

Alaska Politicians to Blow Off Steam at Gun Range

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With about three weeks left in Alaska's legislative session, the pressure is mounting on politicians to get things done. A heated partisan divide on oil tax reform, the state's budget and education in Alaska's Capitol has tempers rising for both Democrats and Republicans.

So what's the best way to ease the tension? Get them all together, and give them each a weapon.

The gun control debate may divide Republicans and Democrats in Washington, but in Juneau, most legislators in both parties are adamant supporters of the Second Amendment. And on Saturday, some of them will head over to the Juneau Gun Club to blow off steam - and reach across the aisle - during this year's "Legislative Shoot."

The annual event, which is put on by the Alaska Correctional Officers Association and also sponsored by the Outdoor Heritage Foundation, pits three-member teams against each other in competitions like trap shooting, pistol shooting and archery.

All levels of experience are welcome, and despite the event's title, the competition isn't limited to the lawmakers. Legislative aides, a handful of people from the executive branch, and family members are all invited to compete or enjoy the festivities.

"It's mainly a really fun event, and it's a great opportunity for everybody to come out and see the club and have a nice breakfast and participate in the event and, you know, just kind of unwind a bit," said Rep. Cathy Munoz, one of the event's organizers in the Legislature.

Munoz said the legislators who represent rural districts are typically very good, but the Juneau Republican noted that Jessie Kiehl, a legislative aide in Sen. Dennis Egan's office, Republican Rep. Paul Seaton, of Homer, and Senate President Charlie Huggins are some of the best shots. Huggins, R-Wasilla, was on the winning team last year.

Participants form their own teams, and many use the event as an opportunity to find common ground with members from the other caucus. Both sides say they don't compete to see which one has the best marksmen.

"The teams are pretty bipartisan," Munoz said. "It's not like an all-Democrat team and an all-Republican team."

Legislators put politics aside to go bowling every Thursday night and have mixed-party teams as well, but the shoot is an especially successful event, said Rep. Chris Tuck.

"It's a good moment to build camaraderie among everyone," said Tuck, D-Anchorage. "It's fun, you get to make fun of each other's shooting."

But Tuck says this year is going to be especially interesting. Since redistricting brought in a handful of freshman legislators eager to participate for the first time, the competition will have plenty of new blood. The veterans aren't sure which newcomers have a shot at the title.

"The variables are going to be high," Tuck said.

One veteran of the event, House Minority Leader Beth Kerttula, can't make this year's shoot but still talked some smack.

"I've outshot a lot of those guys, and they're lucky I'm not coming," the Juneau Democrat joked.