

LAKE CLARK NATIONAL PARK
SUBSISTENCE RESOURCE COMMISSION
Port Alsworth, AK

SRC Minutes - Certified by Chair Warren Hill on 12/30/2025

Saturday, September 27, 2025

Meeting held at Iliamna Village Council Building

Call to order: 1:02 p.m.

Present

SRC Members: Steve Kahn, Tim Anelon, Warren Hill, Karla Jensen

Absent: Billy Trefon Jr, Tinny Hedlund, Ned Fowler

NPS: Grant Hilderbrand (Superintendent), Liza Rupp (Subsistence Program Manager); Buck Mangipane (Natural Resource Manager); Dan Young (Fisheries Biologist), Eva Patton (NPS Regional Subsistence), Bill Edwards (Law Enforcement Ranger)

Guests: Nissa Pilcher (Office of Subsistence Management)

Roll Call

The roll call confirmed that four Commissioners were present, and three Commissioners had excused absences. A quorum was met.

Introductions

SRC (Subsistence Resource Commission) members and all those in attendance introduced themselves.

Superintendent's Introduction

Grant Hilderbrand introduced himself and gave a brief history of his 31 years in Alaska and his experience working as a bear biologist for both the State of Alaska and then the Alaska regional office of the National Park Service. Grant also described his hope that park staff and local residents continue to have meaningful dialogue about resources and ways of knowing for many years to come.

Approval of Agenda

Warren Hill: Since the Superintendent and Tim Anelon both have time constraints today, we should switch the agenda around so that Grant share the superintendent's report first and then we will review the wildlife proposals.

Superintendent Report: Grant Hilderbrand

It has been a challenging year for the park and 2026 will likely also be challenging with hiring restrictions and some budget uncertainty. All the people we have are critical to the function of the park.

There are a couple of highlights from this year that the park is particularly proud of, the first of which is the new park film that will debut in October. It's a project that's been 10 years in the making, so we're really excited to share it.

Also this year we've been able to expand our relationship with some of our local communities and local groups. This past year, we signed a couple of conservation easements in the park with Kijik, and then as part of that, we have a cooperative agreement with Kijik to do some baseline studies within those easements. We've also entered into a cooperative agreement with Igiugig largely to look at water temperature in the lake and to potentially help us with some salmon counting as well. Partnerships are likely to become even more important in the future.

We have also been spending a lot of time working on the Johnson Tract mining development. Mining isn't something the Park Service manages very often, so I would say our learning curve is steep. There are a lot of stakeholders with unique and appropriate and justified perspectives on about this project. As a park is we're not really for or against the mine. The activities that are occurring are legal, and we are just trying to go through a process in a manner that is fair and equitable and involves everyone with an interest having a voice.

New Business

Wildlife Proposals

Warren Hill: With Tim's time constraint we should probably just move through to the proposals. There are four of them and they come from various proponents. When is the meeting that we want to have our comments in for?

Eva Patton: The Federal Subsistence Board meeting will take place in April, but the Bristol Bay RAC also takes SRC comments into account.

Liza Rupp: The Bristol Bay RAC is October 29 and 30th. I will write a letter on your behalf summarizing your comments and submit it to OSM to share with the RAC. Then at the meeting in October the RAC will ask if any SRCs have comments I will present whatever conclusion you

come up with. It does make a difference, such as with the moose season dates from a couple of years ago.

Eva Patton: Your decisions are also read into the record at the Federal Subsistence Board meeting.

Proposal WP26-36: Shorten wolverine hunting season in Unit 9:

Warren Hill: This was submitted by the Bristol Bay RAC. They're requesting that we shorten the wolverine hunting season to match the state season, which I'm guessing is just to eliminate confusion, similarly as we did with the moose regs a few years ago. Generally, I'm not really a big fan of shortening seasons, and it's by a whole month. But basically, I would support them if that's what they wanted. I'm in favor of supporting them.

Steve Kahn: Tim, were you at the RAC meeting where this was proposed?

Tim Anelon: No, can't give any insight. I was thinking that there are hunters who wouldn't like that.

Eva Patton: I was not at the meeting. I'm looking in the analysis because usually they give the justification from the RAC for submitting the proposal.

Steve Kahn: All I see is to align seasons with the state. I was hoping to get more insight on that. I find it curious that the OSM conclusion was neutral. You don't usually find that. Has the personnel at OSM changed recently?

Eva Patton: All the wildlife biologists are the same. Kendra Homan was the primary analyst for this one. And sometimes, it's not very often, but sometimes OSM does have a neutral conclusion. In this case, it would decrease subsistence opportunity for federally qualified subsistence users. And OSM didn't see the conservation concerns, but it could protect denning females. But it says reported harvest has declined and is very low. I know generally, I wasn't specifically at the Bristol Bay meeting, but I know generally, there has been discussion just about when there is a disconnect in state and federal regulations, it can make it difficult for people, you know, not knowing which side of the boundary you're on, make it easier to have consistent regs, and they don't have to worry about the amount of season.

MOTION by Tim Anelon to support the proposal

SECONDED: Steve Kahn

MOTION CARRIED

WP26-37: Remove firearms restrictions for beaver trapping in Unit 9 and Unit 17

Warren Hill: This is submitted again by the Bristol Bay Regional Advisory Council, and they want to remove the firearm restriction for beaver trapping in units 9 and 17. And again, I want to

support them, but also there's been just a lot of talk about an increase in beaver populations around, so I'm in favor of it. I don't think they really get that much harvest anyway, so I support this myself.

Karla Jensen: Same

MOTION by Tim Anelon to support the proposal

SECONDED: Karla Jensen

MOTION CARRIED

WP26-38: Increase harvest limit for brown bears and eliminate state registration permit requirement in Unit 17, and WP26-39: Extend brown bear season to year-round in Unit 17:

Warren Hill: Wildlife Proposal 26-38 combined with 39. And it's two parts. One is submitted by a private individual, Mr. Dan Dunaway, and that's 26-38, is requesting to increase the harvest limit from brown bears in Unit 17, from one bear to two bears, and eliminate the state registration permit requirement. And then the other one is 26-39, submitted by the Bristol Bay Regional Advisory Council, which is wishing to extend the bear season in Unit 17 to year-round instead of primarily winter months. I'm not sure what to think about these. This is where the aerial hunt harvest is going on?

Steve Kahn: Yes

Warren Hill: This is where the intensive management is. They're trying to reduce the bear populations anyway. This is something I'd defer to the biologists, but again I'd like to support the Regional Advisory Council. Who is Dan Dunaway? Is he with the state?

Dan Young: He used to be a fish biologist with the state.

Eva Patton: He's retired from the state now, but he's been a member of the Bristol Bay RAC for a long time. He's very active on that.

Warren Hill: What communities would this be? You mentioned Unit 17. Who would be taking advantage of this?

Buck Mangipane: It's anything in Unit 17. So for us the closest things would be Fish Trap, Snipe Lake, Mulchatna Country. I think it would be Dillingham, any of the communities along the Nushagak. Buts up against the Tickchiks, I think.

Warren Hill: Clearly there's the population to support this if we're having this discussion and there's a state slaughter going on. So I don't see why we wouldn't support them myself. Does anyone have any thoughts?

Steve Kahn: Because of that intensive management in this area, we really don't have a record of how that has influenced things to go forward, so I have real concern over that. I don't know how

long this has been going on, but they've taken 200 brown bear or something in that vicinity, or close to that, over a fairly short period of time. But there hasn't been enough time to really tell how the population is being affected. This proposal would change regulations before we really know what's been going on with that intensive management. So, personally, I have an issue with that.

And the two-part thing is kind of strange, but I'm not sure why somebody needs to take two bears per person over one. I mean, if you take one brown bear a year, every year for 20 years, that's a lot of brown bear. You know, that's plenty of subsistence opportunity.

I appreciate the opportunity to weigh in, but that's how I feel. I can't support it for those reasons myself.

Warren Hill: How about the second part, to extend the season to year-round?

Steve Kahn: I don't have as strong feelings about that.

Warren Hill: That's what makes this kind of tough, because you're taking an action on two pretty different things.

Buck Mangipane: You know, for me, looking at this initially, the season dates don't bother me year-round. I think that presents opportunity for people to harvest bears kind of outside of the normal range, be it in a fish camp or an opportunity that presents itself, and I think that is eminently reasonable. It mimics what our subsistence hunt is currently. You know, we have that in mind. That's how it's set up. It gives people the opportunity to take advantage of those circumstances.

The two bears, one, I think when you read through here, there's lots of discussion about the population being deemed able to support this, but there's no data. What we know is they've harvested close to 200 brown bears within this unit, given the expectation that there were a lot fewer than that. We know there's a lot of bear movement. We have radio-collared bears in Unit 9, and a few in 17, and they move very fluidly between those boundaries. And so, you theoretically could be impacting areas well beyond kind of the unit itself. And so for me, kind of along the lines of what Steve said, I think better understanding the state of the population, given what has been harvested, would be a nice piece of data. And again, this is just federally. So on state lands, which is like 80% of the lands out there, two can be harvested. So it's not really a huge restriction on federal land. It's a relatively small portion of this.

Warren Hill: The state is already two?

Buck Mangipane: Yes, it's already two. It's already two. This is really about an alignment issue again. But I would say, you know, if we hadn't had several hundred bears harvested recently, you know, the population, it's a robust salmon run that we've been having for the last decade, have probably supported really good productivity in bears, and that's a bigger driver in bear populations than any ungulate population there is. We know that. Given that we also know

bears are pretty slow in terms of productivity, they don't rebound quickly, if you harvest 200 bears, you're not going to have 200 more of them very soon. And I think conservatively thinking, you would assess that population impact to then evaluate do we need to enhance the population or continue to have a high level of harvest.

Grant Hilderbrand: I know this is linked together, but there really are two parts to this proposal. I think in terms of going to a year-round season, it's why other places have gone to a year-round season. I think a lot of the motivation would come from if folks end up with a bear that's causing a challenge or maybe a problem at a fish camp or other places outside of an open season, it would allow them to harvest that bear under harvest, you know, under a license to be able to retain that bear and wouldn't have to report it as a DLT to the troopers. So, again, it just seemed like it was more expeditious, but it was something that didn't get utilized very often, but it was a solution to that particular situation.

I think relative to the two bears a year, I agree with everything Buck says. There is a lot of harvest coming out of the general area and I don't think any of us have information that we would want to have to have full comfort from a sort of a population standpoint. Part of our mandate is to manage for sort of a natural situation and we're not sure that we're there. Another part of our obligation is to provide for subsistence. I think to me the question is is there a demand within the subsistence community? Are there folks that want to take two bears a year? I don't have a great answer for that, but what I would say is that even though these proposals are linked together, I certainly see them as being two different sort of topics and potentially two different situations to consider.

Buck Mangipane: There's one other thing that I would add is, you know, the state registration permit that they have in place currently does have some stipulations on I think if you remove the bear from the communities where you have to then have it sealed and I think they removed the hide from the head and the claws so there has been a movement towards some of these regulations allowing people to sell or use bears for handicrafts, there is some impact of that. So I feel like there's almost three things that are being worked on here. One is, you know, the season dates. Two is, do we align the number of bears harvested? And three is, do we kind of continue to use this state registration permit that has these kinds of constraints depending on, you know, what you do with the bear? If you keep it in your community or if you're using it or taking it outside of there. So, it's almost like there are three pieces to consider and it's, I would say, difficult when you put them all together to feel comfortable about it. This is just my assessment kind of looking at it.

Warren Hill: Well, that's exactly how I feel about it. I mean, well, there's a lot going on and it's kind of not really our ballpark. So it's almost, I'm thinking like no action, but maybe support the extending of the season. Write a letter saying we do appreciate this and want to support that. But for these reasons, we don't really want to support the first half, which is basically what Steve was voicing. That we feel like there's no, who wants to take two bears a year per person.

Not really anybody wants that many. Although that's already allowable by the state, but I, myself, don't see the need for that in the subsistence world.

Karla Jensen: I agree.

Warren Hill: So, no action?

Steve Kahn: I have one more comment and it's on alignment. I've noticed that it seems like every time we talk about aligning seasons, it's always the federals aligning with the state. And, you know, in the case of the first proposal that we want to go through, I think that's fine. But I think as a commission that we need to look at what's there and see what we really want. I mean, it shouldn't it go both ways? You know, what is the best policy and go that direction, not just aligned with the state. I understand cutting down confusion, and that's a wonderful thing, but I think that it's just important to keep in mind as we go forward and look at these proposals. If it's strictly alignment, let's see what policy works best for subsistence users that we represent.

I don't have anything else to say, but I would agree with a motion to have no comment, but specific remarks to this proposal.

Warren Hill: Do you want to make a motion?

Steve Kahn: I move to respond to this with no action, but just to notify them that we support the lengthening of the season, and then some of the specifics about why we don't like the first part.

MOTION by Steve Kahn to take no action on the proposals, but to provide comments.

SECONDED: Tim Anelon

MOTION CARRIED

Approval of Meeting Minutes

MOTION by Warren Hill moved to approve the April 27, 2025, SRC minutes.

SECONDED: Steve Kahn

MOTION CARRIED

SRC Status of purpose and role

Chair Hill briefly described the purpose of the SRCs as laid out in the charter.

Status of SRC membership

Liza Rupp shared that there are two vacant Governor of Alaska appointed seats, which only require that the applicant be a qualified subsistence user, and the application can be filled out online. Karla Jensen is a Governor appointee and could help with any questions. Also, Liza is happy to help with questions. There are two meetings a year, one in the fall after moose and the

other in the spring before fish arrive. The meetings have been moved to take place on weekends to help members who work during the week. The NPS pays for travel and the meetings rotate between five resident zone communities.

Eva Patton shared that there will be a Federal Register Notice for vacant and expiring Secretary of the Interior-appointed seats. They are requesting that everyone whose term is expiring in 2026 and who wants to continue on an SRC apply once the notice comes out.

Commission member reports

Warren Hill: The summer was very productive. During the summer months there was a lot of fish, lots of salmon and they were big and bright and early to Lake Clark. The hunting was also good. Most people who put a lot of effort into hunting succeeded. The weather's been good, not very buggy. IT was a pretty wonderful summer. The only thing that we didn't get was blueberries. There were zero blueberries on Lake Clark. I didn't pick a single one. I heard they were plentiful here in Iliamna, which is interesting. How about Pedro Bay?

Karla Jensen: We had a lot of blackberries. There were blues too, but not as much as the black. They're our crowberries, I guess. There's so much, it's like no matter where you walk, they're like popping. And they didn't have that many blackberries down here in Iliamna. But we have them in Pedro Bay. We didn't have any salmonberries though. We had a lot of cranberries this year too.

Warren Hill: Hopefully the bears are all well-fed this year and won't be a problem.

Karla Jensen: . We had a lot of rabbits. Does anyone else have a lot of rabbits? Like on that seven-year cycle? We still have so many rabbits. They're just everywhere. So, there's a lot of fox in the village too. There aren't as many birds. Usually, we have a lot of ducks, but we didn't have this year.

I don't believe anybody got a moose. We don't have that many moose anymore. You have to go way back, way up Iliamna River or way up Pile River to get them. So I don't believe anybody got one.

There were a lot of berries.

The fish were huge, thank goodness, because last year they were so small. They came in late. Usually, we have a lot of fish around the 4th of July. They all showed up the second week and they were in waves. Usually, you throw the net out and it sinks, but it was hard to get fish in it. So as a result, our fishponds don't have a lot of salmon in them and we have a lot of bear now because the bear are hungry. And over in Knudsen Bay which is usually full, when we were flying over I looked down and I didn't see any, just a couple little ones. And usually that thing is packed red all the way around and up the creeks. There's hardly any. One of our fishponds that's usually really full, right by the runway, it's empty. There's nothing in it. Fisheries Research paid

particular attention to that fishpond because this is only the second time that it's gone empty. It's usually full. The other fishpond that's usually really full had about a third of what it normally does. So, there's just not a lot of salmon spawning in those ponds right now. And so there's bear everywhere and they're hungry. We're going to have one of those fun falls.

We still have a lot of wolves. There was a pack of eight or nine that walked right by the Community Center. We looked out and they were just walking down the road like dogs. And there's still a couple around, lone ones. There's a big pack over in Knudsen Bay that go between Knudsen Bay and up toward Pile Bay and back. You could almost time them. About every two weeks they're going one way or the other. One almost got my dog. And they're big. I never realized how big those things are. The dog is big and the wolf was twice that size.

Steve Kahn: So around Brown's Landing there was plenty of black bear and brown bear that we saw. A few cow moose that were having a hard time holding on to their new ones. We did see a wolverine and a lynx which is always kind of fun in the summertime when things are so thick you don't really get to see as much.

One thing I would ask, did anybody else notice what was affecting the pushki, the cow parsnip early in the year? By us it was like all of a sudden, the tops were drooping over and by late July, and in early August they were dying. It was almost like something is affecting the roots or something because it almost looked like a cutworm type of thing, but I never did dig down in there to check. It also translated that songbirds were very few and far between. That feed source for them that wasn't there. I hardly saw any songbirds.

There were a lot of bees, a lot more bees than normal. There were some dynamics going on there. Probably a few more even dragonflies than we normally see. We don't see that many there. It's not the right climate but we still see a few. It's kind of fun.

We can talk later about the fisheries, but I'm watching the numbers coming past the tower and I swear last meeting you told us it was going to be 400,000 and I was thinking that Dan is right on this year. That was funny. They spawn right in our bay and there are more than ever. A few are starting to die and wash up. Bears are swimming for them and eagles are getting them.

I found an adult Cisco washed up just a few days ago, seven, seven, eight inches long. There were no marks on it and it was still living a little bit in the surf there but it had like some blood around the back lower fins. I don't know if it got grabbed by something.

Dan Young: That would make me think maybe like an osprey. I think that sounds like an osprey or eagle or something.

Eva Patton: Do you get a lot of Cisco in the lake?

Dan Young: We do. They're the primary forage fish in the middle of the lake other than juvenile sucker. I mean it's super turbid but it's been a little clearer water this year so I would say maybe

vulnerable that way. They spawn now, so they'd be heading towards the Chulitna River to spawn right about now.

Steve Kahn: We had an eagle earlier this summer that was really good at getting lake trout. It's just so odd because you know you think lake trout is being deep but I think they're up there feeding on the fish at the surface and they just come and he would nail them and in two seconds there were two more eagle and you didn't see an eagle for a week and then that guy got it to shore and then there's two eagles landing in the tree right above and then another raven came in in about five minutes.

Karla Jensen: Do you have a lot of hawks?

Steve Kahn: Yes.

Karla Jensen: We had more hawks this year than anything. They just showed up. We haven't had them in years. You'd see one like occasionally but this year there was more hawks.

Warren Hill: We had some great horned owls nesting on our property. They were kind of noisy.

The other thing I didn't add was that we actually had success goose hunting this year. The conditions were right for the first time in a long time. There's either good ice or not enough ice or it's mud or whatever because we go over the Chulitna River but the lake being wide open and the beaches dried out, we were able to get over there when the time was right. We had a couple of good days. So that was nice. A little variety in the freezer.

Buck Mangipane: Warren, did you see that turkey vulture again?

Warren Hill: No, I haven't seen that guy. I keep looking for him. There was a vulture a summer before last.

Karla Jensen: Are they really big?

Warren Hill: They're huge.

Karla Jensen: I think we had them too. None of us knew what they were. There were two of them. Huge. They were hanging around behind the village toward that back mountain. That was last summer. We didn't see them this summer. We didn't know what they were. They were huge.

Warren Hill: Our trail crew came back one day and was like there's a dead bear right next to the trail and there was a vulture on it. I was like, I believe you about the bear, but the vulture, no way. But the crew said it's a vulture. So, I went up the next day to move the bear away from the trail and the vulture was sitting there. Apparently when they gorge, they can't fly. So, it was sitting right next to the trail. I could walk up 20 feet from it. That's the ugliest bird I've ever seen. Big bald head. Then you read about them. The terrain here sounds great for them. They hunt forested areas near open lands. Down here is nice and open. We saw that one time and we

never saw it again. We looked at it on one of those online bird reporting sites and there's only been two ever in Alaska.

Karla Jensen: We had a blue heron a few years back. He froze into the pond. He just showed up and nobody knew what he was. We went online and looked. That's probably about 10 years ago. He landed in a pond right in the village and then it was late in the year and he froze. Before we could get him, something else ate him. It's just his feet were left. That was really odd.

Old Business

None

New Business

Subsistence Update: Eva Patton

Sarah Creachbaum, the NPS Alaska Regional Director retired at the end of February. Dave Alberg, the Regional Deputy Director, has been acting Regional Director since she left and has been supporting the regional subsistence program. We just received word that Don Striker, former superintendent of Denali, will become Acting Regional Director from mid-October until further notice.

Crystal Leonetti is the new director of the federal subsistence management program at OSM. She is from the Bristol Bay region, from Dillingham. She has been the Native Affairs program manager for the Fish and Wildlife Service out of the regional office, and prior to that was their Fish and Wildlife Native Affairs specialist for least 10 years. OSM is still in their office at the Fish and Wildlife Building in Anchorage, but they now serve directly under the Secretary of the Interior through the Office of Management Policy and Budget. Crystal has been working very diligently to educate members of the office about subsistence issues and regulations.

There have been some very strong pressures upon the Secretary of the Interior, both letters from the governor of Alaska, and petitions from Safari Club International that have their sights on the federal subsistence management program. Crystal has been briefing the Secretaries on subsistence, subsistence regulations and policy and law, and also Title VIII of ANILCA. The new Secretary's office is initiating a secretarial review of the federal subsistence management program. In 2009 there was also a secretarial review, that resulted in three public members being appointed to the federal subsistence board. And the last administration under Secretary Haaland appointed an additional three tribally nominated seats to the federal subsistence board.

There will be a federal register notice for the Secretarial review of the federal subsistence program. but it has not gone out yet. There is a one-pager of talking points that will be

presented at the fall RAC meetings, which highlights some of the questions they're going to be asking during the review but the federal register notice will have a lot more detail.

We want to make sure that all the SRCs have an opportunity to comment on the review. Since the public comment period will likely end before your spring SRC meeting, so if the SRC wants to meet once the federal register notice is posted, you need to have that on the record at this meeting. The SRC has in the past had an occasional teleconference meeting, such as with the Wildlife Rule. It's not clear when the federal register notice will come out, but likely sometime later in the fall.

The timeline that OSM had shared was they were looking to have the federal register notice published; have a 60-day public comment period; and then do an expedited review and have recommendations by summer 2026. So, it was a quick timeline.

Warren Hill: Definitely a lot of it is applicable and important. I think we should have a meeting to discuss the review.

Steve Kahn: I think we should try. I agree.

Eva Patton: There was a request coming from the Washington policy office that after the fall meeting to draft a letter summarizing the SRC's work for the year and submit it to the Secretary of the Interior. Wrangell St. Elias SRC has been doing that for years and so that's where they got the idea. They've been submitting almost an annual report to the secretary. The regional office will draft a standard introductory paragraph that helps introduce all the subsistence resource commissions and that they were established under Title VIII of ANILCA and their role in advising the park on subsistence management issues and importance of bringing local and traditional knowledge to the understanding management of the park. Oftentimes, SRCs are making informal recommendations where there's not a vote but you're helping inform the park about issues of concern which you're seeing out on the land or in water, and recommendations for culture camps and activities happening that help support park communities and engagement with the park and that you serve as volunteers in this role.

Every year there the regional office subsistence program manages subsistence research and monitoring funds. Over the past few years, we've had \$400,000 per year to support subsistence-related projects in parks to conduct baseline community socioeconomic studies, conduct time-sensitive research on specific research management issues that require decisions by the National Park Service managers, what fisheries or wildlife decision-making for subsistence use and subsistence priority and to continue to develop close relationships between the park staff and local communities to cooperatively conduct community-based subsistence studies. The proposals are due October, 17th.

There are three Lake Clark communities at the top of the priority list for comprehensive community-based harvest surveys conducted in conjunction with ADF&G. The communities are

Pedro Bay, Iliamna, and Newhalen. The timing of this work depends on capacity at ADF&G and the availability of funds.

Warren Hill: I always hear people talk about the lack of trout anymore. We don't have any trout.

Karla Jensen: We don't have any trout. When I was a kid, we had whitefish. We haven't seen a whitefish in 40 years. There used to always be whitefish. There are hardly any sticklebacks anymore, too. There used to be tons of those everywhere. FRI told us there's three different specific sticklebacks. But they're slowly coming back, but there are hardly any still. I don't know why.

Dan Young: There's nine-spine and three-spine, but there are anadromous three-spine and there are resident three-spine. There are anadromous sticklebacks.

Bill Edwards: Well, what's understudied? I know there was a lot of whitefish attention associated with Pebble Mine and salmon obviously get a lot of attention, but what's important that hasn't gotten attention, do you think?

Karla Jensen: Seals in Lake Iliamna

Dan Young: They're actually working on that. Igiugig and NOAA have a partnership. They have a student that's working with the Bristol Bay Guardians and NOAA. So, there is actually an ongoing project and NOAA is doing these surveys. There is some relatively recent data and they are doing some climate work right now as well.

Warren Hill: Do you have suckers at Pedro Bay?

Karla Jensen: No. Again, we had them when I was a kid. And the reason I brought up sticklebacks is that my dad used to have dog teams up into the early 70s and there were so many sticklebacks that we used to fill those brown galvanized tubs. He would have us go and get sticklebacks and add them when he'd cook for dogs, and it would fill half one of those tubs and there was so much oil in them, that's why he was feeding them to his dogs. He'd cook them in with the salmon and his dogs were in good shape because there were so many sticklebacks. That's why he'd use them when they were fat.

There're no bullheads. There's not many of those either anymore. There used to be a lot of those.

Steve Kahn: At that little floating dock in front of our place, there's a school of suckers there. There are probably 150 or 200.

Buck Mangipane: When you're talking trout, are you thinking rainbows or lake trout?

Karla Jensen: Both. We used to be able to fish off the beaches and get lots of rainbows, lots of lake trout but now, nothing. We used to have a lot of dollies.

Dan Young: Is FRI doing any work with that?

Karla Jensen: Yes, they are. When the lake froze, it doesn't freeze anymore, we used to be able to fish and pull out big old trout, and now nothing. You could fish all day and get nothing.

Dan Young: Do you know how many seals are estimated to be in the lake?

Karla Jensen: Somebody was telling us there's like a hundred and some seals, but there's far more than that.

Dan Young: A woman from NOAA sent me the 2019 estimate, which is the most recent one. It's close to 500.

Karla Jensen: I believe it. And the further up the lake you go in those islands, the more there are.

Buck Mangipane: Yeah, so I think some of the first surveys that I remember was that they did have highly variable numbers between survey times within close proximity. And so, one of the things they were going to try to tease out was where do they go when they're not being seen? Because the data is showing that they are not leaving.

Karla Jensen: No, they don't leave. They're there all the time.

Buck Mangipane: So you should always see five hundred. You don't go from 500 to 100. That number doesn't happen. So, are they under the ice in some cavern? Trying to figure that out was something that they were trying to tease out because they did document the whole lake and they don't leave the lake. Because I think that was the initial assessment. It was like, oh, well, they just leave the system, so you don't see as many during certain times of the year. But that hasn't been the case. They're all out there. If they're tagging anything, I would imagine that that would happen at some point if they have not yet done so. But that would seem to be the situation.

Karla Jensen: There's one island where for years, I was always trying to catch them when they dropped their pups. Because I want to take pictures of them. And so, I kept going out to this island where I know they always have puppies. And finally, between June 4th and June 8th, during that certain period is when they pup. And that island, just one island, there's so many where there's so many of them. I counted 58 seals just on the beach, and that island was as big as this room. And they were all over the water. As you keep coming up the lake, and you go in and out of these bays where all these islands are, where I live. There are seals everywhere up there. I can go in a bay, and there's 10 more, I don't know, 20 more here. They're just everywhere. Maybe that's why they don't have any trout.

Dan Young: That was the discussion at the last SRC, that the seals are the reason they're on the beach.

Karla Jensen: They tear up our nets. Every year, I'm sending my net to Anchorage. Because I don't have time to fix it myself. But these big holes, because they just go right through the net

and clean them out. Them and the brown bears pull the nets up. They pull them right on the beach, just like a human.

Cultural Resources Update: Liza Rupp

The Kijik Cultural Landscape Report will be submitted for printing in the next few weeks.

Park archeologist Jason Rogers conducted an archeological survey of landforms in the Currant and Tommy Creek drainages just north of Port Alsworth. Unfortunately, he did not locate any archeological sites. If the funding comes through in 2026, he will continue the project with a survey on the Stony River near Two Lakes.

We spent a lot of time this summer working on the Johnson Tract project, which is the possible gold and other metals mine near Tuxedni Bay.

Wildlife Research Update: Buck Mangipane

Lake Clark is the southern extent of the Dall sheep range. This year we were able to complete a survey of the entire range of sheep habitat in the park. The last year we were successful in conducting surveys was 2019, so it's been a while. Since that time, in many areas of the state, there have been some dramatic declines in sheep numbers. Due to, in most cases, extreme weather events, long winters, wet winters, things that typically are the bigger impactors to sheep populations. In 2019, our survey found the highest or second highest number of sheep ever documented among all the surveys done in the park, which originated in 1978-79. The dataset is long term, although it is sporadic through that window of time. Lots of range and variation, but we had been in a place where the population had been kind of growing from, say, 2010-ish through 2019, and was close to around 1,100 sheep for the park. And then we had a couple heavy snow winters. We haven't had what are the typical ones where we get a lot of big warmups, but certainly there were some warmups. Those tend to be the things that have impacts, but also heavy snow years in some habitats can have impacts as well.

Data is still pending, but the overall numbers observed, which are just the raw numbers that haven't been extrapolated into the estimate yet, are down probably between 40% and 50% from what was seen in 2019. So, a dramatic numbers decline. A positive spin is that that 40% to 50% puts us at the 500, maybe 600 number, which is kind of our normal low. Our range has been between 500 and 1,100 throughout time. And so even though we might have had a decline, we haven't dropped below what we've seen as low numbers that are what we'll call normal. Whereas elsewhere in the state, they've been seeing numbers that are pushing beyond what have ever been documented.

The thing I'm not sure we'll be able to tease out, but I think probably is somewhat likely in our population decline is, the areas that subsistence users mostly go in this southern part of the

park tend to be the ones that are the most volatile, and we tend to have the biggest losses. And In all the transects in that southern unit, basically anything south of Lake Clark, they saw sheep only on one transect. One day where we were able to do a cursory survey of Tanalian Mountain, which is right there by Port Alsworth, for which we have pretty good counts on it for many years. And it's an easy survey where you don't miss a lot of sheep on Tanalian when you fly it. This year they saw 14 sheep total. Historically, the range is 17 to nearly 50, with the average closer to like 30 to 35. So these are definitely signs of decreasing numbers.

So, realistically, while we'll probably see that we had a population decline, it's likely localized to certain areas. It seems like in the Twin Lakes country they still had big groups and a fair number of observations there. The data will require more analyzing.

It's not very far, but the sheep numbers between south of Lake Clark and Little Lake Clark and the Tlikakila north all the way to Merrill Pass, show dramatically different densities. That Tlikakila country is productive, and so I think we've had more and more people going up there and being successful. And I think in some of the traditional areas south of the lake it could be pretty hard to find sheep there right now.

So not the glowing report we wanted, but where we are. We are talking to the biologist that does most of the data analysis for us, and we will prioritize doing the survey again in Lake Clark in 2026. We'll try to get some additional funding because it's always nice to get multiple years of data.

Liza Rupp: That would be a good proposal for SAC funding.

Buck Mangipane: Yes, I could write a proposal for that.

Eva Patton: SAC funded a sheep survey in Yukon Charley and that was very important information that led to closing the area for all users to protect the population.

Steve Kahn: Have there every been any sheep surveys closer to Cook Inlet?

Buck Mangipane: Generally, the snow loading typically is too much for sheep in that part of the world. But we do have sheep end up on coastal draining systems up Currant Creek. We have seen them and that's an expansion that I think has happened over time as glaciers have receded and conditions have changed. I think ram groups are starting to explore. I would like to fly the whole Neacola going down, because the mountains to the west side of that, we haven't seen sheep in, but it does seem plausible that as glaciers have receded, that country is probably conducive to sheep, at least seasonally.

Now onto bears. We collaborated with a state. They led most of the effort to do a survey very similar to what we do with sheep, just in sampling transects of all of Game Management Unit 9A and 9B, so a huge area. It was five to six airplanes doing that work over three weeks in May. It was well over 1,000 transects were flown. It was a huge effort, and I think we'll probably end up with really good estimates for both. The Park Service is contributing a lot of the biometrics

and the analysis support, and that individual comes back to work in October, so my expectation is by the next time we have a meeting, we'll have the estimates.

In 9A, we're talking McNeil River all the way up to the park boundary and then the interior. It covers our subsistence hunt area, Pedro Bay, pretty much everything south of the park and preserve and then all the way up into Lachbuna country. There is an old estimate from almost 25 years ago, so it will be good to compare.

We will get an estimate for the whole game management unit and should be able to parse out the data for the park and preserve. We know bears don't really care that there's a line on the map, so having the big picture is the important data. As we think about proposals such as we just saw from 17 having good data at this scale is going to be important to understand the potential impacts.

The coastal bear survey was started to get an idea of population trend, and to see if we could use it as a surrogate for kind of these bigger expensive high effort surveys. They have been working out well and we incorporate both surveys into our modeling system for the coast. Recently, we've been seeing a somewhat lower number. During one of the COVID years we did a survey, and the count was 280, which is one of our highest. I think the highest is 330. Then the last few years have been lower. We've had average or below. We're hearing some concerns from operators that their numbers seem to be down.

This year we did three surveys because we do see changes in timing with peak numbers kind of year to year. The first was June 24th, the second July 12th, and then early August. Numbers this year were good. In June it was 220, so about 40 over average. In July the number was 130. Many years in July we have the same, if not more bears than June. In August it had dropped to 36, whereas two years ago on the same date the count was 112. It all depends on the weather and the resources. Over time, we're going to see what the real normal is, but we're not there yet. We now have close to 50 surveys over 22 years, so we're starting to build a good data set.

From 2014 to 2018, we had collared bears in the park's interior, covering 9a, 9b, and 17b. We had 36 bears that we radio collared that had over a thousand locations. Of those 36, I think 24 of them used both 9a and 17b, to differing amounts. There are a lot of bears that at some point use both of those. There were bears who used 19b, 19c, 16. We're a park that hits all these game management units. So when we look at the regulations we should know that their movements are really fluid. ADF&G caught a female bear at the dump in King Salmon and now she's on the Tlikakila which is over a hundred miles away.

So, there's a lot of movement in these landscapes and the bears are very flexible in the areas they use and are taking advantage of different things. We divide them up into all these units, but they're kind of this big super population of bears. And so, you know, impacts happen beyond where we think they are happening at that time. Many of the long movement bears are females. We certainly see more roaming in males, especially in the spring, you would see some

crazy movements out of them. But some of the females had really long movements with cubs. The coastal bears move a lot less. The resources are abundant in a small area.

Karla Jensen: So, they're moving around a lot even with little cubs. It doesn't matter. It doesn't stop them. Last year and this year we've noticed that the brown bears have more cubs.

There's one had four, another one had three. Before we'd see a sow with one cub all the time. And now we're seeing more sows with multiple cubs.

Buck Mangipane: When we think of Bristol Bay, how many fish have been coming into the system over the last decade? The returns have been amazing. And you know, for these bears, it's salmon. When you look at their diet, if you look at what's driving it, it is not terrestrial prey. That's not how they exist in these numbers. I won't say it's inconsequential, but it's a much smaller component of their diet. And so, you have this 10-year run of really productive salmon runs and you're probably going to start to see some of that manifest itself in more productivity. We can see that as a big driver going forward.

Fisheries Research Update: Dan Young

We had the Telaquana weir and the Newhalen River counting tower. Similar to what Warren said, the fish were kind of early. They were kind of big and kind of bright because of that. This was true for both river systems and Bristol Bay wide. Although Bristol Bay, they say was one day early.

Last year, the fish were really small. The reason they were small is because they were young. They were all two-ocean fish, one freshwater and two ocean fish. The Tazimina was like 94 percent two-ocean fish. And I think the subsistence samples that we get, they were like 85 percent two-ocean. Bristol Bay this year was more closer to 40 percent two ocean fish and 60 percent three ocean fish.

This year, 50 million is what they predicted. With a harvest of about 36 million is what they had their pre-season prediction. It ended up being a little more than that. Closer to 57 million with a catch of 41 million. And every river system got their escapement goal. They were shooting for 4 million on the Kvichak, which I kind of think they didn't get, but their goal is two to four. So it's kind of within the range. And when I talked about 400,000 last spring, I was assuming they get 4 million. Last year we had 6 million coming to the Kvichak, and as such, our count was closer to 800,000 because we had about 12 percent of the return. On average, the proportion that comes into the Newhalen and up to Lake Clark is 12 to 14 percent. But that's ranged from as low as in 2022, it was 4 percent. And then like some of those early years, like 2001 or 2002, only 700,000 fish came into Iliamna, but we still had 300,000 coming to Lake Clark, so that was almost 30 percent.

In looking at the processed from Bristol Bay, there is definitely a trend of smaller fish.

And one of the things when they do the in-season forecast out of Port Moller, is they look at the size of the fish coming back. Fish size is an indicator of the size of the run. They think they're going to be 60 percent three ocean fish, but they're smaller than expected and because of that, they bumped up the estimate because there's more fish. There are more mouths feeding in the oceans, so they're not going to grow as fast.

Buck Mangipane: That coincides with the bigger runs starting in 2010 or so. 2012 is when there starts to be a decline in size.

Dan Young: Some of that decline in size has been from some of these huge runs. On average Bristol Bay is 40 million average run with a harvest of about 25 million. They've had up to 80 million one year few years ago. So, a recent average of 56 million per run

On the Newhalen, FRI ran it for five years from 1980 to 84, and then we've run it since 2000. You can see these, really these years here, that's the 1980s. The run was just shifted way earlier. In 1984, there was high water on the Newhalen River. There was a velocity barrier to migration, and the fish were stopped below the falls. When the water got low enough, they could make it up, but a bunch died pre-spawning in the rivers and in the lakes that year, but that was a huge return with about three million fish coming back.

This year the run was kind of early, like not super huge, but it was early. It kind of just kind of tapered in. It mirrored the Kvichak pretty closely. The water level was kind of average. It wasn't high, it wasn't low. We didn't have a ton of rain. And water temperature was also kind of average, kind of warm. And so I think it was like the perfect conditions for the fish to make it up the Newhalen quickly. The lag time from the Kvichak tower to our counting was lower than normal and the fish were. I don't remember ever catching fish in Port Alsworth as early as we did this year. They just came straight into the lake. It was fast, it was quick.

Steve Kahn: It seemed like your numbers were fairly consistent. There were no real peak days. It just kept getting, 25,000 or whatever was coming up.

Dan Young: Yes.

Midpoint past our tower is usually July 21st, 22nd, and this year we were just pushed earlier. We saw the same thing at Telaquana.

We use otoliths to tell the age of the fish. So, a 1-3 or a 2-2 is a five-year-old fish. They're generally three to six years old, but for us it's really four to six years old. We aren't seeing many six-year-old fish lately. We're also not seeing that many two freshwater. Most of them are leaving after just one year, because they're getting big enough after one year. But this year we had a lot more 1-2 fish than there were Bristol Bay-wide, at least in our samples.

At the Telaquana weir the run was fairly early and we had 118,000 fish. To begin with, we had a four-year funded project, and during those years there were 30,000 fish each year. We were going to stop the project, but ADF&G said to continue because Kuskokwim is just so different

than Bristol Bay, because there are no lakes. It's just a riverine system, and almost all their production is riverine, and we talk about 40, 50 million fish to Bristol Bay and the Kuskokwim is like a million. It's a million total, and Two Lakes and Telaquana are the only lake systems in it. Some years up to 30 percent of what comes into the Kuskokwim is from Telaquana. This year was 15 percent, so it's actually quite a bit lower.

When we did a radio tagging study in 2006-8, half the tags came up to Telaquana. There were just as many that went to Two Lakes, so if we see sometimes 30 percent of the return coming to Telaquana, it's potentially that more than 50 percent of the production is coming from just the park.

We always use this project as an example, because we tend to have projects that are three-year projects, a really normal length of time, but it is only a snapshot in something like this. Had we walked away after four years, we would have said that the Telaquana is a system that produces about 30,000 fish a year, and we would have missed the years with nearly 300,000.

Historically, the Kuskokwim has really been a chinook and chum system, but now they're actually harvesting more sockeye because there are so few chum and chinook. So this weir has become kind of a more important part of their portfolio.

Student from Sleetmute did a project where he studied the correlation between water temperature and salmon productivity and determined that April was the best month to use. For 2025 he predicted around 110,000 fish, and for 2026 he's predicted 169,000.

Buck Mangipane: Could we collect carcasses from the Telaquana fish to see what their age and sizes are?

Dan Young: We could do that.

For the thermal refugia project, we've been flying streams at Lake Clark, Katmai, and Kenai Fjords. We're flying transects over 27 streams, some of them multiple times. Our original plan was to fly a bunch of streams last year and then this year, highlight ones where we saw interesting things and then fly them again multiple times and then go out and stick temperature loggers and look at how these thermally interesting cool water areas persist over time and change in size. We have put out some temperature loggers in places, but we're planning to go out and do more.

We're flying these transects, just like mowing the lawn over these streams. And we wanted to do like, I wanted to do from Bristol Bay up. We did the Newhalen and did not really find anything interesting on the Newhalen River, which was kind of surprising. Flying those rivers, especially like the Kijik that's so braided, there's so many transects to cover that because your swath is only like 400 feet or 300 and then you need to have 50% overlap in each one to make your image stitch together.

We're continuing the long-term monitoring of resident fish, looking at contaminants. Every five years we're going out and collecting samples and looking at how things are changing over time. And it's building to our long-term data set. This year we caught 20 fish on Lake Clark and 20 fish at the Kijik Lake. And they have been shipped off and we're having those analyzed now. And we've been doing some same kind of thing with dragonflies. We collect larval dragonflies in the water. And then this is part of a larger nationwide project with almost 500 different sampling sites across the country now among different agencies.

We're continuing the scoundscape project and also our project sampling for the aquatic invasive plant Elodea.

We should begin surveying the Tazimina River for silvers. We should institute an aerial survey too, just for the sockeye, a few flights maybe. There definitely didn't used to be any coho in that system, so that's new.

Public and Agency Comments:

None

Set time and place of next SRC meeting:

The next meeting will be held in Nondalton. Dates are Saturday, April 18, or April 25, 2026.

Meeting Adjourned:

MOTION by Warren Hill moved to adjourn the meeting at 3:55 pm.

SECONDED: Karla Jensen

MOTION CARRIED