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Senate Finance Committee
Alaska State Legislature

Members of the Committee:

I am writing to comment on HB 72, the proposed State FY16 operating budget, now under consideration by your committee. Specifically, I am urging this committee to restore funding for the operation of the Citizens' Advisory Commission on Federal Areas (CACFA). I am also asking you to fully fund the ANILCA Program and the Public Access Assertion and Defense (PAAD) Unit. All of these programs are within the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. Each of these programs has a distinctive mission, but work cooperatively and in a complementary fashion that protects the interest of the State of Alaska and its citizens. Contrary to what some think their efforts are neither duplicative nor redundant.

In the interest of full disclosure, I served as staff to the original CACFA from August 1982 until it ceased operations in July 1999. Following its reauthorization, I served as CACFA's executive director from July 2008 until August 2014.

The Commission is currently very ably and enthusiastically staffed by Executive Director Sara Taylor and her assistant, Karrie Improte. After some 23 years of experience with CACFA, I can honestly say the current slate of members is the most involved and dedicated group ever to serve the State of Alaska and Alaskans through CACFA. They are a tremendous asset to this state and need your continued support.

I fully appreciate the fiscal crisis facing our State and that savings must be found where possible. However, I believe that the relatively small amount that would be saved by defunding CACFA, the ANILCA program and the PAAD Unit would result in significant costs to Alaska and Alaskans through the loss of access to and uses of natural resources on Federal public lands in the state.

One has only to look at the actions and proposals by the current federal administration for examples of where the losses have already occurred. These include: the seriously flawed management plan for the National Petroleum Reserve Alaska; the proposal for wilderness designation of the 1002 Area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; new policy directions for managing the Tongass and Chugach National Forests; rejection of a land exchange that would have allowed the construction of an emergency access road to the residents of King Cove; decisions to maintain outdated withdrawals on hundreds of thousands of acres of BLM managed lands; and recent actions by the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to preempt State regulation of fish and game within national parks and wildlife refuges resulting in the loss of hunting opportunity for subsistence and sport hunters throughout the state; and policy and regulatory changes by the BLM and Army Corps of Engineers that will close down many small placer miners. While this list is disheartening, without the efforts of CACFA, the ANILCA Program and the PAAD Unit, it would be longer and more damaging.

Promises were made in the Statehood Act and ANILCA contains many compromises and guarantees. The federal government too often take no notice of these promises and guarantees. The final two years of the current federal administration will be critical for Alaska. The State must continue to closely monitor the federal land management agencies and their activities and work harder than ever to ensure that they honor the promises and guarantees. Because of the knowledge, experience and dedication of staff and members, CACFA, the ANILCA Program and the PAAD Unit are the State's best tools to do that. All of these programs are extremely important to Alaska's interests and I strongly urge your continued support for funding their work. Thank you.

Stan Leaphart