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## Shout Out To RHAK Banquet Chairman **Mark LaPorte**

RHAK Founding Member Mark LaPorte has been putting on our Annual Fundraising Banquet in Anchorage since our formation in 2016. His tireless drive and energy and volunteer time as our Banquet Chairman over the years has been key to funding our work and mission. Mark (and his wife, Jana, too) has given so much and now it is time for a break and to hand over that responsibility to someone else.

We can't thank Mark and Jana enough for all they have done for us. This past year they also helped us pull off our first ever Fairbanks Banquet, which will now be an annual winter event!

Founding Member Rick Rodgers will take over as Banquet Chairman. Rick has been helping with our banquets all along and we can't thank him enough for stepping up to take over from Mark. Thanks to everyone who has attended our fundraising banquets; we look forward to seeing you again in 2024.



*Mark and Jana LaPorte*

## New RHAK **Board Member Pete Dickinson**



*Peter Dickinson with his wife Tanya, son Michael, and daughter Nicole*

We are very pleased to announce our newest RHAK Board Member, Pete Dickinson, from Soldotna.

Pete Dickinson was born and raised in Alaska. He spent his youth learning everything he could about trapping and hunting around the state. He met his wife in high school and after their college career in Minnesota, they made their home in Soldotna. Pete has enjoyed hunting all over Alaska and the world, and is thankful that his wife and two teenage children share his passion for subsisting off the land and respecting what God puts before us. One of the most important lessons he teaches his children is that meat does not come from a store; you must know how and where it comes from, including how to preserve and prepare it. Becoming a RHAK board member is a privilege to Pete and he is excited to actively protect and support Alaskan's rights and opportunities to hunt. Welcome, Pete!

(If you are interested in serving on the RHAK board and helping us move forward, please contact Mark Richards.)

# Federal Subsistence Board Update

Proposals have been submitted to the Federal Subsistence Board (FSB) for the 2024–2026 cycle, and the deadline to submit comments is June 30, 2023.

## Wildlife Proposals of Concern

- WP 24–04, 24–05, & 24–06: Close deer hunting to non-federally qualified users (NFQU) on fed lands from Nov 1 – 15 in areas of the ABC Islands in Unit 4.
- WP 24–30, WP 24–31: Permanently close Unit 23 caribou hunting to NFQU on fed lands from Aug 1 – Oct 31.

The Unit 4 deer closure proposals mirror the proposals we opposed last year that were voted down by the FSB. These new ones ask to restrict non-local deer hunters from hunting deer on fed lands in Unit 4 during the peak of the season in areas around Angoon, Hoonah, and Pelican, however they no longer (falsely) claim that there are any conservation concerns for the deer populations in these areas. This time, the rationale for these closures is essentially that there is too much competition from non-local deer hunters, which is preventing subsistence needs from being met.

The Unit 23 closure request seeks to make the temporary caribou hunting closure to NFQU on fed lands enacted last year – due to the declines in the Western Arctic Caribou Herd (WACH) – permanent.

RHAK will be opposing the Unit 4 deer closure proposals as there is no evidence subsistence needs are not being met, and “competition” alone is not a valid reason to restrict non-locals. We also will be opposing the permanent caribou hunting closure in Unit 23. See <https://www.doi.gov/subsistence/proposal/current> for the proposals and info on how to comment. Again, comments are due by June 30.

## Board of Game Report Southcentral Meeting March 2023

By Mark Richards

It was a pretty full room on Friday, March 17th, the first day of the Southcentral Region Board of Game (BOG) meeting in Soldotna, even though blizzard conditions outside had delayed travel by road and caused flight cancellations. The people in the room were a mix of organization representatives like me, Advisory Committee representatives, members of the public, and guides and transporters, all waiting to testify on various proposals before the board. The main items of concern it seemed were proposals asking for trapping setbacks along public use trails, additional elk hunting opportunities to meet subsistence needs in Port Lions and Ouzinkie, a disabled-only moose hunt in Kincaid Park in Anchorage, reduced bag limits for deer on Kodiak Island, expanded bear, moose, and goat hunting opportunities, and an out-of-cycle and out-of-region



Mark Richards at the Board of Game meeting March 17, 2023

board-generated proposal to close all sheep hunting in Unit 19C in the Interior Region for five years.

That last one of course – Proposal 204 – was a big one for RHAK, submitted by the board to address conservation concerns for the declining sheep population in the western Alaska Range. After years of RHAK asking the board to limit nonresident sheep hunters in the unit over

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## **Board of Game Report** continued from page 2

conservation concerns for the sheep and fears residents would lose general sheep hunting opportunities – all voted down by the board each time – and the board allowing nonresidents to take 90 percent of the sheep in 2022, somehow the board felt that now it was time to shut down all sheep hunting in 19C.

Sigh. Ugh. Oh boy. My turn to testify for RHAK came on the third day and I sat at the table, got my printed testimony before me, the accompanying slide show ready on the screen, and started speaking. As I read my prepared remarks, though, I felt myself grow angry and I could tell it was coming across that way. It wasn't personal, it was just after all the years of frustration with the Board of Game kicking the can down the road at the expense of the sheep and Alaska residents, and how board-generated proposal 204 came about in the first place via a clear corruption of the public process, it was time to let it out and finally express what so many RHAK members were feeling. And I did! You can read my remarks in full, along with the slides, on our website at <https://www.residenthuntersofalaska.org/comments>.

When proposal 204 came up for deliberations later in the meeting, Department of Fish & Game staff gave their presentation and stated that while they did have concerns with sheep declines in Unit 19C and elsewhere, they opposed a sheep hunting closure in Unit 19C based on the same rationale they gave for opposing a closure in Unit 15 on the Kenai Peninsula: Full-curl (FC) harvest management was sustainable under all conditions, no matter how low a sheep population was or how many legal rams were out there. Deliberations commenced and grew somewhat heated. Guides had made a strong case that a closure would severely impact them and the clients they had booked for the upcoming 2023 season, and that weighed on board members. Underneath

it all, there also seemed to be a recognition by board members that this can of worms they'd opened with board-generated proposal 204 would set a precedent perhaps they didn't want set – questioning the validity of FC harvest management sustainability – should the board vote for a sheep hunting closure.

During one of the breaks in deliberations on proposal 204 I spoke with board member Hoffman, the proponent of the proposal, and brought up again the seeming hypocrisy of the Department position. I mentioned that earlier in the meeting it came up that the discrete Unit 23 sheep population in the western Brooks Range was much higher than the discrete sheep population on the Kenai Peninsula, but Unit 23 was closed by the board to all sheep hunting in 2015 based on Department sheep conservation concerns, and the area was still closed. We went over to talk with Commissioner Vincent-Lang and Deputy Director of Wildlife Conservation, Ryan Scott, and member Hoffman asked them how it made sense that Unit 23 was still closed to all sheep hunting if FC harvest regulations were always sustainable, when it had a higher sheep population than on the Kenai Peninsula, which the Department opposed closing. The two-word answer by the Deputy Director: "Good Point."

I should mention here that the Department puts itself in this hypocritical position because FC harvest management was never supposed to really mean that as long as there was a harvestable surplus of at least 1, or 10, or 30 (pick a number) legal rams on the mountain each year, there were no sustainability issues or problems with continued unlimited hunting.

As deliberations continued, it was obvious the board was split. Member Hoffman asked for a straw poll to get a better indication of where the members were at,

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## **Board of Game Report continued from page 3**

which was denied by the Chairman, and I believe he knew that the votes for a complete closure for everyone weren't there. It was at that point that he made a motion to amend proposal 204 to only include nonresident sheep hunters in the closure. That amendment and subsequent amended proposal narrowly passed by a 4-3 vote and nonresident sheep hunting in Unit 19C was closed for five years beginning on July 1st, 2023!

Of course, the outcome did not sit well with guides. Two board members, Lynn Keogh & Al Barrette, called a special board meeting two months later, on May 25th, to discuss delaying implementation of the sheep hunting closure to nonresidents, but the board decided they needed to own the votes they took in March and voted 0-7 against any delay in the closure.

## **Final Thoughts**

The outcome of amended proposal 204 is, I hope, a paradigm shift in how the board and the Department will look at Dall sheep management and the FC harvest regulation down the line. There may indeed be negative effects from unlimited sheep hunting opportunity that takes out most of the older class rams within declining populations. It seems we have lost sense of the important role those older class rams play within the population as a whole. We are having ever-younger rams doing the breeding, who then go into winter with additional stress and less fat reserves, which leads to higher rates of mortality. And with such continued low recruitment with successive bad winters, there are ever-fewer legal ram cohorts to replace the ones we are taking, which leads to higher sub-legal harvests as more hunters (both guided and unguided) try to convince themselves those rams are legal.

A number of years ago I sat down for breakfast with the former Board of Game chairman ahead of a meeting

in which there were many sheep proposals before the board. I explained that what I was personally trying to do back then, along with others who would later, like myself, become founding members of RHAK, was prevent more resident general over-the-counter sheep hunting opportunities from going to draw-only hunts. His answer: "Mark, all sheep hunts are going to go draw-only for everyone eventually, it's just a matter of time."

And that's kinda how the board and the Department have looked at it all along. When things get bad enough, we'll put restrictions on everyone. There has never been a board or Department policy to abide by the mandates within our state constitution and protect resident sheep hunting opportunities. Which means there really hasn't been a policy to conserve our sheep populations so that residents have continued general harvest sheep hunting opportunities. Further abetting the board's actions over the years is an entirely inexplicable Department policy that they must remain neutral on all allocation decisions, so even though the Commissioner on down knows full well that it's a huge problem in allowing nonresident sheep hunters to take 80% + of the harvest each year of a declining sheep population, their lips remain sealed as to any recommendations on nonresident allocations. And when the resource does get to the point where the Department has conservation concerns, they offer no priority to residents in recommendations on restrictions.

**The future we don't want to see, and what RHAK is trying hard to prevent, is the scenario where our kids and grandkids may never have a guaranteed opportunity to hunt Dall sheep in their home state.** With your continued support, we will continue to speak out for our wildlife resources and our future hunting opportunities and work on legislative and/or legal solutions that will reform how the board and the Department jointly manage **our** wildlife.

## **Renew Your Membership And Share Your Photos**

Membership renewal is quick and easy at <https://www.residenthuntersofalaska.org/renew> or by contacting Mark Richards at 371-7436 or [info@residenthuntersofalaska.org](mailto:info@residenthuntersofalaska.org). Email Mark any time with photos of your Alaskan adventures to share on the RHAK website and newsletter.



# New Board of Game Member **Dave Lorring**

Dave Lorring, from Fairbanks, was appointed by Governor Dunleavy to replace Lynn Keogh on the Board of Game. He was confirmed by the legislature and will start serving his 3-year term beginning on July 1st, 2023. Dave is a former Alaska Wildlife Trooper (AWT) and former AWT liaison to the Board of Game, avid falconer, commercial pilot, hunter, and fisherman, and has been very active over the years with the Fairbanks F&G Advisory Committee and board process. RHAK supported his nomination and confirmation and we thank him for being willing to serve on the board. Thanks also to Lynn Keogh for his service. The board is still unbalanced in favor of commercial interests with 4 guides and one retired guide on the seven-member board.

## Cassell Case Update: **Kodiak Brown Bear Draw Permit Allocations**

RHAK had proposal 78 (see <https://www.residenthuntersofalaska.org/proposals>) before the Board of Game at their March meeting in Soldotna asking again to remove the loophole in regulations that allows nonresident guided hunters to completely skirt the Kodiak brown bear draw permit process. We provided examples of this happening, how it was not legal or fair to require residents to go through an actual random lottery process while nonresidents with enough money had a guaranteed opportunity to hunt, and mentioned in testimony that the continued refusal by the board to fix this issue did not bode well for the state and Board of Game when the Alaska Supreme Court hears the Cassell case down the line.

We did not expect Chairman Burnett to make our case for us when he commented about this issue. Here is what he said during deliberations on RHAK proposal 78, from a transcription of the audio recording:

**“Why do we pretend that these are draw hunts, other than the fact that we’ve identified them as draw hunts, putting them in the draw supplement; no one can draw except for the very few people, there are no odds, it’s 100%, or zero. Why can’t we identify those separately?”**

Chairman Burnett admitted on the record what we have been saying all along. The nonresident guided-only Kodiak brown bear “draw” permits are not really draw permits at all! While the Cassell case is specifically about whether the exclusive up-to 40% allocation of draw permits to nonresident guided hunters is constitutional, certainly when we add in the fact that all along it was never really a “draw” permit process for nonresidents, it makes what is going on doubly worse.

The state has finally (after a long delay) submitted their brief to the Supreme Court arguing against the Cassell case and it can be found here: <https://www.residenthuntersofalaska.org/lawsuit>. One interesting part of the State’s brief is that it contradicts the comments of Superior Court Judge Guidi where he said in the footnote of his ruling against Dr. Cassell:

**“The regulation adopted by the Board in 1976 grants roughly two out of three drawing permits to Alaska residents, and there is not a single Kodiak brown bear hunt that excludes residents.”**

The state’s brief makes it clear that one-third of the “draw” permits are allocated exclusively to nonresidents. It goes on to speak of how the terms “common use” and “maximum benefit” within Article 8 of our state constitution apply to guides and nonresidents equally. Dr. Cassell’s case should be heard by the AK Supreme Court later this year or early in 2024. RHAK has also submitted an amicus brief in support of Dr. Cassell.



Yukon River just upstream of the Nation River

# Yukon River Float Trip **Eagle to Circle July 8 - 15, 2023**

We have six signups so far for a five-day float trip on the Yukon River from Eagle to Circle, with a day of travel on both ends. It's 160 river miles through the beautiful and historic upper-Yukon country and Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. Mark Richards will help lead the group downriver and share some of the places and stories he knows so well from his 30 years living and traveling in the upper-Yukon area. We'll fish the clearwater streams for grayling and pike, see some wildlife, camp out each night under the midnight sun, share meals and have a great time!

We know it's late now to make plans, but if you'd like to join us, call or drop Mark Richards a line at (907) 371-7436 or [info@residenthuntersofalaska.org](mailto:info@residenthuntersofalaska.org) and we'll include you in the planning and logistics on travel to Eagle and from Circle. If you don't have a raft, canoe, or kayak, it's likely that with enough participation we can fit you in somewhere and help you with a ride as well. Let's do it, there is nothing like being on the Yukon in July! The only requirements for participation are that you must be able to tolerate mosquitoes and maintain a good attitude at the same time! Bug dope helps :)



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