

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park Subsistence Resource Commission

Working Group on Secretarial Review of the Federal Subsistence Management Program

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Updated Recommendations from February 25, 2026

1. The 2024 move of the Office of Subsistence Management, from within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior, to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget of the Department of the Interior:

Recommendation: Leave the Office of Subsistence Management in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget of the Department of the Interior. This is a recent move that has had beneficial outcomes. However, Office of Subsistence Management staff should remember to stay engaged with subsistence users. This change moves subsistence out from under a single agency and into the policy heart of the Department of the Interior. By giving the program direct access to senior leadership and tribal liaison resources, this move recognizes that subsistence is a wildlife management, civil rights, and sovereignty issue.

2. Criteria for regional advisory council membership:

Recommendation: Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) should be made up of local people who know their region. Currently, RAC membership is comprised of 70% subsistence users and 30% commercial/sport users. However, it has been difficult to fill these seats, so more outreach is needed to get people to apply. The current qualifications to become a RAC member are comprehensive and should not change; however, OSM should consolidate questions on the application, as they are duplicative. ANILCA Section 805 requires that RACs be composed of local residents. The current criteria ensure that rural residents remain the primary voice. To "balance" these councils with more urban or commercial interests would dilute the very local expertise that Congress intended to protect, and to centralize authority or reduce the role of RACs is a direct violation of the spirit of ANILCA Section 805, which mandates local participation.

3. Membership of the Federal Subsistence Board:

Recommendation: Keep the current membership structure of the Federal Subsistence Board (“Board”) because it allows more public involvement in the process. Before public members were added, the Board was dominated by federal agency directors. Adding Tribally nominated seats ensures that the people with the most at stake—those whose survival depends on the land—have a voice and a vote. A Board comprised only of agency heads, as requested by some, would lack the "on-the-ground" expertise required by ANILCA. Public members add cultural context and fill in the gaps in the data.

4. Federal regulations and state regulations for duplication and inconsistency:

Recommendation: Clarity with state and federal regulations would help users understand the situations on federal land. For example, when there is a closure to non-federally qualified subsistence users, there should be more outreach to the public so they can be informed. While consistency is a good concept, it cannot come at the cost of the rural priority. The rural priority helps people in rural areas put food in their freezers. The State of Alaska is legally barred by its own Constitution from providing a rural priority. Therefore, federal regulations must be different, or what might appear inconsistent, to satisfy the federal mandate of ANILCA. Deference to the State is only appropriate if the State provides the same level of protection for rural users, which it currently cannot do. To end dual management, there needs to be a Constitutional change by the State of Alaska so that would bring the State in alignment with ANILCA.

5. Regulations applicable to special actions:

Recommendation: The Federal Subsistence Board and delegated federal managers should be able to use special actions to protect resources such as fish and wildlife. Special actions are important tools for managers. For example, the Unit 12 moose hunt was extended by special action by 10 days from September 20th to September 30th after the delegated federal manager heard concerns about the warming climate slowing moose movements until after the season had closed. This special action in 2024 allowed subsistence users additional opportunities to fill their freezers for the 2024 and 2025 regulatory years. The Federal Subsistence Board closed Federal public lands in Unit 13B to moose hunting by non-federally qualified users for the 2024 and 2025 seasons in response to concerns about low moose population and increased competition impacting harvest success for federally qualified subsistence users. Special actions are decided in coordination with the Board and concerned communities, and they involve extensive

consultation with different agencies. The ability to make special actions allows the Board and managers to adapt to changing conditions in-season and protect subsistence rights. These actions ensure that resources exist for future generations.

6. Role of the State of Alaska and its Department of Fish and Game in the Federal Subsistence Management Program:

Recommendation: The federal subsistence management program exists because the State of Alaska cannot legally manage for a rural preference. It is important that local rural voices are heard in these processes, and that their voices are given a greater weight and leverage than those who do not live in the state. The State should be involved in technical coordination, continue to have a liaison to the Board, but should not be given a vote. The State should not have a "veto" over federal subsistence decisions if it cannot implement a rural priority.

7. Board policies and procedures for rural determinations:

Recommendation: The Board should consider a variety of factors for rural determinations. Rural areas cannot only be determined by factors such as accessibility to larger towns or availability of roads. The current process uses a combination of population data and socio-economic "character", such as, their access to stores and resources. To be "rural" is more than a population number; in fact, it is a deeply rooted and culturally significant way of life. A rigid numerical cutoff (like "any town over 5,000 is urban") would unfairly strip rights from communities in the Copper Basin and communities associated with Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve that remain deeply dependent on the land and the resources. Rural determination should be done on a case-by-case basis. The Board should consult the RACs as they have the knowledge of the area. Rural preference exists because it critically helps those living out in rural places.

8. Any additional topics about federal subsistence management the SRC wants to provide:

- Appreciation for adding tribal consultation and extending public comment period