

Good afternoon, my name is Nick Steen. I represent the Ruffed Grouse Society and myself. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on SB 28.

The president of the South Central Alaska Chapter of The Ruffed Grouse Society, Dr. Michael Fuller, recently contacted several members of the legislature expressing opposition to SB 28 as written. We enthusiastically support the concept of a Susitna Forest. The accelerated development in the Anchorage Bowl and the Matanuska/Susitna Valleys is transforming the character of our back yard into an urban sprawl. A forest would preserve public land and resources for effective forest management that promotes economic use of our forest resources, enhances wildlife habitat close to our major population areas and maintains a large block of land for public recreation. Our concern is the fractured nature of the boundaries as proposed. After reconsideration, Dr. Fuller has requested that I express his and the Chapters conditional support for SB 28.

Our Chapter has been working, during the development of the Susitna-Matanuska Area Plan (SMAP), to establish a State Forest on all unencumbered state land west of the Susitna River, between the Beluga River and the south boundary of the Denali State and National Park draining into the Susitna River. We opposed the SMAP plan as developed, since it designated a series of non-contiguous land parcels for forestry management interspersed with land designated as mining or for disposal as recreation and agriculture. That hampers effective forest management and restricts multiple use and public access. SB 28 perpetuates this approach by identifying only the land designated for forest management by the SMAP plan as the Susitna Forest. SB 28 does not address the issues of access for effective forest management, uniform regulations for total area management, boundary identification for recreational use, and loss of public access for recreational purposes by transferring land to private ownership. However, there is insufficient time in this legislative session to make the major changes needed to fix all these issues. Therefore, since we feel getting the Forest established is critical, we would like to support the current bill, but ask your help making it more effective by considering modifications to the boundaries in future legislation.

We would also like to request that the legislature direct the Department of Natural Resources to suspend implementation of any land disposal programs in the SMAP west of the Susitna River until our concerns are addressed.

SB 28
TESTAMONY IN SUPPORT OF ~~HB 29~~

On behalf of the members of South Central Alaska Chapter of the Ruffed Grouse Society and myself, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this committee. We would like to express our conditional support for ~~HB 29~~^{SB 28}. As currently written, the bill is comprised of fourteen noncontiguous parcels of land. We urge you to expand the boundaries to include all unencumbered State land, draining into Cook Inlet, between Beluga Lake and the Southern boundaries of Denali National and State Parks.

We support a forest designation for this area because we feel it is important to keep this land in public ownership for the recreational use of our ever expanding population centers of South Central, to guarantee continued space for wildlife and to retain the character of the land most of us came to Alaska to experience. In our opinion a state forest is the least restrictive land designation that can be managed for everyone's benefit with the exception of those wishing to see land transferred to private ownership. As the population in South Central increases, the recreational demand can no longer be met by transfer of land to private ownership.

Historically, there have been numerous land disposal programs though out the area under consideration. If you review a land ownership map of the area, you will see much of the waterfront land, lakes and rivers (the easy access points), has already been ceded to private ownership. These private inholdings will make access for timber extraction extremely difficult. Interspersing additional transfers of land to private ownership within the land designated for forest management makes no sense at all. Under the recently enacted "Susitna-Matanuska Area Plan" (SMAP), some of the areas we request be designated as state forest are slated for land disposal for cabin sites or agriculture. Transfer of land into private ownership as envisioned by the drafter's of our state constitution is laudable; however, as stated by the late Governor Hammond, it is the "ultimate lockup". Private ownership denies public use of that specific parcel, frequently controls access to adjacent public lands and with the NIMBY attitude, influences management of public lands within view of that land. This NIMBY attitude impacts the State's ability to manage timber resources,

wildlife resources and mining activities. We don't believe those who drafted our constitution envisioned the growth we've experienced.

A forest designation for this entire area, even though we recognize it is not all productive timber land, will provide uniform management guidelines throughout the area. Multiple land designations lead to conflicting use regulations. This causes confusion on the part of the users, unintentional violation of regulations or outright contempt and disregard for those regulations. A forestry designation is, in our opinion, the least controlling land use pattern possible and will afford future generations the greatest opportunity to "experience" Alaska as those of us who have been here a day or two have.

If in the future, it is determined additional Wal Mart parking lots or McDonald's golden arches are a higher priority, the forest designation can be modified to accommodate the change. Whereas, returning private land to public ownership is difficult, time consuming and cost prohibitive.

In summation, to our knowledge, this is the last remaining large parcel of state land in South Central that can be set aside for public use and enjoyment. Effective management of timber resources enhances wildlife populations, such as moose, ruffed grouse and a wide variety of song birds, creates an industry utilizing a renewable resource, that improves the economic basis of our community while supporting the demand for recreation areas to hunt, fish, trap, snow machine, hike, and otherwise enjoy the out of doors. We recommend this bill be passed, but expanded as outlined.

South Central Alaska Chapter, The Ruffed Grouse Society

Presented by Nick Steen