

Locals Speak Out on Subsistence Criteria

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

Last night Federal Subsistence Board members were largely outnumbered by Kodiak locals during a public hearing at the Best Western Kodiak Inn. More than 70 people gave up their Tuesday evening and packed the harbor room to voice their concerns over new rural criteria the board is considering.

Rural status means everything in the world of subsistence harvesting within federal lands and waters. Rural communities are entitled to the land and allowed to utilize natural resources surrounding them. Every ten years or so, when a new census report comes out, the federal subsistence board reexamines what communities should be classified as rural or non rural. That process hasn't always gone to everyone's liking, so the board is looking to update its methods and evaluate the criteria used when determining if a place should be classified as rural.

Kodiak's long standing rural status isn't up for review right now. Rather, last night's meeting was meant as an opportunity for locals to voice what they think criteria for rural status should be, so that if and when Kodiak is reviewed, it can meet the requirements and continue subsistence use of federal land.

Iver Malutin is a councilmember with the Sun's Tribe of Kodiak and stressed the archipelago's history of subsistence.

"We are doing things today, just like my parents did, and my ancestors did thousands of years ago. I could take you to Afognak today and we could live there forever without ever coming to town. We could live off the land and the sea, just like they did years ago. In 1931 when we had a depression, Kodiak and the islands on Kodiak, all the villages, didn't even know there was a depression because we didn't have any money we didn't need any money and that's what the depression was mostly based on. We had food. Right out in the channel my dad would get fish and get ducks where Saint Herman Harbor is and we lived off the sea."

In the past the subsistence board has used population numbers to determine rural status. Pat Holmes said he didn't think this should be criteria for future classifications, or at least not the primary one.

"If you're using a number it should be larger than what you're using. But it really, it varies with the community, it varies with the location. And I think that if you want to get at people that have access to subsistence, that's the question, I think you should be using the Alaska Permanent Fund database, because that's at least people who have been here a year. And that eliminates a lot of transients. Then we don't have to have quibbling over whether the Coast Guard is subsistence or not. Some of those people retire, they stay here for years. So I think you should look at permanent fund, their database, to determine how many permanent residents are in a community."

Natasha Hayden also thought population density shouldn't be the main criteria for rural status. Instead, she suggested the board look at geographic remoteness of an area.

"The uniqueness of being located on an island in the Gulf of Alaska or in the Arctic Ocean or in the Bering Sea or in Southeast Alaska that can only be reached by traveling hours on a marine vessel or hundreds of miles via airplane, the nature of being geographically remote in itself should meet the criteria of consideration of ruralness and anything after that would be secondary to look at."

Other comments pointed out that those modes of transportation on and off the island aren't always reliable. They cited the ferry Tustumena's absence for almost a year, and poor weather preventing flights to and from Kodiak, sometimes for days or weeks. In those cases, food doesn't always make it to the shelves of Safeway, and subsistence really becomes a necessity.

Melissa Borton is the tribal administrator for the Native Village of Afognak and said the federal board should reference the state of Alaska's requirements for rural status.

"They have 12 different characteristics that they look at. Some of them are not demographic in nature, they talk about the extent of sharing resources and the diversity of the resources that we have available to us and those fit Kodiak a lot more than diversity in economy and whether or not we have an educational institution."

Other comments touched on the ten year cycle of review, and said communities shouldn't have to fight for their rural status every ten years.

The federal subsistence board will accept comments until November 1. From there they will be reviewed during the April 2014 Federal Subsistence Board meeting. The board's recommendations will then go to the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture for a final review and decision.