**Game Board wolf vote questioned**

BUFFER ZONE: Critics say newest member would benefit.

By [MEGAN HOLLAND](http://www.adn.com/contact/mholland/index.html%20)  
[mholland@adn.com](mailto:%20mholland@adn.com)

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Critics of a controversial Board of Game decision are challenging a key vote that eliminated a wolf protective buffer zone outside Denali National Park and Preserve. They want the tie-breaking vote of the board's newest member tossed because he sells wolf traps and owns a tannery business.

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Wolf-protection advocate Rick Steiner has asked Alaska government officials to invalidate the vote of Al Barrette, a longtime Fairbanks tanner and taxidermist.

"He has had direct financial relationships with wolf trappers and hunters and stands to gain financially by removal of the very small existing buffer," Steiner said. Steiner submitted his challenge to Gov. Sean Parnell, attorney general Dan Sullivan and Fish and Game commissioner Denby Lloyd.

Barrette, reached at his Fairbanks Fur Tannery, said by Steiner's logic, would have to recuse himself from everything before the board. "So would every (board) member with a hunting license," he said.

The board voted 4-3 on March 5 to eliminate the buffer zones in a narrow wedge of state land that juts into the national park's northeastern corner, and the buffer zone along the Parks Highway. Park managers had hoped for an expansion, saying the park's wolf numbers were the lowest they had been in more than 20 years and that the wolves most seen by visitors were under threat.

"My vote was based on laws, boundaries and biology," Barrette said, adding that park authorities could not prove hunting outside the park affected viewership of wolves in the park.

As for his wolf trap business, the Alaskan No. 9 Trap Co., Barrette says he sells traps throughout the United States and Canada. He does not target customers who take wolves around Denali Park.

Every year, about six wolves are trapped in the wider gaming unit that includes the disputed area, known as the wolf townships, according to Fish and Game. There are 7,000 to 11,000 wolves in Alaska, a number that has stayed relatively constant for years, Fish and Game said.

Only the state attorney general could possibly change the outcome of the Board of Game's decision, according to Kevin Saxby, the state's Fish and Game law adviser. A formal challenge would need to be processed under the Alaska Executive Branch Ethics Act, he said. Steiner hasn't followed the proper procedure yet, he said Thursday.

Parnell appointed Barrette in February. He has not been confirmed by the Legislature but is considered an official board member until that happens.

Saxby also says eliminating Barrette's vote would not necessarily result in a reversal of the vote's outcome, as Steiner would want. "It would be one possible result but not the only possible result," he said.

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