



THE STATE  
of **ALASKA**  
GOVERNOR BILL WALKER

**Citizens' Advisory Commission  
on Federal Areas**

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State Director Bud Cribley  
BLM Alaska State Office  
222 West Seventh Avenue, #13  
Anchorage, AK 99513

Re: Trapping Cabin Authorizations in Alaska

Director Cribley:

I am writing you today to express some concerns regarding the Bureau's current practices for permitting trapping cabins on federal lands in Alaska. The Commission and I are incredibly grateful for members of your staff who have both graciously and generously assisted us in understanding the various regulations and policies and how each is applied, particularly Dave Mushovic and Lenore Heppler. Their efforts and availability to work with us have provided invaluable insights. Unfortunately, our review has brought to light some rather significant shortcomings, and I would sincerely appreciate an opportunity to collaborate on productive solutions to ensure the safety and long-term viability of Alaska's trapping community.

In large part thanks to the Alaska-specific revisions to the BLM-wide cabin policy, as outlined in Internal Memorandum AK-2012-022, most trappers in Alaska can now qualify for a cabin permit owing to more functional commercial user qualifications. While maintaining our long-standing objection to trapping being considered a "commercial" land use, we understand and appreciate that such a designation is necessary to fit within the Bureau's authorization mandate. And while that particular reality may be something worth addressing in the long-term, or be one part of a solution to current issues, there are some more immediate concerns about the practical potential for a trapping cabin to be permitted in the state.

As you know, trapping cabins are, at their essence, a small, warm place in a big, cold place. Efficiently and responsibly running a trapline in the Alaskan winter can be exceptionally challenging. Shortened hours of daylight present limited windows of access, particularly by aircraft. Unpredictable weather patterns can both expose and strand trappers for extended and indeterminate periods of time. Bringing tools, gas and supplies for every conceivable malfunction on each trip can be highly burdensome. Also, as most traplines are remote and necessarily distributed away from other users, problems encountered in the field are usually encountered alone and far from assistance.

Cabins are highly effective at alleviating many of these challenges, particularly those related to safety and logistics. Trappers who fly in to run their 'lines can do so without worrying about waning daylight, which helps facilitate this very low impact method of access. A cabin also provides a base of operations where tools and supplies can be stored and used when needed, where furs can be processed and where a trapper could escape and wait out inclement weather.

This is not about luxury, or simply a matter of convenience. Many Alaskans can tell some great stories about a night spent in a cabin that made all the difference, including ensuring their surviving to tell the story. This established truism is a stark contrast to management needs in other states, making a functional, state-specific policy essential to facilitating land use in Alaska. Unfortunately, there are significant impediments in current policies in effect in Alaska which make obtaining a trapping cabin permit largely unworkable from a practical standpoint.

Recent modifications of the Bureau's manual, particularly regarding rights-of way, have exacerbated previous difficulties in finding all the laws, regulations and internal guidance applicable to the permitting process. There are no fewer than ten critical components to review and understand when considering a permit application, and none are located in the same place. As I mentioned earlier, multiple BLM staff members have helped the Commission to better understand the directives and cross-references that must be brought to bear in the process. The Commission is working on a fact sheet for trappers to review if they have need for a cabin on BLM land, which should help to consolidate agency requirements in a more approachable way.

In drafting this fact sheet, and in assisting a trapper from the Tok area in his consideration of a potential cabin near Joseph Creek in the Fortymile area, three significant hurdles were brought to our attention. Firstly, the content and interplay of the multiple regulations at issue is difficult to understand, even for sophisticated bureaucrats like myself. While our fact sheet may ameliorate some of those difficulties, the ability to make timely updates to it and practical recommendations based on it is frustrated by the fact many authorizations and requirements change or are subject to change, often in ways not consistently applied or widely communicated to the public.

The second and third hurdles – cost recovery and bonding – could be combined under the umbrella issue of “reasonable cost,” but each present unique concerns. For all the known benefits associated with cabin use, it is as expensive as you might expect to construct one in rural areas of Alaska. Add those construction costs to variable annual rental fees, associated permits and overall expenses associated with trapping and it *may* still pencil out, particularly over time. Adding more to this equation, however, starts to beg economic sense.

Staff have indicated that cost recovery is a required component of permitting cabins in Alaska. As it has been explained to us, cost recovery is primarily based on staff time associated with processing a permit application, including time spent navigating applicable federal requirements, like consistency reviews with large, cumbersome land use plans, federal conservation laws and environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act. Respecting the myriad demands on agency staff and funding, responsible and efficient permitting is a valid and essential management obligation to the public. Users have no control over federal salaries, or how efficiently time is spent on an application. Users are already overrun with the increasing size and complexity of environmental reviews, and now they have to directly pay for that escalation?

Where federal law requires permits to use the land, charging applicants the cost of processing those permits sets up a prohibitive regime whereby the land users have to bear deliberative and financial burdens Congress meant to be imposed on the agency, not the users. Most trappers do not have the means or capacity to accommodate this obligation shifting, nor should they. I am aware of no other agency in Alaska, federal or state, that charges all users the true cost of permitting anything. Aside from paying our taxes, land users should not be reduced to revenue streams to cover the heightening costs associated with managing public lands in Alaska.

The matter of bonding all trapping cabins is also a relatively unexpected development causing significant consternation. While the Commission is and has been aware of the Bureau's authorization to request bonds and assurances, we also assumed the authority was employed rather judiciously and depending on the situation. The Commission respects the need to ensure responsible use of the land, including the need to return areas to prior conditions on termination of the encumbrance and the overwhelming prospect of the agency having to take on that duty where a permittee walks away. Even so, preemptively treating every applicant as if they will violate the terms and conditions of their permit is truly unfair. The BLM has multiple enforcement mechanisms for pursuing violations. While those tools will not be as simple as retrieving a bond, this is just another example of agency costs being passed on to every land user, even the *potential* costs, regardless of the circumstances and at the most expensive part of the entire permitting process.

I strongly believe an Alaska-specific cabin policy could not only address the concerns mentioned above but a great many other concerns, as well. Laws and Bureau regulations could be merged and strengthened into a relatable and workable permitting process that could safeguard the public lands and accommodate the needs of public land users. A lenient and articulate cost waiver could preserve affordability for all users and the agency. Options and assurances for reclamation could be finely tailored to the circumstances. A collaborative effort with stakeholders could make this a productive and meaningful tool which reinforces the Bureau's mandate to manage for and balance multiple uses, even providing a framework for addressing similar issues.

I am sure you realize how sympathetic we are to your waning funds and increasing workload, as well as the impact these circumstances have on prioritizing your resources. However, I strongly believe that collaborating on an improved approach to these issues could pay dividends well beyond the time and effort required. Trapping is a fundamental part of our culture, traditions and history as a state. Preserving the safe and responsible use of our public lands for trapping is an investment in our heritage. More than that, this is a genuine opportunity to fulfill the promise to maintain and provide for the Alaska way of life.

I look forward to your response, and to working with you on this and other issues affecting Alaskans and their livelihoods.

Yours faithfully,



Sara Taylor  
Executive Director

cc: Ted Murphy, Associate State Director, BLM  
Kevin Sweeney, Office of Senator Lisa Murkowski  
Elaina Spraker, Office of Senator Dan Sullivan  
Chad Padgett, Office of Congressman Don Young  
Representative Wes Keller, Chairman, Citizens' Advisory Commission on Federal Areas  
Brad Palach, ANILCA Coordinator, Alaska Department of Fish & Game  
Randy Zarnke, President, Alaska Trappers Association