

Federal Subsistence Board Reschedules Statewide Hearings

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

The government shutdown last month threw a wrench into many federal proceedings, including statewide subsistence criteria hearings.

Back in September Federal Subsistence Board members held a public hearing in Kodiak to get input on how communities should be classified as rural or non rural. Basically, those living in rural areas are allowed access to federal lands for subsistence purposes, people in non rural places aren't. The deciding factor has often been influenced by population numbers, and every ten years, when new census data is released, the board typically reexamines statewide rural/non rural classifications.

That process hasn't always been well received, so this year the board decided to hold community hearings and gather public input on how it should determine rural places. But things didn't go according to plan.

Carl Johnson, the council coordination division chief for the Office of Subsistence Management, said the government shutdown forced five of those rural determination meetings to be cancelled. Because of that, Johnson said the deadline for public comments on the rural determination process has been extended.

"So that took away the public opportunity to participate, so we felt it was only appropriate to extend the deadline so that people would have opportunities to participate in these rural determination hearings which we have now scheduled out through the third week of November."

In the grand scheme of things, Johnson said the rescheduled meetings and extended comment period won't affect the timeline the board is working with.

"It gives us one month less time to prepare public comments for the Federal Subsistence Board meeting in mid April 2014. That's when the board will be considering the comments that were received during the public process on the rural determination hearings. So it essentially gives our staff less time to prepare those comments for the board, but in the long run the timeline that the board is using to review the rural determination process will not be changed."

After the board meets in April, Johnson said they will probably take the next year or so to draft changes to the rural determination process and recommend those to the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture. From there, the secretaries will ultimately decide whether or not they want to accept those. If they do, Johnson said they would propose a new rule, which would undergo another year of public review and comment.

“So this is a multi year process.”

Johnson emphasized that they aren’t determining which communities are rural right now. He said it’s the process that’s under review, but any changes could affect rural classifications in the future.

Kodiak’s public hearing was held in September, and Johnson said he thought it was a very productive meeting.

“I was very pleased to see the community turn out. Originally this meeting was scheduled to be held in either Cold Bay or King Cove. But because of the board’s rural determination review hearing schedule we moved the meeting to Kodiak in order to maximize public participation. And I was really pleased to see the people of Kodiak turn out so that that change in schedule was justified and accomplished its goal. I think that the people of Kodiak have obviously put a lot of thought into it and I think they gave a lot of really thoughtful and useful comments. And we also saw a lot of themes emerge, which is very helpful. So their comments will be prepared for the board and we’ll see how that goes.”

Pat Holmes sits on the Subsistence Regional Advisory Council for Kodiak and the Aleutians and said he also thought Kodiak’s hearing went well.

“You know I think this is just the most marvelous thing that the Federal Board is asking folks for their input, it’s just the most opportune time to do that.”

Holmes said he hopes folks take the time to comment on the rural determination process, especially with the extended deadline.