Testimony of **Ted H. Spraker** to the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources at a Field Hearing in Kenai, Alaska.

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Representing Safari Club International, Alaska

Good morning Senator Murkowski and members of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. And to those that have not visited our state, welcome to the great State of Alaska.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide insights on federal issues in Alaska.

My name is Ted Spraker, and I am a 42 year resident of which 38 years I have lived on the Kenai Peninsula, in the nearby town of Soldotna. I was fortunate to have an exciting career as a wildlife biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) for 28 years, having spent 24 of those here on the Kenai as the Area Wildlife Biologist. After retiring in 2002, I was appointed by Senator Murkowski's father, Governor Frank Murkowski, to the Alaska Board of Game (BOG). I am currently severing my fifth term, and I am the chairman. This morning, as a long time member, I will only be representing the interest of Safari Club International as I testify to some of the local concerns related to declining wildlife populations, restrictions to access and the lack of protection from wildfires. My primary focus will be a brief history of moose subpopulations on the northern portion of the peninsula, in Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (KNWR).

In 1931, the Alaska Game Commission recommended establishment of a moose sanctuary of approximately 1,230 square miles, in the northwestern part of the Kenai Peninsula, today known as Game Management Unit 15A. The giant Kenai moose were renowned by hunters in the early 1900s that traveled from various parts of the world in hopes of harvesting one of these magnificent animals.

The Reorganization Act of 1940 merged the Bureau of Fisheries and the Bureau of Biological Service to form the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Ira Gabrielson, Director of Fish and Wildlife, supported a moose refuge at the same time the Army requested to use this area as a bombing practice area. Fortunately, Gabrielson persuaded the Army to select an alternate area. On December 16, 1941 President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order establishing the Kenai National Moose Range and commissioning the Alaska Game Commission to manage hunting and trapping. The Kenai National Moose Range was established to ensure the perpetuation of the giant Kenai moose, other fish and wildlife, scenic and recreational resources. Over the years, the Service fought incessantly to protect the Kenai National Moose Range by formulating tough standards where strong pressures from the oil industry and its allies attempted to force compromises. They were also the leaders in developing and implementing techniques to enhance habitat to benefit moose, and a variety of other species that depend on early seral stages of forest regrowth. This leadership role was halted in 1976 when the FWS changed their policies from a proactive agency to a more passive management approach.

The abstract from a peer reviewed paper written by the current Refuge Manager of the KNWR illustrates the concern in 1991, that if habitat enhancement is not continued moose numbers will plummet, and not surprisingly the authors were correct.

EFFECTS OF FOREST SUCCESSION AFTER FIRE IN MOOSE WINTERING HABITATS ON THE KENAI PENINSULA, ALASKA

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ABSTRACT: Estimates of moose (*Alces alces*) density during winter in early seral forests created by human-caused wildfires and in older successional forests on the northern Kenai Peninsula were obtained using data from standardized aerial surveys conducted from 1964-1990. Wintering moose densities in the study area were highest within areas burned by wildfires in 1947 and 1969, reaching peaks of 3.6-4.3 moose/km². Density estimates for the 1947 burn were available 17-43 years post-fire. The relationship between moose density and forest age in the 1947 burn from 1964-1990 was highly significant ($P < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.68$), and density declined at a rate of approximately 9 percent per year during this period. Highest densities, ranging from 2.0-3.6 moose/km², were recorded 17-26 years post-fire (1964-1973). Winter moose density in the 1947 burn and the area's total moose population then declined abruptly. Favorable habitat created by the 1969 wildfire resulted in a major increase in total population by 1982, although wintering densities in the 1947 burn remained low. Moose density estimates in the 1969 burn following this increase were high and remained relatively constant 13-21 years post-fire (1982-1990), ranging from 3.6-4.4 moose/km². In older successional forests, wintering moose density was low throughout the study period, ranging from 0.1-0.8 moose/km². Forest succession in the 1969 burn will ultimately result in habitat capable of supporting wintering moose densities similar to those currently found in mid-successional and older forests. We predict the area's moose population will decline in the absence of early seral forests.

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By the early 1970s, the Alaska National Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) was being proposed by congress in several different bills, each outlining a single proposed park or monument. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed ANILCA into law, setting aside 80 million acres of federal public lands, a third of which was secured as wilderness areas. By many, ANILCA was deemed the largest land grab by the Federal Government in recent U.S. history.

The Kenai National Moose Range was assimilated into ANILCA as part of the new Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, by the addition of 203,600 acres of Federal land. The purposes of the expansion of the Moose Range into the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge are to:

(A) Perpetuate a nationally significant population of moose;

(B) Protect populations of fish and wildlife and their habitats, including moose and other mammals and waterfowl;

(C) Provide opportunities for wildlife-oriented recreation in a manner consistent with the purposes specified in subparagraphs (A) and (B).

The significance of this legislation is the clear intent and purpose congress enacted into law. The Service has failed to fulfill their legal obligation set forth by our legislators. Additionally, their Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) obligates the Refuge to enhance 5,000 acres annually, which they have not completed since the mid-70s. Presently our moose population, particularly in GMU 15A, is in severe decline. In the early 1980s State Game biologists estimated approximately 4,300 moose in GMU 15A, a similar 2015 census estimated about 1,200 moose. During a five year period in the early 80s, an average of 293 moose (primarily bulls) were harvested in GMU 15A, ranging from 211 to 395. A similar comparison during the last five years shows an average of 22, with a range of 4 to 35. One of the major reasons for the precipitous decline is a direct result of inaction by the Service, by primarily not conducting habitat enhancement (i.e. prescribed burns, crushing or clearing). In addition, trappers willing to harvest wolves to benefit moose survival have been saddled with very restrictive regulations. The KNWR is the only refuge in the state where a four-day trap check is required; it is also the most restrictive refuge regarding regulations for access. All other refuges in our state require less snow depth before the public is allowed access by snow machines, the primary mode of access for trapping. Now that the moose population is less than a quarter its size compared to 30 years ago, predators are now accelerating the decline. We now have what is called a "predator pit" where regardless of how much of the area's habitat is enhanced; the moose population will not recover until the impact of predation is temporarily reduced, and Service refuses to allow effective predator control. Although, they are strong proponents of their own predator control programs as long as it does not include wolves or bears.

Studies have shown, to sustain a moose population a minimum ratio of 30 moose per wolf is needed; this ratio does not factor in the significant impact of bears. Currently, the ratio is approximately 20 moose per wolf (1200/60) in GMU 15A.

In March 2011, the State of Alaska Board of Game passed an intensive management program in attempt to halt the current decline in the Kenai Moose population. The question Alaskans should be asking is why the Service is refusing to follow the law set forth by congress and the purpose for which the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge was established? The Service policies are not perpetuating a significant moose population and by law they are required to.

Public Access: The KNWR provides many trails open to hiking, camping areas and extensive lake systems for canoeing. There are also many lakes with reasonable access open to fishing, which attract visitors and locals to these outdoor opportunities. However, there are only three gravel roads, all in GMU 15A, open to the public. Swanson River Road extends from the town of Sterling to the Swanson River, about 12 miles. The Swan Lake Road branches off the Swanson and is about 15 miles in length. The third road is Skilak Loop which is about 18 miles but is not maintained so it is not open during most winter months, and snow machines are not allowed on the road, even when closed. There is also a fourth gravel road in GMU 15A, Mystery Creek Road, that is open from mid-August to mid-October that should be open from May through October. Opening this road would provide additional access to recreate including camping, spring bear hunting and viewing wildlife.

Wildfire issues: In the past decade, the peninsula has witnessed several large wildfires, largely human caused. The Refuge, along with State, U.S. Forestry and other agencies have done an excellent job battling these threating fires with minimum property loss but the communities of the peninsula are far from being protected. There have been "years of talk" but no action towards creating a fire break to help protect communities west of the Refuge. These fire breaks, if completed wisely, would serve another purpose in addition to wildfire protection. In addition to loss of habitat and high mortality due to predation on moose, about 200 moose are killed annually on local roads. As moose numbers dropped, animals killed by vehicles on roads have become a significant contribution to this decline plus high property loss and human injury, including fatalities. Clearing fire breaks, resulting in regeneration of moose browse, will attract moose away from highways. Due to the lack of wildfires in GMU 15A, the best moose habitat is currently along highways.

In Summary: Local Refuge staff should be directed in conservation minded efforts through habitat enhancement and a temporary reduction in predators to allow the moose population in GMU 15A, and the remainder of the Refuge, to begin recovery to a healthy level. This will only happen if the Service's passive management polices driven by the preservationist ideology of "natural diversity and biological integrity" are removed. Restoring moose numbers will not only provide additional animals for locals to harvest but will provide moose for viewing and prey for predators.

The current passive management approach on Refuge managed lands controlled burns have resulted in not only an unhealthy wildlife situation but a dangerously critical environment in the event of a large wildfire. We have been very lucky during the last two major fires, one day our luck will run out.

Senator Murkowski has several times referred to Federal public lands as "open unless closed" whereas, the KNWR has clearly adopted a philosophy of "closed unless opened".

Thank you