

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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HB 321: State Game Refuge, Sanctuary and Critical Habitat Area

Sponsor Statement

(February 24, 2026, Version 34-LS1257\N)

Alaska's state wildlife refuge program (AKA Special Areas) protects some of the richest and most diverse fish and wildlife habitats found in North America. Encompassing nearly 3.3 million acres within 32 sites, it is the nation's largest state-run refuge program and is of equal acreage contained in our Alaska State Parks network. These rich wildlife areas including refuges, sanctuaries, and critical habitat areas provide abundant opportunities for Alaskans and visitors who engage in a host of activities including hunting, fishing, trapping, subsistence activities, wildlife viewing and photography, nature study, commercial activities, and a variety of general recreational activities such as boating, hiking, camping, and an assortment of winter activities.

The first state-protected area of any sort was created by Alaska's second legislature in 1960 at the Walrus Islands in Bristol Bay. Since that time, Alaskans have developed a world-renowned wildlife refuge system attracting people from around the world and adding significantly to Alaska's economy and lifestyles. HB 321 seeks to provide the Department of Fish and Game and the Boards additional statutory tools necessary for more effective and efficient management of these areas which receive over one million annual visits.

Specifically, HB 321 will correct and adjust refuge boundaries, remove refuge regulatory oversight on private lands including on Native Corporation lands located within refuge boundaries, amend certain refuge jurisdictions to match important habitat boundaries, change "critical habitat areas" to "refuges" to avoid confusion with federal wildlife laws and to provide a uniform purpose statement, restore an original name to one refuge area, change the name of "game" refuges and sanctuaries to "wildlife" refuges and sanctuaries, elevate protections of one of the world's most renowned brown bear viewing site by extending the brown bear hunting closure to lands surrounding the McNeil River sanctuary, remove an interdepartmental fee requirement allowing the department to more economically manage and provide for public uses in refuge areas, allow the department to efficiently manage public uses and public safety within refuges including confirmation of the public's right to carry and use firearms, and to reduce user conflicts and wildlife disturbances in Kachemak Bay.