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Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development

BIG GAME COMMERCIAL SERVICES BOARD
GMU 23 Working Group
Investigation and Enforcement Services
Report



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Division of Corporations, Business and Professional Licensing
Big Game Commercial Services Board

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wildlife Resource Management in Alaska is accomplished through the cooperative efforts of Alaska's Departments of Commerce, Community and Economic Development (DCCED), Fish and Game, and Public Safety. Collaboration between these state departments, as well as with federal wildlife management agencies and other stakeholders, is an important part of the stewardship of Alaska's wildlife.

The Big Game Commercial Services Board (Board), administered through DCCED, regulates and licenses the big game commercial service industry in Alaska. The Board also enforces its regulations through investigative and possible disciplinary action against commercial operator licensees who violate licensing laws.

The Division of Corporations, Business and Professional Licensing (Division) monitors compliance with Board regulations through investigative and enforcement efforts conducted by an investigative unit. One permanent investigator assigned to the Board is responsible for investigation and enforcement efforts within Alaska's 26 game management units (GMUs).

In 2008, the Board was invited to participate in a 21-member¹ working group established to address hunting game management concerns in the area encompassing Kotzebue Sound and the Chukchi Sea, known as Game Management Unit 23 (GMU 23)². These concerns centered around the conduct of commercial operators such as Big Game Guides, Transporters and Air Taxis and their involvement in the wasting of game meat, unlicensed activities, and remaining in the field with their clients.

The assigned Investigator traveled into GMU 23 to conduct interviews, camp inspections, field contacts, ramp checks, and other professional licensing investigative activities on these commercial operators in 2010, 2011 and 2012. The Division also hired a seasonal Investigator to assist with investigation, enforcement, and reporting of possible violations of statutes and regulations jurisdictional to the Big Game Commercial Services Board during these same years.

¹ See Appendix A, GMU 23 Working Group

² See Appendix B, GMU 23 Map

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OBJECTIVES

1. Conduct field inspections within GMU 23 to verify licensees' compliance with statutes and regulations jurisdictional to the Big Game Commercial Services Board.
2. Interview hunters to determine if any transporter violations, game animal waste, or any other illegal activity had occurred during their hunt as well as review the quality of their hunting experience in Alaska.
3. Investigate, enforce, and report any violation of statutes and regulations jurisdictional to the Big Game Commercial Services Board.
4. Coordinate with state and federal wildlife management agencies and regional organizations to investigate possible big game hunting permit violations for commercial operations on public lands.

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RESULTS

OBJECTIVE 1: Conduct field inspections within GMU 23 to verify licensees' compliance with statutes and regulations jurisdictional to the Big Game Commercial Services Board.

- The Division investigator traveled within GMU 23 during the peak of the 2012 caribou hunting season. During that time, he met with transporters, air taxi operators, and guides to verify they were correctly licensed and in compliance with big game hunting laws. The investigative and enforcement results of his field inspections are discussed below.
 - While in the field, the investigator observed or uncovered minor violations involving both transporters and guides. These were violations that could be easily corrected on site, such as hunt records being incomplete, or a camp that was not being kept up to the Department of Natural Resources or Bureau of Land Management requirements. The violations were corrected by the licensees, and no further action was necessary.
 - The Investigator assisted several Guides/Transporters in interpreting/clarifying statute/regulation intent. To include but not limited to, *AS 08.54.720(a)(17)(B)* Guide's Harvest of Big Game with clients in the field and *AS 08.54.720(a)(15)* Waste of a Wild Food Animal.
 - It was noted that two of the larger Transporter Outfits at the Kotzebue Airport have added meat processing tents and equipment for their client's use; this was directly in response to several questions/complaints raised by clients during 2011 contacts with the Division Investigator concerning the lack of meat processing facilities in the area.

OBJECTIVE 2: Interview hunters to determine if any transporter violations, game animal waste, or any other illegal activity had occurred during their hunt as well as review the quality of their hunting experience in Alaska.

- The Division investigator interviewed approximately 24 hunters at various locations at which hunters gather. The interviews were conducted at hunters' camps, the Kotzebue airport, restaurants, hotels, and on the street.
- Hunters were asked about methods used to get to and from the field, whether they were bringing in the required harvested meat, and concerns or issues that may have arisen during the hunt. Most were pleased with the services they were receiving, except for one transported party of non-resident caribou hunters who complained of the excessive amount of brown bears in the area of their camp. This party was subsequently relocated by their Transporter.

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- Statute and Regulations interpretation and intent were discussed in these contacts.

OBJECTIVE 3: Investigate, enforce, and report any violation of statutes and regulations jurisdictional to the Big Game Commercial Service Board.

- The investigator's efforts were hampered by the inability to obtain unescorted access to the aircraft ramp where a majority of the transporter and air taxi activity takes place.
- A transporter was investigated for his involvement/knowledge in the possible harvest of a sublegal moose by his clients. The case was referred to Department of Public Safety and the transporter's culpability was ruled out.
- A transporter was investigated for his involvement/knowledge in the wanton waste of a caribou harvested by his clients. The case was referred to Department of Public Safety and the transporter's culpability was ruled out.
- An investigation was initiated into a transporter crossing the line between his transporter business and his guiding operation. The case remains open, and a license action is anticipated.

OBJECTIVE 4: Coordinate with state and federal wildlife management agencies and regional organizations to investigate possible big game hunting permit violations for commercial operations on public lands.

- The Division investigator traveled with the Alaska Wildlife Troopers to check field camps of operators within GMU 23. He spent four days on patrol with Alaska Wildlife Troopers.
- A flight patrol was coordinated with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management personnel to investigate trespass issues by operators registered with the State of Alaska verifying the proper use of eight permitted camps by licensed guides.
- The investigator assisted with enforcement efforts between Alaska Wildlife Troopers, US Fish and Wildlife and a Guide who complained of two clients that were being harassed by a local hunter.
- The investigator met with representatives from the State of Alaska Wildlife Enforcement, State of Alaska Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, The Northwest Arctic Borough, and the NANA Regional Corporation on investigations and issues of concern over unlicensed guiding activities were discussed. The general consensus was the investigator's presence has decreased the concerns of wanton waste issues by licensed guides and transporters and continued presence during peak activity time is desired.

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The Division of Corporations, Business and Professional Licensing investigator traveled to the Kotzebue area to investigate concerns of wanton waste and the level of illegal and/or unlicensed activity in GMU 23 jurisdictional to The Big Game Commercial Service Board. Approximately 24 hunters were surveyed to determine what methods were being used to get to and from the field. The investigator also looked into how hunters were harvesting their game animals. Field inspections of transporters and guides were conducted to ensure compliance with hunting laws and minor violations were corrected in the field. Serious violations have been or will be brought before the Big Game Commercial Services Board.

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