

Complete Testimony of BOG Chairman Ted Spraker  
House Resources Committee Hearing  
HB 158 – DNR Guide Concession Program  
March 11, 2013  
(transcribed by Mark Richards)

Mr. Chairman I am here today representing the Board of Game to discuss and share some of the challenges – and you've heard a lot of them already today - that the Board of Game will face if some sort of guide concession program to regulate the numbers of guides and the moving around of guides throughout the state is not implemented.

But I do want to make it very clear that I'm not here today to discuss the finer points of this project. You know, we look at the conservation and so forth, we're not looking at the budgets or the areas or how these programs are laid out, we're just looking at the resource.

And we have two major concerns; in fact we have written three letters of support to DNR since I've been on the board supporting some sort of limit to the number of guides and their ability to move around the state. And the reason we have supported it with three different letters, there's two reasons, one is conservation of the resource and the 2<sup>nd</sup> concern the Board of Game has – and we've addressed this quite a bit – is crowding. And we feel that under the current system where there is no limit to the number of guides that can operate on state and BLM-managed lands, this has resulted in some fairly heavy generally localized overharvest of game and certainly crowding.

And I want to give you just a little bit of experience from the Board of Game. Every meeting that I've attended since I've been on the board – and I started in January of '03 – there's been proposals requesting some sort of reduction in harvests by nonresidents. And it first pretty much started, and in the last couple terms that I've been involved in it, it's been surrounding sheep harvests. Primarily competition and overharvest and so forth of legal rams for sheep hunting. But now we have proposals and it's spread to all big game, we've got proposals ahead of us now that deal with some sort of reduction in nonresident take for all big game, so that has changed.

And the requests come in basically two forms. First, proponents of these or offerers of these proposals would like to first eliminate all nonresident hunters; that's a common statement, or at least stagger the opening season dates. We commonly see that in proposals to give the residents a five day or seven day head start before any nonresident hunter is allowed to hunt. The second kind of level of proposals that we get are to only allow nonresident hunting by limited drawing permits. And usually there's an allocation assessed with these proposals, and it's usually around 10%..

And I went through the recent supplement for drawing hunts and I looked at all the hunts and just struck them down to 10%., and that's quite and exercise but I would encourage you if you're interested in this to look at it. That's huge. That would really make a difference. You've heard a lot about the financial benefits of nonresidents, you know the

Board doesn't really look at all the financial parts of it, we look at the conservation. But we understand those things. And this 10%, if that was approved by the Board, would be absolutely huge as far as money coming into our state that go to the Department of Fish & Game for managing our game.

The second thing that we are really faced with is this crowding issue, and I want to give you just a couple of quick examples. We've talked a lot about the Palmer to Glenallen area, 13D/14A, this is south of the Glenn Highway. And as I said we had 36 to 38 guides that were operating in this area. What the Board did, because we had several proposals to address this, we convened kind of a town hall meeting. And the room was full. We had guides, we had a lot of resident hunters there that were interested in sheep hunting. We had a very good discussion. And what was interesting to be because I realize how guides have such difficulty with their financial plan and stability when you go on permits. Knowing that, what really interested me is, all but one guide – and there were probably 8 or 10 guides in the room that operated in this area – all but one guide said, we've had enough, competition is so fierce in this area we can't offer a quality hunt, there's very limited chance for success for our clients, and we just can't compete at this level anymore. We would rather have permits, and then the quality goes up, the size of the ram goes up, we have more sheep to look at, the conservation part's addressed, and mainly the crowding issue is addressed. We've seen examples of that.

Another area the Board of Game is looking at, and I'm sure this is going to come up fairly soon, we've got a meeting in Fairbanks 2014 in the spring, and this is south of Fairbanks, 20A, there's currently about 15 guides registered for this area. And from what I hear from other guides – I'm not a guide – but what I hear from other guides around the state is that the area can probably support about a third of that number and have some really quality hunting, so that's another area we're going to have to deal with, And here's something else that I'm really concerned about. Is that, there's a difference in having guides competing with guides, that's one issue, but the way I look at it as a BOG member, and a real state's rights sort of guy, is that this really puts a lot of competition on residents. Because guides are well equipped, they have large camps, wall tents, a string of horses, aircraft, they're set up, I mean this is their business. For your average hunter that goes in there for a long weekend or a week or whatever, those guys, those residents have a tough time dealing and getting game in places where you have a lot of guide competition.

Another area, and Deputy Commissioner Fleener referred to this one as well, is 19C, it's over west of the Denali National Park, and in this area it's primarily competition between guides. And we've heard this from several guides. One guide that I know personally that works in this area said that the competition is building. I think part of that may be because of what the Board did down in 14A and 13D, I think we probably pushed some of these guides over into that area. And again, when you have an area that's fully utilized, and when you're sheep hunting the areas of access and landings strips and so forth, regardless of how good of a super cub driver you might be, they're limited, there's a finite number of places you can access these sheep areas, And if the guides are operating

all of those, and they're usually there the full season, again it really impacts the number of residents that hunt in that area.

My last example on that series is we have our next BOG meeting, starts Friday in Kenai, and before us we have 53 proposals. We have 9 proposals addressing some sort of competition, overcrowding, overharvest or whatever, and this competition between residents and nonresidents. And that ratio is not uncommon in the last four or five years I've been on the Board. So there's a lot of concern.

Mr. Chairman, in summary, just a few points.

The Big Game Commercial Services Board licenses about 15 to 20 – some years even more than that -- new registered guides each year. And in the Board's opinion, we just don't have enough state land to accommodate that level of growth without additional hunting restrictions. And here's the concern of the Board again.

These new guides probably will not be able to compete successfully with established guides in the area. But I'll tell you who these young guides, and very ambitious guides can compete with, are residents of the state. And again, as we add more new guides, and we don't have some sort of limit on the number of guides or how large an area they can operate in, I think it spills down to the residents and really impacts the residents and their ability to take game.

Another concern we have of course is if this plan or some sort of plan is not implemented, the board will be obligated to address what we usually call hotspot hunts. Representative Wilson brought up this point about, why don't you just fix some of these areas – what the Board has run into is that what the board has run into is that if we fix an area over here, what we do is we push the problem over there. And we're pretty handy at doing that under this system because we recognize hotspot issues. We've done this kind of a piecemeal sort of operation and I think the BOG has pushed some of these problems to other areas, whereas if we had some sort of global approach I think it would be a lot better. Better for nonresident hunters through guides and certainly better for residents.

Mr. Chairman, my last point, or just concluding statement is, I think that by adopting some sort of system to regulate the guiding numbers, and would address this conservation and crowding, we're going to greatly benefit not only the future and stability of the guiding industry – I think that is paramount here – but I think it's really going to make a difference in the hunters that are residents of the state, and benefit the residents. I see a lot of – and I've looked at this fairly carefully – I see a lot of benefits from this sort of regulation to resident hunters in the state, especially when it comes to places that are really popular for moose hunting and popular for sheep hunting.

Mr. Chairman, with that I'll conclude and I'll do my best to answer any questions.