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Growing Alaska Through Responsible Resource Development

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February 21, 2014

Representatives Eric Feige and Dan Saddler
Co-chairs, House Resources Committee
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, AK 99801

Re: House Bill 79, Susitna State Forest

Dear Representatives Feige and Saddler:

The Resource Development Council (RDC) is writing to support House Bill 79, which would create the Susitna State Forest on 763,200 acres of state land west of the Parks Highway.

RDC is a statewide, non-profit, membership-funded organization founded in 1975. The RDC membership is comprised of individuals and companies from Alaska's oil and gas, mining, timber, tourism, and fisheries industries, as well as Alaska Native corporations, local communities, organized labor, and industry support firms. RDC's purpose is to link these diverse interests together to encourage a strong, diversified private sector in Alaska and expand the state's economic base through the responsible development of our natural resources.

The Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) currently manages 9.5 million acres of state land in the Matanuska and Susitna Valleys. The bill would establish the Susitna State Forest from land classified for forestry – lands managed by DNR for timber harvest and other multiple uses. Remaining land is designated for other uses, including land sales, recreation, water resources, agriculture, and fish and wildlife habitat. Over 3.1 million acres is protected in legislatively-designated state parks, refuges, and public use areas.

The establishment of the Susitna State Forest would ensure that large tracts of land would remain available for long-term forest management that maximizes the sustainable supply of timber from the state timber base; develops access and encourages a broad range of uses on state forest land, including motorized uses; and provides economic and recreational opportunities to communities, businesses, and residents.

It would allow the Division of Forestry to more actively manage lands and vegetation to promote a variety of forest ages, which in turn would maximize the sustainable supply of timber from the state timber base and provide for more diverse and healthy habitats for wildlife. In addition, active management would also help reduce wildfire risk.

The Division of Forestry would manage the state forest for a long-term supply of timber to help meet growing regional demand for state timber sales and personal use firewood harvesting. The state forest would also help meet increasing demand for logs, chips, and biomass feedstock for commercial, public school, residential space heating, and wood pellet manufacturing. Local processors depend on a stable long-term supply of state timber for their raw materials. In fact, a dependable long-term supply is required to justify major private investment in processing and manufacturing facilities or expansion of such facilities.

An enhanced long-term timber supply would not only help support the forest products industry, it would create new jobs, and provide important economic opportunities to local communities, businesses, and residents.

There has been some concern expressed by local residents and user groups that the proposed forest may block public access and traditional uses. RDC would not be supporting this bill if that were indeed the case. RDC has a long history of fighting for and preserving access to both federal and state land for the responsible development of natural resources, economic development, job creation, recreation, and traditional uses, including motorized uses. We would be writing in opposition to the bill if it were yet another impediment to access.

DNR is serious about developing access to a newly-designated state forest in the region, including an all-season road to the Little-Su, as well as a permanent bridge crossing. Clearly, the forest would be open for public use and enhance access, wildlife habitat management and harvest, and recreational activities.

Public access on state forests is typically greater than on other state land because active timber management requires expansion of the road system. Access is a major focus of the state forest planning process as plans provide detailed guidance on road design, construction, and maintenance. In fact, DNR has a demonstrated track record of providing access in state forests, with design and management tailored to the resource management needs of each forest.

It is important to keep in mind that HB 79 would establish a new state forest from state lands presently designated for forest management. The Susitna State Forest would be managed consistent with the management intent under the current Susitna Matanuska and the Southeast Susitna Area Plans. Alaska's Forest Resources Practices Act would apply to management activities on the forest and is designed to protect both fish habitat and water quality.

If established, Susitna would be the fourth state forest in Alaska after the Haines, Tanana, and Southeast State forests. These land units have demonstrated that legislatively-designated forests are a desirable means of ensuring timberlands are available for management while allowing access for other uses.

RDC supports HB 79 and believes the proposed state forest will be of much benefit to the local economy – creating and sustaining much needed jobs in the forest products industry while providing many other opportunities, including public access that doesn't exist today for other multiple uses. We urge the committee to pass HB 79.

Sincerely,



Carl Portman
Deputy Director

cc: Chris Maisch, State Forester
Rep. Lynn Gattis
Rep. Shelley Hughes
Rep. Wes Keller
Rep. Mark Neuman
Rep. Bill Stoltze
Sen. Mike Dunleavy
Sen. Charlie Huggins