

City and Borough of Sitka
VISITOR PLAN STAKEHOLDERS
“Environment” Subcommittee
Greg Dudgeon, Presenter
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Stakeholder Questions

1. Do visitor numbers impact rural status (for subsistence purposes)?
2. Will the visitor industry affect rural status?
3. Does Sitka have enough services/resources for visitor accommodations, and does it (visitor infrastructure) jeopardize rural status?

Background

The 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (Public Law 96-486) requires that rural Alaskans be given priority for subsistence uses of fish and wildlife on Federal public lands. Only residents of rural communities and areas are eligible for the subsistence priority. The Federal Subsistence Board initially determined which Alaska communities were “rural” when the Federal Subsistence Management Program began in 1990. Federal subsistence regulations require that rural/nonrural status be reviewed every 10 years, beginning with the availability of the 2000 census data.

Under Federal subsistence regulations:

- A community with a population below 2,500 is considered rural, unless it possesses significant characteristics of a nonrural nature or, is considered to be socially and economically part of a nonrural area.
- A community with a population of more than 7,000 is considered nonrural, unless it possesses significant characteristics of a rural nature.
- A community with a population above 2,500 but not more than 7,000 will be evaluated to determine its rural/nonrural status. The community characteristics considered in this evaluation may include - but are not limited to - use of fish and wildlife for personal consumption, the diversity and development of the local economy, community infrastructure, transportation, and educational institutions.
- Communities that are economically, socially and communally integrated are grouped for evaluation purposes.

Sitka’s Rural Designation

In spite of its population of nearly 9,000, Sitka retained its rural designation in a decision by the Board in 2005, largely due to current characteristics of the community, including:

- Sitka’s location on an isolated Southeast Alaska island where population growth has been minor over the 1990-2000 census time period (3%, or 247 persons).
- The State of Alaska Joint Boards of Fish and Game, in the late 1980s, and the Federal Subsistence Board, in 1990, determined that Sitka was a rural community for the purposes of subsistence regulations. Public comments and Council recommendations in 2005 provided no evidence that Sitka had assumed a more nonrural character since the Federal Subsistence Management Program’s initial determination of its status.
- Sitka’s geographic isolation contributes to its continued high cost of living. Its residents have been dependent on subsistence harvests to help meet their needs.
- Comprehensive household harvest surveys and other studies conducted by ADF&G’s Division of Subsistence (in 1988 and 1997) demonstrated a strong subsistence orientation for Sitka. This data documents patterns that are consistent with other Alaska subsistence communities (high per capita

- harvest levels, high levels of participation in subsistence harvest and use activities, wide diet breadth, and use of traditional territories).
- Reliance on these resources has appeared to increase with recent changes in the community's economy. Logging-related industries have closed, with the subsequent loss of hundreds of well-paying jobs. Federal government employment opportunities have also declined, due to the reduction of personnel required to manage timber harvest on the Tongass National Forest.

While the Board reviews rural determinations on a 10-year cycle, determinations may be reviewed out-of-cycle in special circumstances. Once the Board makes a determination that a community has changed from rural to nonrural, a waiting period of 5 years is required before the nonrural determination becomes effective.

Community (or area) characteristics considered in evaluating a community's rural or nonrural status include, but are not limited to:

- Personal use of fish and wildlife;
- Development and diversity of the economy;
- Community infrastructure;
- Transportation links; and
- Educational institutions.

Stakeholder Answers

1. Do visitor numbers impact rural status (for subsistence purposes)? **No. Rural/nonrural status designation is dependant on an aggregate of community characteristics, including resident population. Visitation and tourism have no bearing on Board determinations.**
2. Will the visitor industry affect rural status? **Not directly. However, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources emphasized that the rural status of communities is not static, and could change over time, as a community gains or loses population (Senate Report 96-413:233). A combination of potential outcomes from increased visitor industry and related activities including population growth, greater economic diversity, enhanced infrastructure and improved access could lead to Sitka losing its rural designation.**
3. Does Sitka have enough services/resources for visitor accommodations, and does it (visitor infrastructure) jeopardize rural status? **Whether Sitka offers enough services and infrastructure to provide for the levels and types of tourism residents support depends on the respondent. Current information on available visitor accommodations and infrastructure is largely anecdotal. For example, the COB of Sitka has not determined how many short term rentals or bed and breakfast establishments are operating in the community at this time.**

Regarding Federal subsistence, growth in visitor accommodations, services and resources could have a cumulative impact on Sitka's rural designation. As described previously, changes to the current (resident) population and community characteristics that helped Sitka retain its rural status in 2005 have the potential to alter the Federal Subsistence Board's rural designation in the future.

Sources

Janet Cohen, Anthropologist, NPS – Anchorage
Sandy Rabinowitch, Subsistence Manager, NPS – Anchorage
Ken Adkisson, Subsistence Specialist/Anthropologist, NPS – Nome
Jay Nicodemus, Assistant Special Agent in Charge, NMFS – Sitka
Albert Duncan, Special Agent, NMFS - Sitka
Wells Williams, City Planner, COB of Sitka
Greg Dudgeon, Park Superintendent, NPS – Sitka