

April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2026

TO: Senate Finance Committee

RE: SB 208-AGRICULTURAL LAND LEASES (Support)

My name is Robert Gibson, I am a farmer and rancher in the Homer area focused on a cow and calf operation providing premium organic and wholistically grown customized beef for residents on the Kenai Peninsula and beyond.

I testified today (04/27/2026) on the issue of land lease management and in support of Senate Bill 208: Agricultural Land Leases. This letter is a follow to my testimony.

Three or four years ago I realized it was necessary to start a search for more agricultural land since my cattle herd was growing. I searched through an online map system. My options as I saw it were to find land owned by the federal government, primarily though BLM, through State land and local government-owned or administered property such as Kenai Peninsula Borough (KPB) land. I also investigated Native Tribal landownership and private ownership.

I found a piece of land located only a few miles from my current land inventory where I grazed cattle. That land was owned and administered by the KPB so I contacted their land management office to convey my interest in leasing this parcel for agricultural purposes. At the time, Mr. Charlie Pierce was KPB mayor and he said the borough needed a statement of how I would like to use the land along with a development plan, an application and a fee of \$500--before bringing it up for approval by the assembly.

After the assembly approved my proposal, I provided the requirement as well of KPB general liability insurance to protect the public from roaming cattle and protecting the cattle from being killed on highways by motorist. After the plan and lease were approved, I started preparing the never-before cultivated land which needed a lot of attention to be able to produce agricultural products--I worked on this for the first year.

Year 2 of the lease, I received notice from The Great Divide Insurance Co, my general liability provider, that they were cancelling my insurance on the grounds that the underwriter located in the lower 48 was no longer interested in doing business in Alaska. So, my insurance required by KPB was cancelled resulting in the termination of my KPB land lease. During the remainder of that year, I diligently looked for another insurance carrier with FOUR insurance brokers helping with me, but none were successful.

Coming into Year 3, the land began falling back into its wild status. Noxious and poisonous grass and weeds along with tree saplings started to reclaim the land. At the beginning I was able, to my surprise, to find an insurance carrier right here locally in Homer. I returned to negotiations with the Borough presenting them with the fact that I now had access to insurance coverage but was met with the response that the Borough had changed their minds and mayor Micciche was not interested in developing that parcel for agriculture.

Adjacent to this 300-acre parcel was another much larger land parcel consisting of 4000 acres of hay fields and ranch land for grazing. In Year 1, when I first found the 300 acres, I was aware of this larger parcel and submitted to KPB land management a letter of intent stating that when this 4000 acres which currently at that time was held with a leaseholder with about 3 years left on the lease, I stated my intention to lease that land which was received by the Borough and recorded by the clerk.

This year (2026), that land lease was prematurely terminated for reasons unknown to me. I talked to the previous lease holder, and he said my lease is cancelled so you can have it. I then returned to KPB land management in person expressing my intention to lease that land. I had a meeting with director of land management Robert Ruffner. He said he would bring up the request with the mayor and get back with me.

After about a week, Mr. Ruffner contacted me to let me know that Mayor Micciche was not interested in leasing the land--neither the 300-acre parcel or my request of this larger parcel of 4000 acres. Again, I was disappointed with how the borough managed the land resources. I said to myself, there's got to be a way to solve this problem I went back to the land management director and suggested that they could consider leasing that land to me not in its entirety, but the section of the land that had overgrown hay fields. Again, he said he would talk to the mayor about it and get back with me. I never heard back from him for 3 weeks--when I finally got ahold of him the mayor was still not interested in the development of more agricultural property.

I visited the office in person a 3<sup>rd</sup> time and suggested if they didn't want to lease the old parcel or a section of the parcel, to at least let me cut the hay with a short commitment for this year alone. The KPB is currently experiencing a serious shortage of forage for Alaskan life stock prompting farmers and ranchers to import hay from other states, and this comes at an extensive, unmanageable cost to the farmer which ultimately reflects in food prices. This is a situation that must be changed so Alaska can be self-sustaining.

Again, the response to my request for opportunity to harvest the crop was denied. It's clear to me that the current Mayor is against agricultural development on the KPB. In summary, it is important for me to get prompt responses back from the borough since agricultural requires a lot of extraordinary preparation due to our short growing season. What frustrates me is the fact that I get no detailed or general explanation why these land parcels or why the borough is against these traditional agricultural lands.

My efforts restoring these traditional agricultural land parcels have been greatly supported by NRCS (National Resources Conservation Services) who in the past helped me to evaluate the profitability of these land parcels.

I would like to give a shout-out to Senator Bjorkman who I hope will remember me for the time he served on the assembly of the Kenai Peninsula Borough. Senator Bjorkman supported my efforts in trying to provide food security for the state of Alaska. Thank you, Senator—it was greatly appreciated.

Here is another agricultural issue that concerns me: When the state conveys ownership of state land, it is stipulated by law that this land cannot be subdivided unless the resulting parcels after subdivision each contain a minimum of 40 acres. If a landowner of

61 acres, as I described today in my testimony, decides for wants or needs to subdivide a piece of the parcel, it cannot be done. I have personal knowledge of many landowners, some of them small farmers, that have a need to subdivide portions of their property for various reasons. Many farmers have children and an interest in subdividing land for children interest in agriculture, but according to current/present land laws it cannot be done. Because the subdivision will not produce 40-acre parcels. Therefore, the land will just sit to no avail other than for the benefit of wildlife. Many of these land parcels designated as agricultural land are not suitable for agricultural purposes. I have studied the map of Alaska and the inventory of Alaska state land carefully and have found that many of the so-called agricultural designated properties are swamp lands, densely forested, or undesignated wetlands.

Alaskan legislators need to review these issues to effectively implement these promising programs in a way that can practically benefit Alaskans.

Because of my vast experience and background, I'm also interested in sharing my knowledge which I have offered to Rep. Sarah Vance in support of HB 353: Lease/Sale of Agricultural Land

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Here is a little information about my background and experience:

I grew up a farm boy and learned agricultural business from grandparents and great grandparents. I have over 75 years in agricultural, ranching, livestock and forestry management.

I owned and managed a large dairy cow operation in Sweden producing 1000s of gallons of milk daily on 4000 hectares of land and was a produce farmer in the Caribbean Island importing to the United States

In the mid 1970's I was invited by Russian government to help with forestry administration in Siberia. (IRKUTS) where I managed large tracks of forest land.

Decorated Navy Seal deployed in Europe  
Degrees: Doctor of Naturopathy and Plastic Surgery Technology

In the early 1980's leased land for cattle operations from the late comedian/actor Mr. Bob Hope while simultaneously planting 1000's of oak trees in the hills of California.

Involved in the planning and reintroduction of Bison (Woodland Buffalo) to Interior Alaska.