Testimony of Ricky Gease
Executive Director
Kenai River Sportfishing Association

Before the U.S. Senate Committee on
Energy and Natural Resources

May 31, 2016

Thank you Chairman Murkowski and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify on the challenges and impacts of federal regulations and wildfire management on outdoor recreation, hunting and fishing opportunities, and tourism on public lands on the Kenai Peninsula.

Whereas federal lands comprise about two-thirds of the lands on the Kenai Peninsula, federal agencies and regulations have a big impact. In the short time here I want to cover three topics and their impacts on access and opportunity: wilderness, active vs. passive management, and funding restrictions.

Wilderness: First, I support the concept of wilderness areas on federal lands, as I think there is value in having a mosaic of land use designations from an ecological perspective. However, I do not think there is value in having an inflexible structure that ties the hands of the land management decision making process, so much so that it discourages wise choices. Let me provide two examples:

1. **Cooper Landing Bypass:** The issue to build a highway bypass around Cooper Landing has been around for more than 40 years. It has been controversial, yet there does seem to be light at the end of the tunnel – unfortunately that light looks like is an oncoming train.

   The bypass has had two objectives – allow highway traffic to move safely and at highway speeds around Cooper Landing, and to move highway traffic away from the Kenai River.

What then is the oncoming train wreck? The preferred alternative by the State DOT is the most expensive alternative, builds another bridge across the Kenai River, fails to move highway traffic away from the banks of the river, does not mitigate high accident areas, and utterly disrupts culturally sensitive areas.

So after 40 years, why spend an additional $50 million, put the river at continuing risk of large scale environmental damage, and plow through culturally sensitive lands of Alaska Native heritage?

Because DOT, both on the federal and state level, want no part of working through the process of a land exchange that involves wilderness designation. 80 acres of a rock mountain side in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge has a wilderness designation, at the starting point of the "Top Shelf" route that would safely bypass the whole of the Kenai River, avoid culturally sensitive land, bypass Cooper Landing, and come in at $50 million less cost.

And though the Russian River Lands Act passed by Congress allows for land exchanges in the area, no one wants to go through the seemingly futility of working through that regulatory framework. Even though proposed lands for the exchange are much more ecologically important for brown bear and king salmon habitat. We will forego being smart, and wise, and strategic, just to avoid dumb and inflexible regulations.

I will talk about fire management in a minute, but if this preferred alternative I call the "G-String" route (more expensive, skimpier, less protection) is eventually built, and a major fire erupts on the central Kenai Peninsula, and federal emergency fire management crews on the eastern peninsula are stuck on the Sterling Highway in Cooper Landing for hours during the height of the tourism season because of the bottleneck bypass design, how's that going to look as a sterling example of smart government?

2. **Wilderness "study" area of western Prince William Sound:** This area has been under study as a wilderness designation for about two decades.

Western Prince William Sound is important for outdoor recreation, hunting and fishing, and tourism. Because of the ongoing "study" there can be no development, no infrastructure improvements, such as public use cabins built in the region that would improve access and accessibility of this area for visitors. While it may be a romantic notion that structures like public use cabins obstruct the true wilderness experience, they do provide a safe and secure structure for visitors to experience the wilderness. My firsthand experience from being a park ranger at Kenai Fjords National Park showed me that public use cabins in remote areas on federal lands improves the visitor experience. Twenty years is not a timely manner to conclude on a study on wilderness designation. It is time for Rapunzel to let down her golden hair.

Active vs. Passive Management: A funny TV commercial – a bank has an armed robbery, people hit the floor, panic erupts, and the distraught bank customers ask the security officer to do something – he replies – "oh, I am not a security guard, I am only a security monitor. I only advise you when a robbery is taking place." After a short pause, he informs them "A robbery is taking place." Two examples highlight the issues with de facto passive management.

1. **Fire Management:** If and when the greater Kenai / Soldotna area burns to the ground in a catastrophic fire, more than a few people here will be thinking "A robbery is taking place." Fire is an integral part of the ecology on the Kenai Peninsula. We are willing to spend unlimited resources on fire suppression and control *once* a fire starts, but we are unwilling to implement proactive fire management plans *before* a fire begins. The only reason our community did not face catastrophic fire damage in the billions of dollars a couple of years ago was the strategic placement of a no nonsense fire line south of Funny River road. Without that head start fire break to fight the fire that eventually burned close to 200,000 acres, mostly on federal lands, most likely it would have swept through our communities like a freight train.

   What is our current protection plan to the north and east of the communities of Sterling, Soldotna, Kenai and Nikiski? What controlled

burns are occurring now on federal lands? What large scale fire breaks are located on federal lands? Not much.

The interface between the federal lands in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and the surrounding state and private lands is interesting. It seems as if the onus of fire protection is on non-federal entities disproportionately than on federal managers. Not that federal fire personnel don't see the importance of our community safety, but lack of adequate funding for proactive fire management and an unwillingness to locate adequate fire buffer zones on federal lands is heading us for an eventual large scale disaster.

2. **Predator Control:** No issue in Alaska highlights the differences between active and passive management on federal lands than predator control. The leave no trace wilderness philosophy has crept into the federal perspective on predator management – and now has become thou shall not kill predators. Traditional wildlife philosophy sets ranges for both predators and prey species in game management. The population based goals are to ensure the sustainability of both predator and prey populations, and to provide harvestable surpluses for hunting. In Alaska hunting provides an invaluable food source for many households, increasing basic food security for many families. Whether for subsistence or sport hunting, access to harvestable surpluses of animals is a foundational aspect of life for many.

   It is safe to say no federal agency in Alaska is a dynamic proponent of the traditional wildlife management tool of active predator control. Examples abound: from the predator control issue of wolves on Unimak Island, to the Federal "BORG – resistance is futile" response to Alaska Native / rural Alaskans claims that predator control for bears, wolves and sea otters is a customary and traditional tool long used to prevent the spread of predator pits, or the most recent attempt by NPS and USFWS to impose hunting restrictions and bans through federal agency regulations instead of federal or state game boards.

Hunting and trapping, for all animals whether predators or prey, has a historical place in wildlife management in Alaska, and should include federal lands, now and into the future. These activities have long held an important place in the pantheon of outdoor recreation and tourism on the Kenai Peninsula.

Funding Restrictions: With the varied mosaic of land ownership on the Kenai Peninsula, with its mix of federal, state and private lands, funding for basic infrastructure is key to maintaining a healthy economy and healthy ecosystems.

For the most part, federal agencies do a very good job of cooperating and partnering with state, municipal, tribal and private entities, in particular for fisheries and fish habitat. Examples of effective partnerships include the USFWS and ADFG Cost Share program, which has allowed one third of private property owners on the Kenai River to protect, restore and enhance riparian fish habitat along the Kenai River. The Kenai Peninsula Fish Habitat Partnership, the Don Gilman River Center and the Kenai River Special Management Area are other examples of effective partnerships between federal, state, municipal, tribal and private entities.

However, there is one federal regulatory restriction that greatly restricts the effectiveness of partnerships for fisheries, in particular fisheries research on salmon. That is the restriction on federal funds for research projects through the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund. PCSRF regulations now require funding to be limited only to the study of salmon stocks listed under the Endangered Species Act. This regulatory restriction, added just a few years back, has effectively blocked further salmon research in Alaska with PCSRF monies, the largest such source of federal salmon research money available.

Salmon populations throughout the North Pacific rise and fall in cyclical boom and bust fashion, following periodic changes in ocean productivity. It just makes sense to research salmon during all parts of the boom and bust cycles, so that we can come to understand all the variables involved in the population dynamics through the years, decades and centuries.

Early-run king salmon fishing on the Kenai River has been closed for four years. Gillnets as a subsistence gear for king salmon is prohibited once again on the Kuskokwim River. Commercial and subsistence harvests of kings on the Yukon are

fading from memory. We have a statewide king salmon crisis, and other species are also showing signs of distress, such as sockeye salmon (second year in the row that third year ocean fish show little to no growth), halibut (rate of growth declines by one half in the last decade) and seabirds (winter die offs of the iconic common murres in the Gulf of Alaska).

No one can state that there is not some sort of ocean dynamic in play in the North Pacific that is greatly distressing Alaska salmon populations. Access to research funds through the PCSRF would go a long way towards finding out the underlying reasons to this time of poor ocean production for salmon and other species. ESA listings for salmon stocks brings about as much flexibility as wilderness designations. People in Alaska are loathe to go forward with any such designation for salmon populations in the state. However, lacking an ESA designation does not mean that salmon, in particular king salmon, are not in need of help.

Lost economic opportunity for recreational fishing, specifically for king salmon and halibut in Cook Inlet, are on the magnitude of tens of millions of dollars. Throw in lost opportunity in our subsistence, personal use and commercial fisheries, here and statewide, you have untold losses. But these losses are not enough to override the regulatory requirement for an ESA listing to trigger funding for salmon research. Again, how is that a reflection of smart and responsive government?

In summary, federal regulations are a necessary component to well managed federal lands. But at times they are also an unnecessary roadblock to smart government, where providing access and opportunity for outdoor recreation, hunting and fishing, and tourism are on par with environmental protections. With a few tweaks (none controversial) on how we view wilderness, active vs. passive management, and funding restrictions, we can be a lot further down the road of ensuring both healthy economic activity in tandem with necessary ecosystem protections for the Kenai Peninsula and elsewhere in Alaska.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee today on this topic.