

AOC Flexes Political Muscle

By AOC Lobbyist Jeff Logan

Management of fish and game is an expensive proposition. It takes people, equipment, and time to do the job, and all cost money. Fishers, hunters, trappers, guides and shooters are proud of the fact that revenues from licenses and tag fees, and taxes on guns and ammo, have paid for Alaska's fish and wildlife management for decades. But with expenses increasing, and revenues from our licenses and purchases decreasing, a funding gap has emerged. Over the past few years AOC leadership has been reviewing budgets, talking to biologists at the Department of Fish and Game, and looking at the results.

After talking with AOC members, board members, and various state officials, AOC leadership agreed to support increased funding for ADF&G. During this process many people expressed frustration with how the department has spent money in the past, and questioned whether AOC should support more money without results. In the end, most agreed that doing nothing is not an option. AOC President Teresa Sager Albaugh wrote Governor Murkowski to share AOC's perspective and request that he include general fund monies in the state operating budget for the Division of Sport Fish, the Division of Wildlife Conservation, and for Board Support. Albaugh's letter stated that the department needed funding for basic field research to support the Board of Fisheries' and the Board of Game's allocation decisions, and to support science-based management like the predator control program. AOC has also observed a trend of "de-funding" citizen involvement through the Advisory Committee ("AC") process. AOC expressed strong support for funding to get the public involved once again with the AC and board process. Governor Murkowski listened to AOC, and when he released his Fiscal Year 2007 budget last December additional funding for ADF&G was included. AOC's focus in Juneau during the recently-ended legislative session was to ensure that these monies stayed in the budget.

In our system of checks and balances once the governor proposes spending money, both the house and senate review the proposal and make the changes they see fit. The House Finance Budget Subcommittee for the Department of Fish and Game is chaired by Representative Jim Holm of Fairbanks. Holm was skeptical of the governor's increases, partly because of the way the department had spent and accounted for money in the past. Holm said that while his constituents were complaining about dwindling numbers of moose and caribou the department simply wanted to conduct more studies. The department promised to do better. Sportsmen from the Interior, Southcentral, and Southeast called, wrote and testified in support of additional money for the department. In partial response, the House voted to add some but not all of the Governor's increases. Our attention then turned to the Senate.

Senate Finance Budget Subcommittee Chairman Con Bunde of Anchorage, who has years of experience with ADF&G's budget, did grant a partial increase but offered some of the same concerns about how the department had spent their money in the past. Again, the department promised to do better. Sportsmen, including many AOC members, called, wrote and testified in support of additional monies for the department, which proved to

be critically important in the end. The House and Senate both proposed different funding levels for the department, and in such cases they meet in conference committee to decide which numbers to forward to the full House and Senate for final approval. In virtually every case the conference committee, Chaired by Senator Gary Wilken of Fairbanks, approved numbers supported by AOC.

The legislature assembles two budgets: an operating budget to fund general state operations, and a capital budget to fund projects. As it turns out, the items that AOC supported that were left unfunded were, in essence, projects. We turned to Mat-Su Senator Lyda Green, who controls the state capital budget. Senator Green agreed with the need for the capital budget money and, with support from the citizen members of the Boards of Fish and Game, fully-funded important field data projects.

In the end, virtually all of the monies AOC President Teresa Albaugh requested were appropriated by the legislature and signed into law by the governor. Now it's up to AOC to "follow the money," make sure it is spent properly, accounted for in a transparent manner, and results in fish and game abundance and thus increased harvest opportunity.

We learned several lessons this past session during our exercise to support additional funding for ADF&G. The first is that AOC's voice *does* matter, and that it's important for AOC members to communicate with their legislators about what they want – and what they don't want. Another important lesson is that perceptions and mis-perceptions about how ADF&G spends their money linger for a long time. If AOC members want more fish, moose and caribou available for harvest, it is critical that we as citizens closely monitor our government to ensure that our public monies are being spent properly. It is equally critical that we act on fact, not fiction, when we do so. Finally, a lesson that we learn year after year is that it's critical to have friends in Juneau, and AOC has many. We need to recognize and thank those people who have helped us, and continue to educate those who don't. Alaska's most important renewable resource – our fish and wildlife – depend on it.