

791 Redpoll Ln  
Fairbanks, AK 99712  
June 7, 2010

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Arctic NWR – Sharon Seim  
101 12<sup>th</sup> Ave. Rm 236  
Fairbanks, AK 99701

re: Scoping Comments for Revision of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statements

These comments are offered on behalf of the national office of Wilderness Watch as well as its Alaska Chapter. Wilderness Watch is a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to education and advocacy for protection and proper stewardship of our Nation's National Wilderness Preservation System and the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

As we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of establishment of the Arctic Refuge and also embark on revision of its Comprehensive Conservation Plan, we must recognize this historic opportunity to assure that this treasured landscape and all its unique values, will in fact be protected and maintained in its wild condition. We support the decision to include a review of all Refuge lands for Wilderness designation according to the Wilderness Act of 1964 as a part of this plan. The Service must also address its responsibilities for appropriate wilderness stewardship and revise this plan in a manner that will correct current deficiencies, and prescribe actions aimed at restoring and preserving wilderness character.

Our specific comments, concerns and recommendations are presented below following the outline provided in the planning booklet.

**a) What is most important to you about the Arctic Refuge, its future, and the draft goals?**

The Arctic Refuge is one of the world's last remaining great wild places where nature continues to exist on its own evolutionary trajectory, with relatively little intervention by human kind. This has not gone unnoticed by the American people who recognize the Refuge as a symbol of wildness, and freedom from human controls, an authentic connection to our past and a guiding light for the future. Some have characterized the Refuge as “our geography of hope” in that we need such places that inspire and inform us in our search for sustained existence on Planet Earth. Because of its great biological diversity, size and remoteness, the wilderness values of the Arctic Refuge are unparalleled. Stewardship standards and practices for this priceless landscape, therefore, should be the model for the entire National Wilderness Preservation System. The revised CCP must become the framework for achieving the very best standards for wilderness stewardship.

For the most part, the draft goals are an excellent guide for addressing stewardship challenges and ultimately fulfilling Refuge purposes. Goal 8, however, which proposes a range of management actions to include “active management of species and habitats” contradicts other goals such as Goal 3 which states: “ecological processes are allowed to shape the environment, essentially free of intent to alter or manipulate the natural order.” To fulfill the ultimate intent for the Refuge as stated by Olaus

Murie: “...a small part of the Planet that is left alone,” we recommend that Goal 8 be changed to read: Effects of climate change on Refuge resources are evaluated through research and monitoring, and are considered when making management decisions.

**b) What should the Refuge staff do, or avoid doing, to best meet Refuge purposes (including wildlife, wilderness, recreation, natural diversity, subsistence, international treaties, water)?**

Wildlife: Refuge staff should continue to monitor population status and habitat of key species, in particular those species subject to human harvest (moose, caribou, Dall sheep, musk ox, 3 species of bear, wolves, wolverine, lynx, and other furbearers). Accurate and reliable harvest data should be collected on an annual basis. Effects of hunting, non-consumptive recreation and other human activities including climate change on various species and habitats should also be evaluated.. Results of such monitoring and evaluation should guide management decisions that assure resource protection.

To preserve ecological integrity and other wilderness values, wildlife surveys, management studies, scientific investigations and research must be conducted in the least intrusive manner possible. Techniques such as remote sensing, DNA analysis, and simple “on the ground” observations should be considered over more disruptive methods.

Wilderness: Refuge staff should exercise restraint in all that they do within designated Wilderness. This means that only those actions that are the minimum required to administer the Refuge as Wilderness are allowed. Mere convenience should not be a factor in deciding what action is the minimum required. Restraint should be exercised to the point that actions that are not necessary for administration of Wilderness are not performed. The Refuge Manager has a special responsibility to set the example for appropriate agency restraint in Wilderness, and make sure that staff understand the requirements and that they comply accordingly.

In Wilderness, structures and installations should be prohibited. Currently existing structures such as the unsightly cluster of buildings at Peters Lake should be removed. Other trash and debris should be removed and sites cleaned up. Crashed and abandoned aircraft should be removed using the least disruptive methods consistent with Wilderness Act requirements. Physical features in the Refuge that are currently nameless should remain unnamed . The agency should not propose or support the naming of features in the Arctic Refuge. Archeological and cultural resources should be left in their natural context unless threatened by loss.

Recreation: The collection and analysis of public use information from air taxi operators, commercial recreation and hunting guides should continue. The Service should remain focused on providing opportunities for solitude, challenge, authentic adventure, exploration and discovery. To maintain the sense of exploration, mystery, and the unknown, the Service should not produce materials that feature special attractions. It should not develop materials recommending campsites, routes, river crossings etc. that domesticate the experience and lessen the spirit of adventure, self-reliance, and independence. Visitor independence, freedom and self-reliance should be respected to the extent that basic protection of wilderness qualities allow. The agency should not attempt to make the area “safe” or assume responsibilities for the visitor. In all types of recreation management, agency presence should be unobtrusive, subtle, and and low profile as possible.

Refuge staff should continue to provide and encourage leave-no-trace information for recreational visitors and subsistence users as well. Information that educates the public about the natural history and physical qualities of the Refuge can enrich the appreciation of visitors without interfering with

their opportunity to experience the Refuge as a natural landscape should be readily available. The agency should require the highest standards of sportsmanship and fair-chase for hunting in the Refuge.

Natural Diversity: The Service, refuge manager and refuge staff must recognize that protecting and maintaining natural diversity, ecological processes, and biological integrity of the Arctic Refuge is an over-arching principle and purpose for the Refuge. This concept was central in the historic vision of the founders of the Refuge and has been reinforced through ANILCA purposes and the Refuge Improvement Act, which directs that biological integrity, diversity and environmental health be protected relative to the Refuges specific ecological characteristics. This means that the Arctic Refuge's unique naturalness, wildness and undisturbed condition be preserved and maintained.

The Arctic Refuge's remoteness, large size and intact ecosystems are unique in the entire National Wildlife System and provides a model for what wild nature is and how it functions when left alone. Manipulation of species and their habitats are directly incompatible with the natural diversity requirements and must not be allowed in the Refuge. Programs such as the State of Alaska's "intensive management" which seek to reduce predators in favor of game species violate Refuge purposes as well as Service policy and legal mandates for biological integrity, diversity and environmental health. Recent research has shown that human harvest practices which focus on individual segments of populations have strong selective influences on phenotypic characteristics and have long term ecological and evolutionary consequences. The revised plan should specify that study be conducted to determine what effect various harvest activities such as trophy hunting may be having on natural diversity in the Refuge.

Subsistence: The undisturbed condition of the Arctic Refuge ecosystems have sustained indigenous peoples living within the Refuge for thousands of years. The ANILCA refuge purpose to provide opportunities for subsistence, first of all requires protection of these life supporting ecosystems. Refuge staff must continually evaluate all proposed activities and uses in the Refuge to determine their potential impact on subsistence resources and uses. Management decisions must be based on such evaluations to assure that subsistence opportunities are protected. Refuge staff should continue to develop positive relations with subsistence users through frequent communication and information sharing.

International Treaties: Fulfillment of international treaties and agreements with regard to fish, wildlife and their habitats is a purpose of the Refuge, and must be integrated into various components of the revised CCP. Refuge staff should coordinate with international organizations and partners concerning the requirements of the treaties (migratory birds, polar bears, caribou, Yukon River salmon etc) that pertain to Arctic Refuge. Protection of polar bear denning habitat, including access to and from the sea environment is a requirement which must be met on the Refuge. Likewise, the Refuge must protect: sensitive habitats such as calving, nursery, insect relief and migration habitats of the Porcupine Caribou herd; spawning and migration habitats for migratory salmon of the Yukon River system; and nesting, and staging habitats for migratory birds. To fulfill these international requirements it is essential that the undisturbed condition of the Refuges ecosystems are protected and maintained.

Water: ANILCA purposes require that to the maximum extent water quality and quantity are maintained to achieve conservation of fish, wildlife and their habitats in their natural diversity. To fulfill this purpose the Service must continue to assess and monitor water resources in the Refuge. It must be prepared to assert water rights for Refuge purposes in cases where development activities may jeopardize water availability to fish and wildlife in the Refuge. Documentation of water requirements from watersheds that may be partially outside Refuge boundaries should be a priority for the Service.

The revised plan should also recognize the potential influences of climate change which might reduce water resources needed for fish and wildlife in the Refuge, and take such changes into account when asserting water rights and in making other management decisions.

**Describe any issues, opportunities, or conflicts (now or in the future) you think this plan should address and how the plan can best deal with these issues/conflicts**

Wilderness stewardship: preserving, maintaining and restoring wilderness character:

Section 4 (b) of the Wilderness Act requires that “...each agency administering any area designated as wilderness shall be responsible for preserving the wilderness character of that area and shall so administer such area for such other purposes for which it may have been established as also to preserve its wilderness character.” This requirement begins upon enactment of legislation creating Wilderness, which in the case of the Arctic Refuge was December 2, 1980.

Starting in the early 1980's, public use in the Refuge began to dramatically increase by several fold above 1980 levels. Most of the use is concentrated on a few river corridors that rapidly became popular for float trips. In these areas there has been crowding, camp site impacts, human waste issues, loss of solitude and a general degradation of wilderness character. Currently there are no regulations in place to limit the number of commercial river guides, and no rules to allocate opportunities on the crowded rivers. Continued incremental public use and associated activities threatens wilderness quality and the ecological integrity of the Refuge.

To address currently impaired wilderness character in areas of the Refuge where there is excessive public use, the revised plan must identify this situation as an priority issue and describe how it will be addressed. Components of a recreation use plan should include: objectives to be achieved, standards and indicators for measuring use and changes, monitoring protocols and schedules that can determine if standards are being met, thresholds at which management actions would be invoked, and description of the specific management actions that would be taken to achieve objectives. A recreation use plan should consider all available and pertinent information such as seasonality of use, number, location and condition of campsites and their relationship to sensitive wildlife and habitat along the river corridor. If use limits are invoked, the plan must take into account the possibility of displacement of use to other vulnerable areas, and include measures to prevent excessive use elsewhere in the Refuge. The Service should consider limiting river launches to prevent or reduce groups from encountering each other while on the river, and to prevent crowding at put in and take out locations. It should also determine if human waste should be hauled out from rivers that have the most use. Limitations on the number of commercial guide operations, air taxis and outfitters that are permitted to operate in the Refuge must be established as well. Development of any recreation management plan must include an appropriate public involvement process and conclude with final regulations necessary to implement the plan.

Establishment of a commercial free zone (as provided for in the Service Wilderness Stewardship Policy 601 FW 2 E) and aircraft closure for the Firth – Mancha Research Natural Area should be implemented in the plan. Together these measures would provide further protection for this special area. It would allow for opportunities for visitor to hike into the area from aircraft landing zones outside the area, and avoid encounters with low flying airplanes and parked airplanes. The plan should also study the need for such zones in other areas of the Refuge.

Impacts from aircraft landings on sensitive tundra surfaces:

During the 1980's, the landing of airplanes on sensitive tundra vegetation began to increase and expand to many new areas, resulting in damage to vegetation, soil erosion, visual impacts and degradation of wilderness character. The use of airplanes, motorboats, and snow machines for access within the Arctic Refuge is allowed by Section 1110 (a) of ANILCA, "*subject to reasonable regulations by the Secretary to protect the natural and other values ...*" Currently there are no such regulations in place for the Arctic Refuge and there are no limits on the number of air taxis that are permitted to operate in the Refuge.

The revised plan should require a thorough examination of this problem and develop appropriate regulations as authorized by ANILCA. Regulations should be designed to prevent further development of new landing sites on sensitive tundra, and prescribe which existing sites should be closed to further use to allow damaged areas to recover. Provisions for enforcement of regulations should also included. Appropriate public notice and involvement as required by ANILCA will also be necessary.

#### Recent increases non-local hunters in the Refuge:

The over-all number of hunters and the reported hunter harvest data as presented on the Arctic Refuge planning website (Public Use poster) show substantial increases over past levels. A significant aspect of the increase is related to recent activity by outfitters operating in the Refuge from the Happy Valley and Galbraith Lake airports that are located on the Dalton Highway.

Limits should be placed on the number of outfitters that are allowed to operate in the Refuge and permits for outfitters should specify areas of operation so that hunter distribution is managed to prevent concentrations and conflicts in any part of the Refuge. Consideration must be given to potential impacts to Refuge resources, subsistence users and other visitors. Accurate reporting by outfitters and the hunters that they transport must be a requirement in permit conditions. Failure to comply should be grounds to revoke the permits. The revised plan should include an assessment of what level and type of hunting activity is compatible with natural diversity, biological integrity, and environmental health purposes. Natural diversity purposes may not be met by the current maximum yield goals of State hunting regulations. Goals for maintaining natural age and sex composition in wildlife populations should be developed and hunt regulations be implemented to meet these goals. The plan should also consider establishment of commercial free zones as authorized by the Service's Wilderness Stewardship Policy (610 FW 2 E) as a method of reducing pressure on Refuge resources and to resolve conflicts between various user groups.

#### Increased recreational use of Refuge lands in the vicinity of the Dalton Highway:

Information presented in the Public Use poster (see CCP website) suggests a significant increase in visitor use of the Atigun Gorge area of the Refuge. Other lands in the Refuge adjacent to the Dalton Highway may also have increasing use for recreation.

This issue is very similar to that outlined under "Wilderness stewardship" and should be addressed in a similar manner. Develop a recreational use plan with objectives, standards and indicators, monitoring and evaluation, action thresholds, management actions and regulations to implement the plan. Limits may need to be set for number of permitted commercial guide operators, group size, and number of groups entering confined spaces such as Atigun Gorge at any given time period. Leave no trace education and practices are helpful, but the success of these measures can ultimately be insufficient limits are not established.

Potential impacts associated with motorized recreation and access in the Refuge if current State restrictions are removed for the Dalton Highway corridor:

Legislation was recently introduced in the Alaska Legislature which would remove current restrictions on the use of snow machines within the 5 mile corridor along the Dalton Highway. Similar legislation was also introduced which would have removed the restriction on the use of all-terrain vehicles in the Dalton Highway corridor. If the State restriction is removed, it is certain that there will be increased motorized activity on the adjacent Refuge lands which would result in greater hunter harvest of Refuge wildlife as well as disturbance to sensitive wildlife populations, and impacts on vegetation and soils. This may also result in impacts to local subsistence opportunities.

Refuge purposes including wilderness, wildlife and natural diversity require that the Service be prepared to respond in a manner which assures that resources and values are protected and maintained if current State restrictions are removed in the Dalton Highway corridor. Because wildlife of the north slope are extremely sensitive and vulnerable to disturbance by snow machines and off road vehicles, and that the tundra vegetation and soils are easily damaged, closure may be the only option to protect Refuge purposes. The revised plan should be pro-active in prohibiting the use of ATV's on Refuge lands. To prevent impacts from snow machine use, it should evaluate options for establishment of non-motorized use areas for "walk in" hunting only on Refuge lands adjacent to the Dalton Highway. Such areas would be similar to the State's closed use areas on other road systems. Such areas must be large enough and boundaries configured so that enforcement of illegal entry is feasible. Additional regulations for area and seasonal closures of snow machine use over a broader area of the Refuge may also be necessary.

Climate Change:

Rapidly changing climate, especially in the arctic, poses many significant challenges to Refuge wildlife, habitats, subsistence users and visitors. It also presents challenges for wilderness stewardship, and science programs permitted in the Refuge. Thinning and melting of the Arctic ice pack will increase shipping and tour cruises along the Refuge coastline. Impacts from fuel spills and other marine pollution and increased tourist visits may result. Changes in temperature and precipitation as well as other weather patterns will likely alter habitats and wildlife ecology. Climate change may increase the possibility of the spread of non-indigenous species.

The plan should recognize the special value of the undisturbed ecosystems of the Arctic Refuge and their role in understanding the cumulative effects of human developments and climate change in the Arctic region. Today, the value of an area such as the Arctic Refuge is greater than ever due to expansion of development elsewhere in the arctic and the increasing speed of climate change. The value of this large, un-fragmented landscape can not be over-stated with respect to dampening the effects of climate change. The Arctic Refuge with its unprecedented diversity, large size, isolation and ecological integrity offer great capability for maintaining ecosystem resiliency and providing options for species adaptation to a rapidly changing climate. The Service should not attempt to actively maintain current conditions, but instead, allow natural processes and species to adapt. The effects of other human related influences, and stresses must be minimized through strong resource protection to allow adaptation processes to fully function.

In order to realize its maximum value as a scientific control for understanding the effects of climate change in the Arctic, the Refuge's undisturbed, and un-manipulated condition must be protected and

maintained. Natural ecological processes must be allowed to continue unfettered from any human actions aimed at “desired” results. To assure the control concept, scientific activities that are associated with research and monitoring of climate change in the Refuge must remain unobtrusive, avoid disturbance of wildlife, and not involve habitat manipulation. The introduction of species not native to the Refuge, in response to climate change, should not be allowed. Native species, such as polar bears and caribou, need the undisturbed conditions of the Refuge now, more than ever, as they face the double jeopardy of development impacts and climate change on other parts of their range that may be beyond the Refuge boundaries.

The plan should be pro-active in protecting the integrity of the Refuge from impacts associated with increased shipping and cruise ship use of the North West Passage as the polar ice pack continues to melt. For example, strict prohibition of the use of helicopters to transport tourists from cruise ships into the Refuge should be implemented before problems develop. Access to the Refuge from cruise ships via inflatable boats must be carefully regulated according to season and location to prevent impacts to nesting birds on barrier islands as well as in other sensitive areas where wildlife may be impacted.

Actions to prevent introduction of non indigenous invasive species, which may become a greater threat due to climate change, should be implemented through cooperative efforts with air taxi operators, guides and visitors as well as with neighboring land managers, especially along the Dalton Highway.

#### Offshore oil exploration and development:

Development of existing oil leases on both State and Federal offshore lands as well as from new leasing programs in the future could have serious influences and impacts to Refuge resources.

The CCP should acknowledge the reality that although the Refuge is closed to oil and gas development, the effects of such development in the offshore (State and Federal) waters will have effects on Refuge resources. It should identify strategies to reduce or deal with impacts from potential offshore development. Consequently the plan should continue the prohibition on the use of any Refuge lands to support offshore oil and gas exploration, development or production. The staging of equipment, materials and other infrastructure for offshore activities on Refuge lands must be prohibited.

The revised plan should identify the entire coast of the Arctic Refuge as an environmentally sensitive area. Refuge staff should be active participants in oil spill contingency planning and other inter-agency programs dealing with the impacts of offshore oil and gas activities. Conservation strategies for coastal fish, shorebirds and waterfowl, polar bears and caribou that use the coastal zone of the Refuge should be developed with full participation of Refuge staff.

#### Need for greater effort to remove trash, and abandoned objects from the Refuge:

The Arctic Refuge is a relatively open landscape where abandoned trash is visible over a long distance. Due to environmental conditions in the arctic, trash and abandoned objects persist over a very long time. Due to its large size and difficult logistics, clean up and removal of accumulated debris are challenging in the Refuge. There is also a backlog of crashed and abandoned aircraft in the Refuge which are more visible than other trash and more difficult to remove.

The revised CCP should establish a plan to identify and remove trash, abandoned aircraft and other items from the Refuge. This plan should identify measures to prevent future trash accumulation.

Cooperative work should continue with air taxi pilots who report locations of trash and volunteer to remove items. Volunteer programs to remove trash should be encouraged. The Service should also develop an operational plan to remove remnants of the abandoned cat train that is located near the Canada border. This need not involve enormous logistical capabilities, but instead use conventional means to dismantle heavy items so that they can be hauled out in pieces by medium sized aircraft equipped with skis during winter.

**e) Do you have any information that could contribute to our Wilderness or Wild and Scenic River reviews?**

We believe the Service has full authority in ANILCA Section 304 (g) and Section 1317 (a), as well as by its Refuge Planning Policy (602 FW 1.2) to conduct wilderness and wild and scenic river reviews as a part of this CCP process. Complete and thorough reviews should be done. The previous CCP did not include the "1002" area in its wilderness review and therefore, did not fulfill this requirement.

Furthermore, the criteria used to recommend wilderness during the previous CCP process was found to be overly restrictive (GAO/RCED-89-155). The original establishing order (PLO 2214) for the Arctic National Wildlife Range stated the purpose: "*to preserve unique wildlife, wilderness and recreational values.*" Thus the intent was clear from the beginning that wilderness was a central purpose for the area. Since that time with passage of stronger legal protection for wilderness values in the Wilderness Act of 1964, it is now most appropriate to consider and recommend that other lands within the Refuge that currently are not designated as Wilderness be so designated. This is especially true for the 1002 coastal plain which is the only part of the original Wildlife Range that was not designated Wilderness by ANILCA.

**Conclusion:**

Due to its vast size, remoteness, and diversity of ecologically significant landscapes and wildlife, the Arctic Refuge is an irreplaceable national treasure. Preserving these qualities both from incremental changes brought about through recreational visitation, and development interests or from industrial exploitation, is a great challenge that must be addressed by the revised plan. We encourage the people of the Fish and Wildlife Service who are involved in developing this plan, from the planning staff to the highest officials in Washington DC, to do their very best in producing a plan that preserves the unique qualities and values of the Arctic Refuge by establishing a standard of wilderness stewardship that becomes the model for the entire National Wilderness Preservation System and achieves the vision of the Arctic Refuge founders.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments.

Sincerely,

Fran Mauer  
Wilderness Watch