

STATE OF ALASKA

CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMISSION ON FEDERAL AREAS

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June 7, 2010

Richard Voss
Refuge Manager
Arctic National Wildlife Refuge
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Fairbanks, AK 99701-6237

Dear Mr. Voss:

The Citizens' Advisory Commission on Federal Areas has considered the Notice of Intent to revise the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and prepare an environmental impact statement. We note that this planning process also will include a review of refuge rivers for potential recommendation for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System and review of refuge lands for potential recommendation for inclusion within the National Wilderness Preservation System. We appreciate the opportunity to offer the following scoping comments for consideration by the refuge planning team.

Public Involvement

The Commission thanks you for providing the briefing and answering questions about the CCP revision at our June 2nd meeting in Fairbanks. We are encouraged by the extensive public outreach effort made by you and your staff during this initial phase of the plan revision. We are particularly pleased that the public meetings did not simply follow the "open house" format, but included the opportunity for the public to provide testimony as part of the planning record. Also, giving attendees the option of presenting testimony in an open forum or by meeting one on one with a member of the refuge staff is commendable. As you know, the Arctic Refuge receives more attention than other unit in the refuge system, making public involvement a critical part of this plan revision. We are confident that you will offer the same level of opportunities for public involvement in each phase of the process. The Commission is available to assist with future public outreach efforts or to again distribute information through our newsletter if that would be helpful.

Wilderness Review

The Commission is strongly opposed to the development of new recommendations for designation of additional wilderness within the Arctic Refuge. The question of additional

wilderness designations for all national wildlife refuge units in Alaska was previously addressed in studies mandated by ANILCA Section 1317. The study for the Arctic Refuge was conducted in conjunction with the development of the current CCP. The November 1988 Record of Decision for the CCP and Final Environmental Impact Statement selected a plan alternative that represented the existing management situation and did not include a wilderness proposal.

The Commission supports retention of this decision, primarily because the 8.0 million acres of designated wilderness already within the Arctic Refuge is sufficient. Maintaining the remainder of the refuge in a non-wilderness status will allow the Service a measure of flexibility to respond to changing circumstances or management needs. Existing statutory and regulatory authorities provide sufficient protections for refuge values and purposes without reducing management options by imposing an additional layer of restrictions on the Service, cooperating agencies such as the Alaska Department of Fish and Game or the public.

The restrictions imposed by wilderness designation in Alaska are slightly less restrictive because of the special provisions of ANILCA. In spite of those special provisions, however, it is our considered opinion that each Federal land management agency has adopted wilderness policies that are more restrictive than was intended by Congress. These policies can unnecessarily restrict public activities and use, even those of a transitory nature that have no impact to refuge resources.

During the CCP revision process we would encourage the Service to look at how these policies are applied to the existing wilderness area in the refuge. The CCP should contain a table or summary of those activities and uses that are allowed and those that are restricted within designated wilderness. Included in the CCP should be a discussion of the applicable Service policies, regulations and statutes which guide wilderness management. Plan alternatives and refuge management policies should also allow for special circumstances where restrictions on the use of mechanized or power equipment can be waived for medical reasons or to accommodate handicapped individuals.

1002 Area

Although the ANILCA Section 1317 recommendations were never submitted to Congress by the Secretary, Congress has considered the question of wilderness in the 1002 area of the Arctic Refuge many times. There have been bills proposed in both the House and the Senate in each of the last 11 Congresses. At least 22 bills proposing wilderness designation for the 1002 Area have been introduced. Several other bills also contained wilderness proposals for lands within the Arctic Refuge. To our knowledge, none of these bills has advanced beyond committee. Given this and the controversial nature of wilderness designation in Alaska overall, the Commission would suggest that the time and effort in conducting wilderness studies in the 1002 area (Coastal Plain Wilderness Review Units) as well as the Brooks Range and Porcupine Plateau Wilderness Review Units could be better spent on other important management issues.

Wild and Scenic River Studies

The Commission is also opposed to studies and/or recommendations for additional wild and scenic rivers within the Arctic Refuge. As we have stated above on the wilderness study issue, existing statutory and regulatory authorities are more than adequate to protect all rivers and

waters within the refuge. In fact, one of the purposes of the refuge is to ensure “water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge.” We see no need to conduct wild and scenic river studies that will divert staff resources from other management issues.

Access

Under the current CCP and regulations, there are no restrictions for the Arctic Refuge on public access via snowmachine, motorboat, airplane or nonmotorized surface transportation. Even though there have been increases in public use and visitation, Commission members who are knowledgeable about the refuge see no need for any restrictions at this time. While we are aware that restrictions may be implemented only through the closure process and subject to the criteria found in the regulations at 50 CFR §36.42, the findings in the environmental impact statement and the revised CCP will heavily influence any decisions on future proposals for public access restrictions. This issue should be thoroughly and objectively examined as part of this revision.

Visitor Use Survey

We recently learned that implementation of the revised visitor use survey will be delayed until after the plan revision is completed. The Service should reconsider this decision and release the visitor survey for this season so that this information can be included in the CCP revision.

Cabins

Guidance for cabin management in the current CCP was developed prior to the promulgation of regulations for the use and construction of cabins within national wildlife refuges in Alaska. At the time the CCP was adopted, cabins were managed under a regional policy that was not uniformly applied and which was not consistent with the provisions of ANILCA. Formal cabin regulations were not adopted until 1994.

The Service estimated in the original CCP that there were 37 cabins on refuge lands used for trapping or other customary and traditional subsistence uses. According to the CCP, 25 of those were used to “some degree” and 12 were not being actively used. Twelve of the cabins were under special use permit. The CCP (pg. 210) states: “The Service eventually will place all of the cabins on refuge lands under permit, or declare them abandoned after researching their pattern of use.”

The CCP goes on to say that a detailed inventory of cabins and their uses on refuge lands will be conducted. It also says that before declaring a cabin abandoned, the Service will research its pattern of use and that all cabins determined to be abandoned will be disposed of in accordance with Service policy.

We have no specific information on the present status of cabins or cabin permits on the Arctic Refuge. We do understand that there are fewer cabins being used or under permit than when the original CCP was adopted. The revised CCP should include the results of the cabin inventory and the current status of cabins on the Arctic Refuge. The original CCP states that the Service has no plans for constructing or designating new public use cabins, but points out that cabins may be constructed or designated if necessary for refuge management and or public health and safety. We suggest inclusion of at least one alternative that would allow either the designation of existing cabins or construction of new cabins for public use in the non-wilderness portions of the

refuge. Consistent with ANILCA Section 1315(d), the need for public use cabins or shelters for public health and safety purposes within the designated wilderness portion of the refuge should also be considered in the alternatives. There is a significant segment of the public that considers public use cabins within conservation system units as both appropriate and desirable.

Again, the Commission appreciates the opportunity to provide these comments. We look forward to working with the refuge staff on the development of this plan revision and the environmental impact statement. We would welcome the opportunity to participate in planning team meetings along with other State personnel, if appropriate and if you think that participation would be helpful. When convenient, we also encourage you to provide updates that can be included in our monthly newsletter. Please contact us if you have questions or if we can clarify any of our comments.

Sincerely,



Stan Leaphart
Executive Director