at public meetings sponsored by varied interest groups around the state.

The schedule for the proposed return of management requires several decisions before an application will be submitted to the U.S. Departments of Commerce and Interior, where marine mammal management rests with NOAA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

A bill has been introduced in the Alaska Legislature regarding non-wasteful and humane take of marine mammals. This legislation is still pending. A decision also is required by the Guide Licensing and Control Board in order

to provide maximum economic opportunity to rural coastal residents. Both these actions are required by the Marine Mammal Protection Act before management may be returned to states.

The Act also requires the state to make a scientific finding of the status and health of marine mammal populations, to be determined at a hearing called the OSP or Optimum Sustainable Population Hearing. This hearing will then set a recommended range of population for marine mammal species, limiting all take by humans to numbers that will allow the population to remain within that range.

Following the OSP determination, the Board of Game will solicit from the public and the department proposed regulations that would actually describe the management programs for the 10 species. Items such as methods, means, seasons and bag limits would be considered at this time. These proposals would be forwarded to advisory committees and the public for further review and comment before the board would enact them as regulations.

The entire process is expected to take more than a year, and avenues of public comment and review remain open throughout the procedure.

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