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March 5, 1997

Susan Will  
Bureau of Land Management  
Northern District Office  
1150 University Avenue  
Fairbanks, Alaska 99709-3899

Dear Ms. Will:

The State of Alaska has reviewed the BLM's *Squirrel River Wild and Scenic River Suitability Study, Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), Scoping Draft*, dated 12/9/96. This letter represents the consolidated comments of the state's resource agencies. We appreciate that BLM has taken the extra step in releasing this scoping draft and hope that it leads to a comprehensive draft EIS.

The State's comments address the following question in the BLM transmittal letter:

***Have we adequately described the existing situation and the impacts likely to arise from the various alternatives in Chapters 3 and 4? If not, what would they be?***

We recommend expanding the Chapter 4 discussion of how the existing recreational hunting and fishing activities described in Section 3.2.3 might be affected by the federal subsistence priority under the various alternatives. The current presentation doesn't indicate if conflicts between sport/recreational and subsistence users are currently taking place, or if federal regulation of subsistence activities would significantly reduce or possibly eliminate sport hunting and fishing activities in the river corridor. For example, would federal subsistence management likely lead to more restrictions on moose hunting by non-federally qualified subsistence hunters in the Squirrel River watershed? The implications of pending extension of federal subsistence management into navigable waters also warrant additional discussion and analysis. We recommend that the EIS examine these topics in more detail.

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Page 51. The first full paragraph references BLM's Wild and Scenic Rivers Handbook limits on "new construction of roads, trails or other provisions for motorized travel within the river corridor.... under scenic designation, roads or trails may occasionally bridge the river and could be allowed...." This language should be revised to recognize ANILCA Section 1110(a) provisions concerning access for traditional activities (e.g. "shall" permit, as opposed to "may" permit). In addition, we request reference to the 1984 Alaska Land Use Council "Guidelines for Management of Wild, Scenic and Recreation Rivers in Alaska", of which BLM was a joint author. This document consolidates the Alaska-specific provisions for wild and scenic rivers that deviate from BLM's national guidelines.

Page 85, second paragraph. The third sentence should be deleted. This sentence says that adding another conservation system unit (CSU) to the route of a transportation corridor will not significantly increase the requirements the state must meet under Title XI of ANILCA. Since approval of a transportation corridor under Title XI has not yet been tested, this is not a reasonable assumption. The requirements that may be imposed in a Wild and Scenic River corridor could be significantly different than in other CSUs.

Section 4.5 pages 106-112. This section on impacts from no designation implies the state provides minimal protection for fish and wildlife, and exaggerates potential for restrictions on subsistence use. Any transportation facility built in the area would need to comply with State Title 16 requirements for protection of fisheries, a multitude of other federal and state laws, and would likely be significant enough to require a NEPA process.

Page 110. Regarding subsistence, state ownership would not necessarily result in increased hunting and fishing to the point that harvest by local residents would be impacted. Subsistence uses by rural residents (the only ones qualified under Title VIII of ANILCA) at least in theory would be better protected if the land was retained in federal ownership. The Proposed Action, however, also projects possible impacts on subsistence users associated with increasing recreational use of the corridor (see p.142), and anticipates fall "sport" moose hunting to increase regardless of W&SR designation of the Squirrel River. The state process for protecting the uses by local residents might be more cumbersome but the tools are available. The issue is complicated by pending federal extension of its subsistence management authorities in navigable waters--which is a topic that perhaps should be further discussed.

Despite comments concerning subsistence noted above, the subsistence discussions in this document, including the ANILCA Section 810 analysis, are unusually well-written and informative.

Page 128, Access 5.4.5. In response to question #60, please add reference to ANILCA Section 1110(a), access for traditional activities (e.g. hunting, fishing, trapping, recreation). As written, this paragraph only recognizes access for subsistence purposes under ANILCA Section 811 and Section 1110(b) addressing access to inholdings.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. If you have any questions, please contact me at 907-258-7349.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sally Gibert". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Sally Gibert  
State CSUCoordinator

bcc: Diane Mayer, DGC-Jun  
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