



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Alaska Region
240 West 5th Avenue, Room 114
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

IN REPLY REFER TO:

February 28, 2014

Honorable Cathy Giessel
Alaska State Senate
State Capitol Room 427
Juneau AK, 99801

Dear Senator Giessel:

We have received Senate Joint Resolution 15, and understand through a conversation with Rep. Dan Saddler on February 27, 2014, that the resolution will be considered by the House Resources Committee on March 3, 2014. Recent media reports with inaccurate information regarding Beringia associated with the resolution also concern us. We would like to provide your office and others in the Alaska Legislature with comments on several provisions of the resolution. Our comments are organized by topic and note specific page and line numbers in the Senate Joint Resolution.

Participation by the State of Alaska

In several sections (Page 1, Lines 11-13; Page 2, Lines 1-2; Page 3, Lines 23-27; Page 5, Lines 6-7) the resolution urges participation by the Governor and other parts of the Executive Branch in discussions related to an agreement with Russia.

We welcome that participation, and note for the record that the National Park Service has already enjoyed substantial involvement from the Governor's Office and others in his administration over a period of several years. Specific examples include participation by the Lieutenant Governor in a panel discussion at our semi-annual Beringia Days Conference in Nome in 2011, and participation by Kip Knudsen and Mark Robbins of the Office of the Governor in subsequent meetings on the subject. Mr. Robbins and others in the administration have also been frequent recipients of email updates by the National Park Service as the international diplomatic process moved forward.

Additionally, in November 2012, the State of Alaska provided comments on a draft of the non-binding Memorandum of Understanding with Russia as well as the associated action plan. That input is associated with the request of September 2012, which is noted on Page 3, Line 23.

While the Service has never had the opportunity to brief you or others in the Alaska State Senate on the 23-year-old Beringia Heritage Program and the range of work conducted with many Alaska communities and organizations, we would be pleased to do so at your convenience.

Geographic Scope

On Page 2, Lines 22-25, the resolution notes that the National Park Service defines Beringia as a broad area stretching from the Lena River to the Mackenzie River. That is the geographer's common definition of Beringia, but does not accurately reflect the location of work we have done since the Beringia program began more than 20 years ago.

The as-yet-unsigned non-binding Memorandum of Understanding between Russia and the United States focuses on the Bering Strait Region, and specifically the Beringia National Park in Russia and Bering Land Bridge National Preserve and Cape Krusenstern National Monument in Alaska.

The cooperative work that the two nations have conducted for more than two decades has focused on that much smaller area, while including valuable participation by residents of Bering Strait communities such as Nome, Shishmaref and Kotzebue. The type of work and the distribution of federal funding that has been extended to the University of Alaska, Native Corporations and community organizations is detailed on the Service's Beringia web site, www.nps.gov/akso/beringia.

Page 2, Lines 26-28, asserts that the National Park Service has attempted to expand the scope of its influence beyond Alaska park boundaries. We note for the record that Congress has made several provisions for our work outside of unit boundaries of the National Park System. Some are described in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (P.L. 96-487) while others are described in other federal legislation.

Page 3, Lines 7-9, states that "...for many years, the National Park Service has pursued a program to establish a Beringia International Park, a world heritage site, and a marine biosphere reserve that would include land and water in Alaska and the Russian Far East." The statement is generally correct so far as an international park is concerned; that was the recommendation of the 1991 study conducted by the National Park Service and representatives of the then-Soviet Union. The National Park Service is not proposing a world heritage site or a marine biosphere reserve. The Memorandum of Understanding does not establish an international park, but does describe in detail the intentions of the two nations.

Scope of Effects

Page 4, Lines 4-8, asserts that the current MOU effort would lead to international designations and reduce the sovereignty of the State of Alaska and the United States. We would refer members of the Legislature to the language of the Memorandum of Understanding.

Section 8 of the Memorandum of Understanding says, "This legally nonbinding Memorandum is not an international agreement and does not create any rights or obligations under international law."

Section 10 says "Nothing in this Memorandum abrogates or in any way infringes upon the sovereign rights and authorities of each of the Governments and their Participants to manage lands within its respective borders in accordance with its country's laws, or upon the rights or third parties."

The National Park Service appreciates the opportunity to provide information to the Alaska Legislature, and looks forward to continuing our work with the State of Alaska on our mutual interests. Please feel free to contact me directly at 907-644-3512 if you would like additional information about the Beringia program or any of our work in Alaska.

Sincerely,

John Quinley
Associate Regional Director, Communications and Partnerships

Cc: Alaska Governor Sean Parnell
Rep. Dan Saddler (c/o Trevor Fulton)
Pat Pourchot, United States Department of the Interior