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Alaska Peninsula Communities File Suit to Void Conflicted Fisheries Regulations

Complaint alleges three Board of Fisheries members with undisclosed conflicts cast the deciding votes to restrict the Area M salmon fishery.

ANCHORAGE, Alaska, April 6, 2026 — The Aleutians East Borough, the Native Village of Unga, Area M Seiners Association, and Concerned Area M Fishermen on Friday, April 3, filed suit in Alaska Superior Court against the State of Alaska Board of Fisheries, seeking to void fishing regulations adopted at the Board's February 2026 Alaska Peninsula finfish meeting.

The case, filed in Superior Court in Anchorage (Case No. 3AN-26-05959CI), alleges that the Board's action to adopt five separate regulatory proposals at its February 2026 meeting violates State administrative procedure laws. Part of the violation stems from the Board's mishandling of three Board members' alleged conflicts of interest, which the lawsuit alleges should have prevented those Board members from voting on four of the challenged regulations.

The lawsuit asks the court to overturn changes to five sections of Area M commercial fishing regulations. Proposals 126 and 127, both adopted by a 4–3 vote, would dramatically reduce open fishing time and area for commercial purse seine and gillnet gear in the South Alaska Peninsula. Proposal 141 imposes closures during the post-June fishery when chinook salmon catch exceeds specific thresholds. Proposals 147 and 148 change the maximum allowable net depths for purse seines and gillnets, with those changes set to take effect in 2027. According to the complaint, the combined effect of the five regulations would create "a derby-style fishery that will likely result in increased chum and chinook harvest" — the opposite of their stated conservation goal.

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Area M's commercial salmon fisheries are among the most highly regulated in Alaska. The complaint alleges the Board nonetheless failed to take a hard look at the evidence before adopting the challenged regulations. Under a voluntary adaptive management program in place since 2022, Area M fishermen reduced average annual June chum harvest by 50% compared to the five-year average prior to the program — a 32% reduction against the ten-year prior average. The seine fleet voluntarily stood down an average of 291 hours of fishing time per season. In 2025, the drift fleet joined, standing down 554 hours across 28 vessels and 64 separate stand-down events. The program earned the support of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the Commissioner.

"Area M fishermen built an adaptive management program from the ground up, voluntarily, in cooperation with the Department of Fish and Game, that reduced June chum harvest by 50% compared to our pre-program average. The state's own biologists testified on the record that it was working. The Board heard that testimony and dismantled the program anyway. That is what this lawsuit is about," said Kiley Thompson, President of Area M Seiners Association.

The complaint further alleges that Board member Curtis Chamberlain made a materially false statement on the record when he denied ever having advocated for closing Area M fisheries. According to the complaint, Chamberlain testified before the Alaska Senate Resources Committee in May 2023 in his professional capacity as an attorney for Calista Corporation in support of legislation designed to close Area M to commercial salmon fishing in June. At the Board's 2023 Area M meeting, the complaint alleges Chamberlain called for action to "...leave enough salmon for Yukon commercial fisheries to survive. My family has a permit that isn't worth the paper it's written on." Board member Chamberlain cast the deciding vote on three of the four challenged regulations.

The complaint alleges that six federally recognized tribes in the region formally raised these conflicts in writing to the Board on February 13, 2026. After the Board twice failed to address the ethics issues raised by the Tribes during the Board meeting, they subsequently filed a formal complaint with the Alaska Attorney General's office on February 23, 2026. As of the date of this release, that complaint has gone unanswered for 42 days. Plaintiffs allege the Board's failure to act on these documented conflicts rendered the resulting regulations unlawful under the Alaska Administrative Procedure Act (AS 44.62) and the Alaska Executive Branch Ethics Act (AS 39.52).

Plaintiffs seek a preliminary injunction blocking the regulations from taking effect, a declaratory judgment that the regulations are void, and a permanent injunction against their enforcement.

"We raised these concerns formally, before the meeting began. We went to the Attorney General. We were ignored at every step," said Mayor Alvin Osterback of the Aleutians East Borough. "When the State leaves rural Alaskans with no recourse, the courts are the only option left."

"Our people have fished these waters for more than 9,000 years. We don't make headlines. We don't file lawsuits. Fishing is our way of life and our identity," said John Foster, President of the Native Village of Unga. "The communities of this region are among the most remote in the country. We do not ask for much. But we will not be ignored."

Plaintiffs are represented by Taylor Rose Thompson of the Thompson Law Group (Anchorage, AK) and Beth Baldwin and Eleanor Bohn of Ziontz Chestnut LLP (Seattle, WA).

About Aleutians East Borough: The Aleutians East Borough is a municipality encompassing communities along the Alaska Peninsula and Eastern Aleutian Islands, including Sand Point, King Cove, Cold Bay, False Pass, Akutan, and Nelson Lagoon. Commercial fishing is the economic foundation of the Borough and its municipal budget.

About Native Village of Unga: The Native Village of Unga is a federally recognized Indian tribe headquartered in Sand Point, Alaska. Tribal members and their Unangan ancestors have utilized the local ocean fishery for over 9,000 years for both subsistence and commercial purposes.

About Area M Seiners Association: Area M Seiners Association is a 501(c)(6) non-profit based in Sand Point, Alaska, representing commercial salmon fishermen holding CFEC limited entry permits in the Area M fishery.

About Concerned Area M Fishermen: Concerned Area M Fishermen is a 501(c)(6) non-profit based in Homer, Alaska, representing fishermen holding CFEC limited entry and interim use permits in the Area M salmon fishery.