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Senate committee kills coastal bill

Bill would have given districts another year to submit changes

The chairman of the Alaska Senate Resources Committee killed a bill Wednesday that would have given coastal districts more time to revise their policies for development.

The federal coastal program is the main tool that state and local governments can use to influence federal projects, such as oil and gas development and possibly, in the future, off-shore aquaculture.

"If you want lawsuits, the way to do it is put bad, confusing policies in place. That's where we are heading, I think," said Tom Lohman, with the North Slope Borough, who testified in the Senate Resources Committee on Wednesday.

The state's 27 coastal districts have been caught in the middle of a dispute between state and federal officials over the state's proposed revisions to the program, which drastically reduce the role of the local districts.

Senate Resources Chairman Tom Wagoner, R-Kenai, said Wednesday after setting the bill aside that he believes the 27 coastal districts have been dragging their feet on their revisions, due July 1, and there is no reason to give them any more time.

The bill proposed by Sen. Gary Stevens, R-Kodiak, would have given the districts another year to submit their changes.

Sen. Kim Elton, D-Juneau, disagreed with Wagoner. He said the districts have been put in a fundamentally unfair position.

The coastal districts are being required to revise and submit their new policies even though federal officials haven't approved the state's revisions to the coastal program, he said.

Juneau city officials are worried about the revisions. Despite previous assurances from state officials, Juneau's ability to enforce its wetlands program - which it spent \$250,000 to create - is going to be severely curtailed, said Peter Freer, planning supervisor for the city's planning department.

Under its program, the city is now able to expedite development projects in certain coastal areas of the city. "I'm not sure we'll be able to do that anymore," Freer said.

Three coastal district representatives who testified Wednesday said they need more clarity about the state's revisions. NOAA has objected to a number of the changes, saying they don't comply with federal law.

Randy Bates, who heads the state coastal management program, testified Wednesday in the Resources Committee hearing that the federal objections are "unrelated to how districts build their policies."

He said the state in a few days will propose some changes to the program to address NOAA's objections.

The state hopes to get a response back from NOAA on April 14, according to Bates.

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