

Wasilla Board of Game Meeting Should Allow Remote Public Testimony
By Mark Richards

I was recently required to register to attend and testify at the Wasilla Board of Game meeting that runs January 21 - 29 at the Best Western Lake Lucille Inn and sign an "Acknowledgement of Risk" and liability waiver so I cannot sue the state should I come down with covid from attending the meeting.

The Board of Fisheries meeting that was supposed to take place in Ketchikan earlier this month was canceled and postponed, because, as the Executive Director of the Board of Fisheries, Glenn Haight, explained: "Cases in Southeast are increasing in almost every community. With the rise in cases post the holiday season, already key staff have contracted COVID-19 and are unable to participate. In addition, the nation and Alaska are facing serious transportation difficulties as weather and the pandemic are seriously hampering travel in the near-term."

Surely that is still the case as Alaska is seeing record covid case counts right now, so it was surprising that the Board of Game would still be meeting in person this week in Wasilla. Surprising, but not unwelcome, as both boards have already had to postpone meetings that should have happened last year due to the pandemic.

While I'm glad that the Board of Game meeting is still taking place in person, and have no problem with attending, I know that many who live in outlying areas and villages, after reading the lengthy warnings in the registration documents that make it seem likely that you *will* be exposed to covid at the meeting, will choose not to attend. Yet the Board of Game will *not* allow those members of the public to testify remotely; only ADF&G Department staff and Fish & Game Advisory Committees will be allowed to testify virtually and avoid the possibility of catching covid at the meeting and bringing it back to their village or family.

Both boards have had a year to review and develop covid mitigation policies at meetings and if meetings could not take place in person the ability to hold virtual meetings, which would allow remote testimony from the public, ADF&G staff, and Advisory Committees. However, "it was determined by both boards during reviews of their 2020/2021 meeting cycle, that these complex subjects and the necessary public involvement required, could not be done telephonically or through web conferencing."

While I understand it is problematic to set up and allow remote public testimony at a Board of Game meeting, if Advisory Committees and Fish &

Game staff will be allowed to present and testify telephonically and/or through web conferencing, so as not to expose themselves to a "high risk environment" where "covid 19 may be present at this meeting," it would seem there is a way to also make that work for the public.

The upcoming Board of Game meeting will cover hunting and trapping regulations for Region IV, which covers game management units 9, 10, 11, 13, 14A, 14B, 16 & 17, comprising areas from Glenallen, Palmer, King Salmon, and Dillingham. Four years have gone by since the Board of Game last reviewed game population densities in Region IV and seasons and bag limits, and the Board has over 100 proposals to consider.

Alaska has one of the best public systems of wildlife management and involvement in the country, but only if the public has the means to be involved. Written comments were allowed to be sent in, but those do not have the same effect as public testimony, whether in person or done remotely via phone or web conference. It is unfair and disenfranchises the public at large when you tell them it's a high risk to attend the meeting in person, make them sign a liability waiver, yet that is the only way to make your voice heard.

If you do want to attend the Board of Game meeting in Wasilla in person to testify, you can register and sign the acknowledgement of risk and waiver at this link:

<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=gameboard.meetinginfo&date=01-21-2022&meeting=wasilla>

Mark Richards is the Executive Director of Resident Hunters of Alaska, and the vice-chair of the Fairbanks Fish & Game Advisory Committee. These views are his own.