

IT'S TIME TO BRING BACK THE DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE PROTECTION By Patrick Valkenburg

Soon after the last gubernatorial election, the administration decided to downgrade the Division of Fish and Wildlife Protection to a Bureau 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. Reading between the lines, however, it appears the intent was to reduce upper level staff costs in FWP and make wildlife troopers spend more time helping state troopers with trooper patrol functions. 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.

Here are some of the facts. After the reorganization and creation of the Alaska Bureau of Wildlife Enforcement (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 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 exploded in size, and the transporter industry has grown substantially.

Unlike troopers, 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 bar checks, sex offender registration, prisoner transport, or other 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, dissatisfaction within the organization and public dissatisfaction with 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. AOC supports reestablishing the Division of Fish and Wildlife Protection within the Department of Fish and Game because the primary function of fish and

wildlife protection is much more closely related to ADF&G than to the primary functions of the Department of Public Safety. Outdoor users should let their legislators and candidates know they feel on this issue.