

Project session: How Do We Build and Sustain Healthy Northern Communities?

Thursday, September 25, 2008

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The four presentations that comprised this session took all of the time given and, as a result, there was no time for discussion. Further, unlike all of the other project groups, this group did not have a second opportunity to meet. As such, the comments contained herein reflect the author's (Audrey Giles) impressions alone.

The speakers in this session were comprised of three employees from Alaska Fish and Game's Division of Subsistence and one private contractor (who has done extensive consultation with this group). As such, the views presented were not diverse in message, though diverse in content. The first presenter helped to frame the Division's work by informing attendees of Alaska's political and legislative environment and the ways in which it has been used to define subsistence and other terms. Interestingly, the Division is staffed primarily by social scientists. In general, employees use surveys and ethnographic research to show where subsistence and non-subsistence areas are located.

The second speaker, Stephen Braund from Stephen R. Braund and Associates, provided detailed information on the ways in which his company collects information concerning subsistence use areas and traditional knowledge. His employees use a combination of mapping (GIS) and interviews to talk to both active harvesters and retired harvesters to produce the information the communities with which he works needs. He noted that it is challenging to map the intensity of usage (for example, not all areas are used equally).

The third speaker, an Economist in the Division of Subsistence, provided information about the methods the Division uses in producing estimates concerning Alaska subsistence harvests: double data entry by two different people; permit system/calendar reporting; and recall surveys. He

stressed the importance of using mean replacements (which are used to assume that those who have not been interviewed are similar to those who have been interviewed) and expansion factors (used to account for households that are not contacted for surveying or fail to return a permit). He also spoke about the 30/70 rule: 30% of households tend to harvest 70% of the resources. Finally, he noted that income was the most difficult variable to estimate.

The final speaker was Division employee/PhD student Davin Holen, who spoke about the dynamic context of cultural and social sustainability of communities in Southwest Alaska. He mentioned that social and cultural changes are happening in the region due to climate change. He argued that the notion of resilience can be applied to subsistence economies, as they – like humans adapt. He provided one community's fishery as an example and noted that subsistence is the primary factor for why people choose to stay in remote communities. He stressed that communities are resilient in the face of change.

While these speakers all spoke to the issue of subsistence, I was surprised that the session had such a narrow focus. The impact that subsistence has on a variety of dimensions of health did not receive sustained attention.