

Restore the Division of Fish and Wildlife Protection

By Patrick Valkenburg (edited here for space)

Soon after the last gubernatorial election, the Murkowski administration decided to downgrade the Division of Fish and Wildlife Protection to the Alaska Bureau of Wildlife Enforcement (ABWE) under the Division of Alaska State Troopers. Many people across the state were skeptical that the relatively minor cost savings would outweigh the likely reduction in enforcement of wildlife and fisheries laws and regulations. Reasons for the move were never entirely clear or very well explained, and there was no opportunity for public comment. After almost 3 years of this experiment, it is now clear that the move was a failure from the perspective of fish and wildlife protection.

After the reorganization to the ABWE, there has been a 24% decrease in annual fish and wildlife patrol and investigation time by fish and wildlife troopers and a 20% decrease in fish and wildlife contacts. However, there has been an accompanying 50% increase in non-fish and wildlife citations and a 75% increase in non-fish and wildlife warnings by ABWE troopers. Also, money that comes into the state Fish and Game Fund from fines is down significantly. In other words, fish and wildlife enforcement officers are spending much less of their time on wildlife enforcement and much more of their time assisting the state troopers with regular law enforcement duties.

As is usually the case, statistics don't tell the whole story. Most young people embark on a career in wildlife law enforcement because of their dedication to resource management and associated activities, including hunting, trapping, fishing, and flying. Under the new system, there is no guarantee that recruits into the state troopers will ever get to be fish and wildlife enforcement officers or pilots. These new policies have already taken their toll on recruitment, and ABWE is having trouble filling vacant positions.

At the end of the Hammond administration in the early 1980s, when fish and wildlife enforcement was a high priority, there were 117 commissioned positions and an annual budget of 13.5 million dollars. Today, there are less than 90 positions with a budget equivalent in early 1980s dollars of about 9 million. Since the early 1980s the wildlife and fisheries-related economy of Alaska has grown to well over 2 billion dollars, fishing charter fleets have greatly expanded, and the transporter industry has grown substantially.

Fish and wildlife enforcement officers have always had busy periods and slower periods. The slower periods have allowed protection officers to catch up on case reports, investigate ongoing cases, participate in education and community involvement, and work with biologists on management projects. Voluntary compliance is a key part of wildlife enforcement, and good public relations and education are essential in building support for management and enforcement programs. Under the reorganization, whenever fish and wildlife troopers have some time to work on case files or perform other duties, they are called away to do non-fish and wildlife-related activities. Many fish and wildlife troopers now have 20-30 cases piled up on their desks awaiting action. It is frustrating when someone goes out of their way or shortens a hunting or fishing trip to turn in a lawbreaker and then finds out that ABWE didn't have the time to follow up on the case.

Although the reorganization of Fish and Wildlife Protection was a well intentioned move to assist state troopers, public dissatisfaction with fish and wildlife enforcement throughout the state indicates that a change is needed. It seems clear that the enforcement function needs to be organized at the division level, perhaps back within the Department of Fish and Game. Outdoor users should let their legislators and candidates know they feel on this issue.