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CONTACT: [Robert Dillon](mailto:Robert.Dillon@blm.gov) 202.224.6977
[Michael Tadeo](mailto:Michael.Tadeo@blm.gov) 202.224.5810

Sen. Murkowski Comments on Proposed Withdrawal of Lands in Fortymile Mining District

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, recently submitted comments to the Bureau of Management (BLM) on its proposal to prohibit mining activity on 685,000 acres within Interior Alaska’s 2.1 million-acre Fortymile mining district. BLM’s planned withdrawal is part of its draft “Eastern Interior Resource Management and Environmental Impact Statement.”

“After reviewing the 1,267-page document released by BLM, and speaking with a number of Alaskans who stand to be affected by it, I am highly concerned by the agency’s proposal to permanently close a significant portion of the Fortymile subunit,” Murkowski wrote to BLM’s Fairbanks office on March 3.

BLM has proposed designating 685,000 acres within the Fortymile mining district as an “Area of Critical Environmental Concern” (ACEC) under the revised management plan for the region covering Interior Alaska. BLM claims the withdrawal is necessary to protect habitat for local wildlife, even though it has successfully coexisted with local mineral production for decades.

Murkowski said that while she does not oppose maintaining the Fortymile Wild and Scenic River Corridor set aside by Congress in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), she believes the new withdrawal area conflicts with promises made to Alaskans and would harm the state’s economy.

“I object to the scope of the mineral entry closure envisioned by BLM,” Murkowski wrote to BLM. “This new designation violates ANILCA and would negatively impact Alaskans, who have already faced repeated resource-related restrictions from the federal government in recent years.”

According to BLM, the Eastern Interior Planning Area generated 11.5 million troy ounces of gold through 2007. The Alaska Department of Natural Resources reports that the eastern area, mostly the Fortymile mining district, produced more than 33,000 ounces in 2010 alone.

“If the BLM proceeds with its current preferred alternative and does not allow mineral exploration and development on the nearly 700,000 acres in its proposed ACEC designation

within the Fortymile subunit, Alaskans will never know the extent of the mineral resource located there and will never be able to benefit from the minerals contained in the area,” Murkowski wrote.

Murkowski, chairman of the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said BLM’s plan comes at a time when the state of Alaska’s government is facing a \$3.5 billion budget deficit, and looking at all possibilities to promote economic growth and generate new revenues. She noted that it also comes just after the Interior Department’s actions to limit future oil and gas production in northern Alaska and right as the state faces significant regulatory impacts from a number of new, pending, or expected federal rules and regulations.

“It is accordingly unacceptable to allow a significant opportunity for increased mineral extraction to be curtailed,” Murkowski wrote. “It is truly not in keeping with the commitments made to Alaskans 35 years ago for future development in this area to be so dramatically limited. The proposed closures will prevent any future assessment of minerals, any new mineral entry, and thus represent the very type of land withdrawal barred by Section 1326 of ANILCA without congressional ratification.”

Murkowski asked BLM to eliminate completely or at least greatly reduce the size of its proposed ACEC withdrawal, to consult with Fortymile miners about the management of their region, and to significantly reduce – not increase – the regulatory burden being imposed on placer miners.

Murkowski’s comments to BLM are available on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee’s [website](#).

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