

# STATE OF ALASKA

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**GOVERNOR**

## **ANILCA IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM**

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November 17, 2006

Mr. Robin West  
Refuge Manager  
Kenai National Wildlife Refuge  
Post Office Box 2139  
Soldotna, AK 99669-2139

Dear Mr. West:

The State of Alaska reviewed the October, 2006 Draft Management Plan for the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area within the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. This letter represents the consolidated views of those state agencies with affected or overlapping management authorities and responsibilities in the area.

We recognize the controversial nature of this plan, and the difficulties faced by all those who worked on development of the document. The compressed planning timetable designed to accommodate the Alaska Board of Game's regulatory procedures challenged the ability of state and federal managers to find a solution that meets the needs of the public and supports the purposes of the Refuge. We also recognize the substantial range of professional opinions regarding the relationships between wildlife viewing and hunting. The State agrees with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) that wildlife viewing and other wildlife dependent recreational activities can and should be enhanced within the Skilak area. We generally support the intent of the Preferred Alternative to upgrade and expand facilities and infrastructure as funding opportunities permit. Unfortunately, the Preferred Alternative does not incorporate any new opportunities for hunting as envisioned by the Alaska Board of Game. We consider carefully managed hunting opportunities, among the Refuge System's "big six" wildlife-dependent recreational activities, to be an appropriate part of the mix within the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area.

Of equal or greater importance, the State desires to maintain the integrity of, and appropriate interrelationships between, the authorities and responsibilities of the Service and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G); and by extension, the Alaska Board of Game. The framework for this state/federal relationship is addressed in federal law, regulation, and Service policies – specifically the Refuge Improvement Act, 43 CFR Part 24, and Director's Order 148. In Alaska, this relationship is spelled out in the Master Memorandum of Understanding (MMOU) between the Service and ADF&G that addresses the respective roles and responsibilities, signed in 1982. A joint memo by the

Service Regional Director and ADF&G Commissioner recently recommitted both agencies to the spirit and letter of the MMOU.

Consistent with the MMOU, the State offers to work with the Refuge to develop and implement a final plan for the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area that optimizes opportunities for all wildlife-dependent recreational activities to the maximum extent practical.

In our view, the Board of Game's interest in increasing hunting opportunities in the Skilak area is entirely reasonable and compatible with both wildlife viewing and long-term wildlife conservation. By the same token, we recognize the interests of those desiring to maintain the current management direction, which has been in place for many years.

We request the final plan more specifically address both State and Service hunting-related concerns with the current alternatives in the draft plan. We offer the following options for consideration either independently or in combination, as appropriate, within the framework of the existing planning process and requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act:

- Formal recommendation to the Board to establish a Youth Hunt, with prescribed regulations that require adults to accompany youths. The State already has an age-dependent regulation requiring Hunter Safety Education.
- Formal recommendation to the Board to reduce the 6-month time frame that authorizes firearms for hunting for small game and furbearers within the area to a shorter period of time when most camping and wildlife viewing are not generally occurring.
- Formal recommendation to the Board to restrict the new firearm hunt to grouse, ptarmigan and hare only. (The moose hunt would remain unchanged regardless of alternative.)
- Formal recommendation to the Board to modify their authorization of firearms to further restrict the type of firearm, such as shotguns only.
- Reevaluate the necessity, configuration and size of the various no-firearm discharge zones around existing and proposed facilities, roads, trailheads and parking.
- Delay implementation of any no-firearms discharge zones associated with future facilities until each facility is constructed and operational.
- Retain the existing western boundary of the Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area. The State does not object to the proposed 500-acre boundary extension between the Sterling Highway and the Kenai River. We recommend making a formal proposal to the Board concerning the addition of these uplands to the Skilak Loop Management Area as well as any changes in the regulated take of wildlife within the area.

As you know, the Board of Game filing deadlines are rapidly approaching. If the Service determines a modification of the Board's current intent is desirable, we are willing to

assist in developing a mutually-acceptable proposal, with appropriate justification, for the Board's consideration. If the Service does not propose a modification, the Board's previous decision to allow a six-month small game firearm hunt in the Skilak area becomes effective July, 2007 with a starting date of October 1, 2007.

We also request the final plan clarify that the Refuge will exhaust the Board process before taking independent management action that could set up conflicting state and federal hunting regulations – clearly not in the best interests of the managing agencies or the public.

### **Page-Specific Comments**

Page 15, Vegetation Management. We strongly support the intent of the Vegetation Management direction in the action alternatives for the utilization of habitat management to improve browse for moose. We request the final plan clarify that implementation will be fully linked to the moose population objectives developed by the Service and ADF&G to provide for healthy moose populations as well as opportunities for recreation.

Page 19, Roads. The preferred alternative proposes that the Service acquire the Skilak Loop Road right-of-way from the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF) in order to increase year around maintenance and make improvements. We support the goal of increasing funding for the road and regret that the State is unable to devote extra funds for this purpose in light of other competing maintenance priorities. We question whether direct federal ownership of the right-of-way is a prerequisite to spend federal dollars on the road. We would like to explore this issue more thoroughly. In the meantime, we request the final plan focus on cooperatively exploring all options to increase funding for the road. If right-of-way acquisition is mentioned specifically, we request it be considered an option to achieve the maintenance funding goal, not an end result by itself.

Page 49, Skilak Loop Road. The first paragraph cites average daily traffic figures from DOT/PF. This average daily use represents primarily peak summer use along the short, eastern segment of the road, and cannot be extrapolated to create a year around traffic estimate.

The last sentence in the second paragraph inadvertently implies that DOT/PF sometimes chooses to ignore "intolerable" road conditions. It would be more accurate to report that because the Skilak Road does not provide needed access to any residences or communities, it has a low maintenance priority among other roads on the Kenai Peninsula, especially during the winter. Therefore, DOTPF is often unable to respond to maintenance requests.

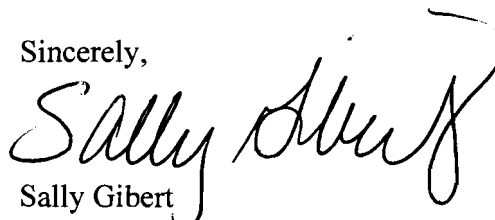
Page 134, Wildlife Viewing. The State disagrees with some of the conclusions in this paragraph. Properly managed hunting with firearms does not diminish overall wildlife populations. In fact in some cases, managed hunting can alter age/sex ratios in ways that

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actually increase wildlife abundance. In addition, we disagree with the characterization of the relationship between firearm hunting and making wildlife more wary. We recognize there can be such a relationship in some species under some circumstances; but it is inaccurate to imply that any hunting of any species at any time of the year will adversely affect the behavior or viewing accessibility of all species year around. We are also concerned about the implication that non-consumptive users would not be safe recreating in areas that are open to hunting. The hunting-related options discussed above are designed to minimize overlap with non-consumptive users and provide reasonable opportunities for all priority wildlife dependent uses.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. We remain available to discuss the issues and options for their resolution.

Sincerely,



Sally Gibert  
ANILCA Program Coordinator