



Sierra Borealis

alaska report



SIERRA CLUB ALASKA CHAPTER
MARCH 2015

Three Alaska Chapter issues need YOUR comments now (here & p. 4 Gates of Arctic)

p 4
by March
13!

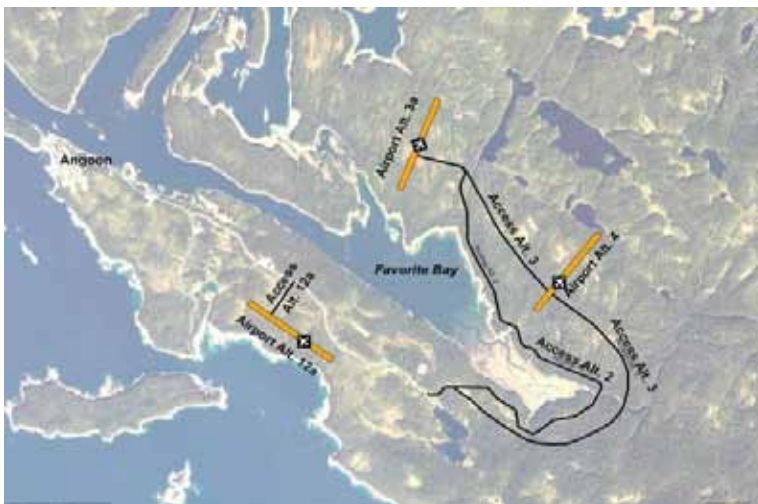
Two conflicting sites vie in Angoon Airport project

March
20
deadline-

A project to provide an airport for the community of Angoon on Admiralty Island is currently in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement stage. The stated purpose of the Angoon Airport project -- to provide emergency air service, improve access to the isolated island community, and allow for greater economic and infrastructure development -- will best be met through an airport that is located closest to town, imposes the least operating and maintenance costs, and impinges the least on the nearby monument and wilderness.

The Federal Aviation Administration, the lead agency on the project, has chosen as its preferred alternative a site that best fulfils the above goals -- the in-town airport site, Alternative 12a. This alternative

-- continued page 3



Oceans and Offshore news: Oppose Drilling plans

March
23
deadline

In Alaska's arctic and subarctic oceans, there is much to celebrate, as well as lots of work to be done.

First, the good news: On December 16th, 2014, President Obama signed a Presidential Memorandum protecting more than 30 million acres of Bristol Bay waters, an area about the size of New York state, by withdrawing the Southcentral Alaska area from oil and gas leasing and drilling indefinitely. The action will protect the area's abundant salmon population, which supports a multi-billion dollar sport and commercial fishery and vigorous subsistence traditions. (See **Sierra Borealis**, June 2012 and most issues since.)

In response Dan Ritzman, Alaska Program Director for Sierra Club's Our Wild America campaign, made the following statement:

"We applaud President Obama for this bold action to protect some of America's most bountiful waters. These waters are vital for an abundance of wildlife, including salmon and whales. For too long the threat of dirty fuel development has hung over Bristol Bay. Thanks to the President's leadership and to decades of work by the local community, tribal organizations, and the seafood industry, this area has finally received the protection it deserves.

"The president's action is especially important in the face of a changing climate. Keeping dirty fuels, and the climate pollution they produce, in the ground will benefit us all, but especially

-- continued page 2

Oppose Offshore drilling plans -- from page 1

the people of Alaska whose home is already warming at twice the rate of the lower 48 states.

"Putting these waters, and others in the Arctic Ocean, off-limits to new dirty fuel development will help preserve Alaska's unique natural wonders and the traditions, economies and wildlife they support."

Administration Arctic Ocean actions

Then, in January 2015, President Obama withdrew specific areas of America's Arctic Ocean (in both the more easterly Beaufort and the western Chukchi Sea) from oil and gas leasing, to protect subsistence resources and access and to protect important ecological areas. The areas withdrawn by presidential action include Hanna Shoal and critical migration and subsistence use areas.

Hanna Shoal, in the Chukchi Sea, is a stronghold for ice-dependent wildlife like the Pacific walrus, polar bear, gray whale, bearded seal and ringed seal. The Chukchi Sea migration corridor also serves as an important area for the endangered bowhead whale and thousands of spotted seals, and provides important walrus haul-out sites every year.

Now for the bad news: after the Bristol Bay announcement, but at the same time as the above offshore withdrawals were announced, the Department of the Interior (DOI) released a draft of the 2017-2022 Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) oil and gas leasing program (five-year plan), which proposes new lease sales within the 80 million-acre planning areas of the Arctic's Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. The proposal also calls for lease sales in Alaska's Cook Inlet, as well as sales in the Gulf of Mexico and southern and mid-Atlantic Ocean.

Soon after, Shell announced its intention to drill in the Arctic Ocean in the summer of 2015. Shell already has a terrible track record in the Arctic, and this is before any drilling has even occurred. In 2012, a series of mishaps and



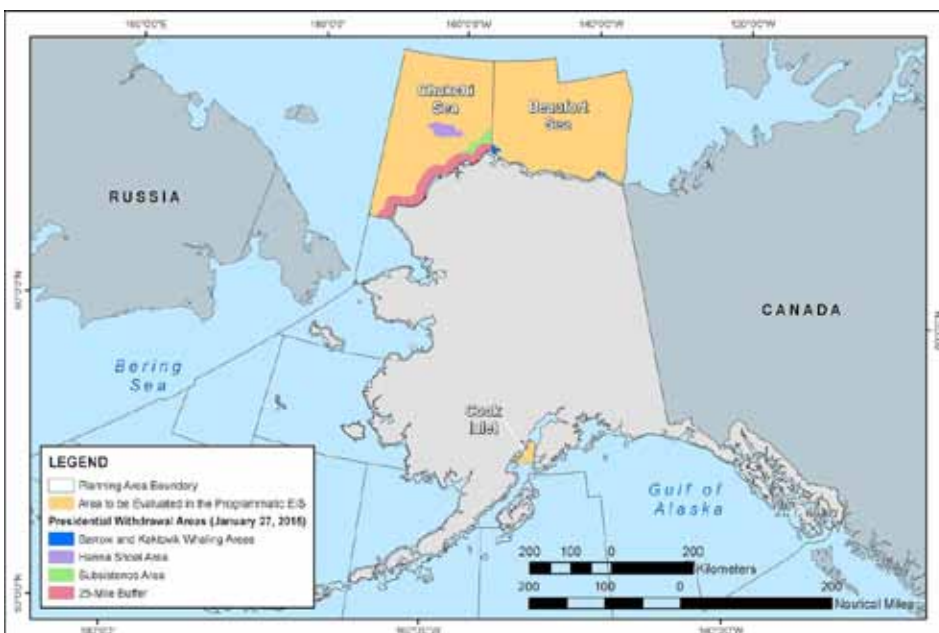
Arctic ice offshore

photo: Steven Kazlowski

near failures kept Shell from drilling in 2013, (see **Sierra Borealis** March 2013, Sept 2012), and the Environmental Protection Agency fined Shell for Clean Air Act violations by its Kulluk drill unit and Discoverer drillship. On December 8, 2014, Shell contractor Noble Drilling LLC agreed to plead guilty to eight felony offenses and pay \$12.2 million dollars in fines because of environmental and safety violations aboard its vessels.

The response to a significant spill, which is almost a foregone conclusion should drilling be allowed to go forward, has never been tested in Arctic waters. What has been tested was off the coast of Washington state, in relatively balmy waters compared to the Arctic. In September, 2012, Shell's oil spill containment dome was tested in what was supposed to take a single day, but instead took five. Ultimately the dome "breached like a whale" and sank 120 feet, and when they managed to bring it back to the surface, a Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) official noted that, "the top half is crushed like a beer can."

On February 12, 2015, DOI issued [its Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for Chukchi Oil and Gas Lease Sale 193](#). The Environmental Impact Statement confirms again that drilling in the Chukchi Sea puts Arctic people and wildlife at risk from major oil spills. The analysis states there is a 75 percent chance that one or more large oil spills (more than 1,000 barrels, or 42,000 gallons) will occur if the leases are developed. The final decision about whether to end or affirm the Chukchi Sea oil leases will be made on March 23.



➡ **What you can do--two actions:**
Send a comment on the 2017-2022 Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) oil and gas leasing program (five-year plan) -- go to page 3 bottom

Angoon Airport -- from page 1

costs taxpayers the least and upholds the natural and cultural integrity of Admiralty Island. The Sierra Club also supports Alternative 12a.

But the Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT) unfortunately proposes pursuing the most expensive and the most ecologically damaging alternative, Alternative 3a – the farthest from town and the farthest incursion in the monument-wilderness.

The State DOT proposal would develop monument-wilderness land and compromise its heritage, subsistence and ecological values by building a road and airport for Angoon at a site far from town. In contrast, the in-town alternative (12a) is viable and would better serve the people of Angoon, cost taxpayers less money, and preserve Admiralty Island's myriad values.

Admiralty Island, southwest of Juneau, is a place of superlatives: it hosts the densest brown bear and nesting bald eagle populations on earth; it is the largest unspoiled island ecosystem in North America, and it boasts a vast intact tract of temperate rainforest. It also supports the Alaska Native community of Angoon, whose culture is deeply entwined with the place, including a rich legacy of heritage sites and ongoing subsistence. The natural and cultural values of Admiralty Island are evident in its overlapping designations as a national forest, a national monument, a congressionally designated wilderness area, and a UNESCO biosphere reserve.

The community of Angoon presently has a float plane dock in town and is served by semi-weekly Alaska Marine Highway System ferry service.

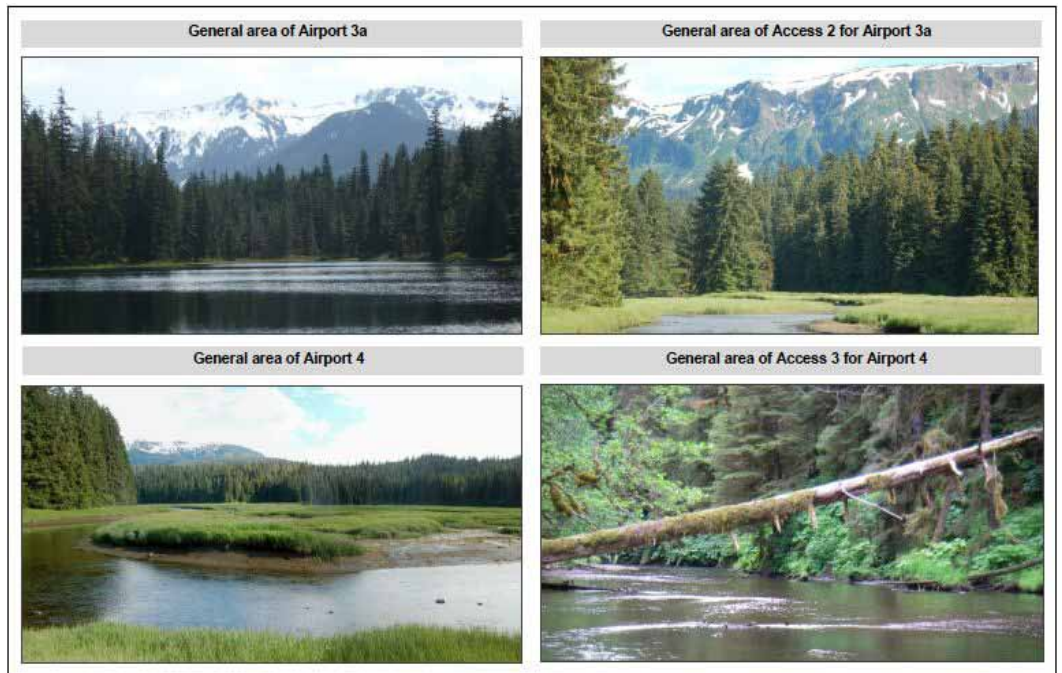


Figure WC6. Views of the Kootznoowoo Wilderness Area near the proposed locations of Airport 3a and Airport 4 and their access alternatives.

⇒ WHAT YOU CAN DO:

The discord between the FAA and the State DOT means that public comment can play a pivotal role in shaping the outcome of this airport project.

It is critical that members of the public weigh in on this project to rally support for the FAA's preferred Alternative 12a, which promotes a solution that benefits Angoon while preserving Admiralty Island's irreplaceable monument and wilderness lands. The DEIS public comment period is open **through March 20, 2015**.

To comment on this DEIS:

- Email by **March 20** to comments@angoonairporteis.com
- Send comments as a hard copy, mailed by **March 20**, to Angoon Airport EIS / 1220 SW Morrison, Suite 700 / Portland, Oregon 97205
- Fax comments to (503)224-1851.

Thank you for voicing your support for Alternative 12a and for Admiralty Island! Questions about commenting? Contact Lindsey at lhajduk@gmail.com. ❖

-- Lindsey Hajduk

⇒ Comment on Offshore drilling plans -- continued from page 2

at <http://boemoceaninfo.com/get-involved/comments/> and let the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) know that the Arctic is no place to drill. Even with some areas permanently withdrawn, we don't know what the impact of drilling will be on sensitive wildlife populations--and by extension human on populations--who rely on a healthy ecosystem. And we cannot afford to exacerbate climate change by continuing to extract dirty fossil fuels from one of the world's last pristine places.

Help prevent Shell from drilling in the Arctic this summer: Shell's history of failure plus DOI's recent finding of a 75 percent chance that a large oil spill could occur if leases were developed in the Chukchi Sea give the Obama administration ample reason to reject Shell exploration and take *all* Arctic leasing off the table.

To send your message to President Obama: e-mail to president@whitehouse.gov; send a letter to: The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20500, or call White House comment line at (202)456-1111. ❖

-- Alli Harvey, Our Wild America Alaska Campaign Rep

immediate deadline:

Gates of the Arctic Management Plan amendment -- Comment by March 13

Support NPS preferred alternative **BY MARCH 13**

Established in 1980 by Congress in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve totals 7.524 million acres, of which almost all -- 7.154 million acres - is designated wilderness. Another 948, 608 acres is in a national preserve, with two separate units, centered on the Itkillik River in the northeast and on the upper stretch of the Kobuk River in the southwest. Six wild rivers are also designated.

In amending the existing 1986 General Management Plan (GMP), the National Park Service has identified two action alternatives. Its preferred alternative calls for a "continuation of the current management approach, a strong focus on wilderness character and opportunities for solitude and self-reliance, no new infrastructure or visitor facilities, continuation of current resource management approach..."

The other alternative has "strong focus on wilderness recreation opportunities" and calls for "slight increase in visitor services, education, and outreach, limited new infrastructure and visitor facilities, seek opportunities to serve as an outdoor laboratory..."

Of the two, the Service's preferred alternative is more consistent with the park/preserve's purposes and management directives set forth by Congress in ANILCA.

The alternatives call for several future studies and supplementary plans, including a wilderness suitability study/ Environmental Impact Statement on the "eligible wilderness" in the Itkillik and Kobuk units. In its 1986 wilderness review of the preserve the Service had found both units eligible but recommended only 331,000 acres in the Itkillik unit. When their recommendation reached the Interior Department, higher-ups buried it, thus ending the ANILCA-required wilderness review process that ultimately has the President

"...advis(ing) the Congress of his recommendations."

Now the Service is postponing a renewed wilderness suitability study based on the expectation that an application is forthcoming for a transportation corridor across the Kobuk unit from the oil pipeline haul road to the Ambler mining district. However, the Itkillik unit is not threatened by adverse developments, nor is the Kobuk unit, aside from a potential road corridor that would consume a tiny amount of preserve acreage. In fact, as eligible tracts the preserve units have been managed as *de facto* wilderness pending congressional and presidential review for potential addition to wilderness. In short, there is no excuse for further delay; the Service should begin a new wilderness study and recommendation now.

➡ What You Can Do NOW:

Send a short comment to support the Park Service's preferred alternative (Alternative B), and urge the agency to begin promptly, without postponement, a wilderness suitability study for the eligible national preserve, as the first step in the wilderness review mandated by Congress.

March 13 is the deadline for comments. Submit a written comment at the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website: http://parkplanning.nps.gov/gaar_gmp, or by regular mail to: Gates of the Arctic GMPA, National Park Service, 4175 Geist Road, Fairbanks, AK 99709.

For more information and to comment, go to <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?parkID=11&projectID=30266&documentID=63221>. ❖

-- Jack Hession

BLM approves first commercial production in NPRA Greater Moose's Tooth-1 project to proceed

On February 13, 2015, the Bureau of Land Management's Alaska office issued its Record of Decision for the first commercial development project, [Greater Mooses Tooth Unit 1](#), (GMT-1) within the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (Reserve). This decision allows for construction of a permanent, eight-mile road through the Reserve's sensitive wetlands and tundra, which will cause long lasting impacts on wildlife and subsistence values.

"The decision puts the fragile and important wetlands of the western Arctic at risk from the growing cumulative impacts of oil development. To offset this, the administration needs to put in place permanent protections for the special places of America's Arctic," said Dan Ritzman, Alaska Program Director for Sierra Club's Our Wild America campaign. "The dirty fuel industry shouldn't be allowed to

subvert the importance of these areas for wildlife, subsistence traditions, and Americans' sense of wild."

As the Bureau moves forward with permitting oil and gas development within the Reserve, it should also allocate equal resources toward proactively managing its five designated Special Areas for conservation and wildlife values. In response to the final Record of Decision on GMT-1 permitting, the conservation community calls on the Bureau to commit all necessary resources for a landscape-level planning process to ensure the strongest future protection possible for each of the Reserve's designated Special Areas.

The five Special Areas are Teshekpuk Lake, Utukok Uplands, Kasegaluk Lagoon, Peard Bay, Colville River.

The Greater Moose's Tooth-1 project represents a significant piece in the growing -- continued on page 6



Celebrate! New Arctic Refuge Wilderness recommendation

On January 25, the White House announced that President Obama would ask Congress to designate 12 million of the 19 million acres of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as Wilderness. A White House video featured footage of the Refuge and of President Obama explaining the decision: <http://wapo.st/1JpMn2V>

The Sierra Club supports President Obama's recommendation, and thank you messages from across the country have poured into Washington since the announcement, thanks in large part to tens of thousands of Sierra Club members. We are celebrating across the country even as we get ready for the next step, to actually permanently protect the coastal plain of the Refuge. So many of you have worked tirelessly for decades to protect this place, and now we are on a new path toward that end.

Only Congress can designate wilderness. Presently, seven million acres of the 19 million-acre Refuge is designated as the [Mollie Beattie Wilderness](#). The new recommendation asks for wilderness status for nearly the entire refuge, including the Coastal Plain, with only minor exceptions near the communities of Kaktovik and Arctic Village, which are adjacent to the Refuge.

The President's announcement is historic because it reverses the 1987 Reagan-era position of the federal government which stated the Refuge was appropriate for oil and gas development. With this new Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) released for the Arctic Refuge by the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service, the White House now presents the official position of our Executive branch of government

in favor of permanent protection for the Refuge.

In recommending [wilderness protections for the refuge](#), President Obama and Interior Secretary Jewell are finally bringing the official policy in line with public sentiment. And while the desire of Americans to protect the Arctic Refuge is not new, the new recommendation does represent a significant political shift. In becoming the first president to officially direct Congress to designate new wilderness in the Arctic Refuge, President Obama has for the first time shifted the political momentum towards permanently protecting this special place.

A place that symbolizes America's remaining wildness

For decades the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has been emblematic of the larger struggle between those who want to protect our nation's wild places and those who want to exploit them for short-term profit. Despite repeated Congressional attempts to open the beleaguered coastal plain of the Refuge to drilling, the area remains largely unspoiled today. Fortunately, the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), that expanded the Arctic Refuge and made a significant portion of it wilderness, left the 1500-acre Coastal Plain (already then coveted by oil companies) closed to development unless specifically opened by new Congressional legislation.

Stretching north from boreal forests, across the towering mountains of the Brooks Range, down through sweeping tundra to coastal lagoons, the remote Arctic Refuge is home to a wealth of wildlife found nowhere else. It's one of the country's last truly wild places and, in fact, was designated specifically to preserve the wilderness values. That very wildness resonates deeply with the American psyche, even for those who may never visit here.

It's that intrinsic connection that so many Americans feel to this last great wilderness that has so far helped push back proposals to develop the Refuge. The efforts of well-funded and politically-connected oil companies and other special interests have been blunted by massive outpourings of public support for preserving this unique wild place.

For now the Fish and Wildlife Service will manage these recommended portions of the Arctic Refuge as wilderness, protecting the harsh yet beautiful landscape, the wildlife, and the subsistence culture of local Alaska Natives.

However, new congressional challenges to the Administration's decision are already being mounted. While it's unclear how those challenges will play out, what is clear is that to move forward we must break from our dirty fuel past. There are better ways to fuel our country -- [clean energy solutions](#) that don't sacrifice our last wild places. The future is based on clean energy and a long-term vision for the health of our country, our climate, and our wild places.

Take a minute – or more -- to celebrate this recommendation for wilderness, and “visit” the Refuge online: check out Sierra Club videos online at <http://bit.ly/1zlxDpl> ❖

-- Dan Ritzman, Senior Campaign Representative,
Sierra Club [Our Wild America](#) Campaign



photo: Patrick Endres

Denizens of the Arctic Coastal Plain, musk oxen symbolize wild nature

Welcome Alli Harvey!

The Sierra Club's Our Wild America Campaign is pleased to welcome new Alaska Campaign Representative Alli Harvey to our efforts to protect America's wildest places.

Since first visiting the state as a teenager with a backpack and an Alaska Marine Highway ticket, Alli's been drawn back north again and again. After completing her degree in Urban Studies at the New School in New York City, she immediately packed up and moved to Anchorage to become a grassroots organizer with Alaska Center for the Environment. With ACE, she helped form the Alaska Food Policy Council and organized to boost ridership on the People Mover transit system on target days, contributing to passage of a municipal bond after she was able to contact riders and ask them to vote to support public transit.

Alli left Alaska for two years in Reno. She went to work for Friends of Nevada Wilderness to steward and protect wilderness across the state; this experience deepened her love of and respect for wild places (and instilled a real soft spot for the high desert--wild Nevada in particular.) Most recently Alli was back at ACE as the Grassroots Giving Manager. If you want insights into Alaska's unlimited recreation opportunities check out Alli's Wednesday column in the outdoors section of the Alaska Dispatch News.

Alli likes working with people and has seen firsthand the difference that grassroots organizing can make in, and for, Alaska. This appreciation and understanding of people power is what makes the Sierra Club a natural fit for her.

Working on Arctic issues especially interests Alli, because so many champions of America's wild Arctic places live outside of Alaska. "We really depend on people from key states across the Lower 48 to get in touch with their representatives to move protection of the Arctic



Alli Harvey in wild Alaska

forward," Alli said. "I'm excited to work with the Sierra Club because our power base is so vast. We have Arctic advocates in Illinois, Hawaii, Maine--all across the U.S."

One thing Alli's excited about working on in Alaska is mobilizing the "green" base in Alaska, to engage new activists. She believes that there are many more people in-state passionate about protecting wild places than we know yet, and local Sierra Club Outings are one way to reach them. Alli is currently completing her Outings Certification so she can lead and train others to lead local Sierra Club outings in Alaska. Local outings can be either Chapter or Group sponsored. She sees a powerful connection between getting people outdoors and providing them with opportunities to engage further by taking action and volunteering. In addition, Alli hopes to work with Sierra Club national outings leaders to Alaska to offer their participants opportunities to take action.

Alli brings energy, grassroots organizing experience, and leadership acumen to her new staff role with the Sierra Club. When not at work, she's usually out running, playing Scrabble, or painting. *Fun fact:* she and her husband have a small parrot named Inigo Montoya, whose favorite food is yogurt and whose talent is saying his name. ❖

NPRA: Greater Moose's Tooth project approved

-- from page 4



cumulative impacts associated with oil and gas development in the Arctic. The Obama administration's 2013 [Integrated Activity Plan](#) allows for leasing access to 72 percent of the Reserve's economically recoverable oil while also setting aside Special Areas to protect wildlife, subsistence and wilderness characteristics. Lands outside of Special Area boundaries contain important wildlife corridors, making it essential that GMT-1 and future projects minimize impacts to this fragile, wildlife-rich landscape. The project must set the highest standards for development by requiring best available technologies and the smallest possible footprint. ❖

-- Alli Harvey, Our Wild America Alaska Campaign Rep

Alaska Chapter Welcomes Lindsey Hajduk to Executive Committee

Thank you to all who voted in the Sierra Club Alaska Chapter Executive Committee election in December. The ExCom is happy to welcome Lindsey Hajduk as the new liaison elected from the Knik Group (Anchorage and South Central Alaska). We were sorry to lose Lindsey as Sierra Club staff when she went on to other employment but are delighted she is staying on as a volunteer activist.

In addition, Nancy Kuhn was re-elected liaison from the Denali Group (Fairbanks and Interior) and Mark Rorick was re-elected liaison from the Tongass Group (Juneau and Southeast). At-large ExCom members who were re-elected are Pam Brodie (chair), Mike O'Meara (vice-chair) and Jack Hession. Pat Fort continues to serve as our appointed treasurer, and Will Taygan as webmaster. (see new website, <http://www.sierraclub.org/alaska>.)

-- Pamela Brodie, Chapter chair



Governor Walker Takes Positive Action

In late December, Alaska's new Governor, Bill Walker, announced he was putting six high-profile state infrastructure "mega-projects" on hold, due to the expected \$4 billion state deficit caused by the collapse in oil prices. The projects are the Juneau access road, the Knik Arm bridge, the Susitna-Watana hydroelectric dam, the Ambler road, the Kodiak rocket and missile launch complex expansion, and the small-diameter North Slope gas pipeline. All have been economically controversial as costing more than they are worth, and most have been opposed by the Sierra Club as environmentally damaging and unnecessary. Nevertheless, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on these projects, all have powerful advocates, and none of them should be considered "dead" in the long term. For the short term, while the Legislature has the power to vote for funding of these projects, under the Alaska Constitution the governor has the power of line-item veto over state spending.

Governor Walker fired his acting Department of Transportation (DOT) Commissioner Pat Kemp due to disagreement over funding the Juneau Access road (see below) and other projects. Immediately upon taking office, Gov. Walker removed several other commissioners and deputy commissioners remaining from the administration of his predecessor, Gov. Parnell, including Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Commissioner Joe Balash and Fish and Game Commissioner Cora Campbell. Balash, who had been a deputy DNR commissioner, was appointed commissioner when Dan Sullivan resigned to run for the United States Senate. Sen. Sullivan has since hired Balash to be his chief of staff. Gov. Walker has retained Larry Hartig as Commissioner of Department of Environmental Conservation, a post he has held since 2007.

Walker appointed Mark Myers as his Commissioner of Department of Natural Resources and Marty Rutherford as deputy commissioner. Both have worked for DNR before. Both protested and resigned from the department in 2005 when then Gov. Frank Murkowski attempted to negotiate a partnership with industry on an Alaska natural gas pipeline. Rutherford later worked for Gov. Palin but left during the Parnell administration. Like Walker, Myers and other recent appointees are critics of Parnell's changes in oil taxes.

Gov. Walker also appointed former Eagle River state representative and moderate Democrat Sam Cotten as acting Commissioner of Fish and Game. (By law, candidates for commissioner of Fish & Game must be nominated by the Boards of Fish and Game.) Cotten is a long time commercial fisherman with considerable expertise and political experience in the field and is a former member of the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council.

Juneau Access: R.I.P. – Forever?

The future of the Juneau Access is particularly

complicated by the fact that federal highway funds have already been spent on it, and it is possible that as much as \$26 million might have to be repaid if the project is not built.

The project, a 48 mile extension of the Juneau road system through environmentally valuable wildlife habitat in the beautiful Berners Bay area, would shorten the existing Alaska Marine Highway ferry route to Skagway. However, costs of construction and even maintenance outweigh Marine Highway savings. The state DOT will finish its nearly completed Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which is needed for federal funding and approval, and for which the state has already paid. In 2009, the State was ordered to rewrite the previous Draft Supplemental EIS due to a court case brought by environmental organizations including the Sierra Club. (See **Sierra Borealis**, March 2012, June 2011.)

Mark Rorick, longtime Tongass Group volunteer leader who has followed the intricacies of the Juneau Access road project and marshalled Sierra Club opposition for years, also points out, "The Juneau Access project would build a road through the nation's largest Forest Service Inventoried Roadless Area to a 'new' ferry terminal north of Juneau in the middle of nowhere, and then connect by ferry to Haines and Skagway. Travelers would still go part way by ferry, but they would have a much longer drive to get to the ferry. The road itself would be unsafe with frequent multiple avalanches and ice, while the Alaska Marine Highway System in Lynn Canal has never had a fatality. Both the cities of Haines and Skagway oppose this unnecessary road. And the DOT Environmental Impact Statement says the road does not meet the public interest, but has a 'negative net benefit' for the public, according to the Federal Highway Guidelines."

The Juneau Access road has a long history of death and resurrection. It was discontinued by Gov. Tony Knowles, re-started by Gov. Frank Murkowski, stopped again by Gov. Sarah Palin, and re-started again by Gov. Sean Parnell – and now halted once more by Gov. Walker. This time, may it Rest In Peace. ❖

-- Pamela Brodie



Along the Porcupine with the Muries

-- by Frank Keim

I think of you often, Olaus and Mardy,
as my friend Fran and I float this wide
river
so brim full of brown water this summer,
silted from heavy storms upstream
where towering thunderheads flash
shots of quicksilver
across distant purple mountains,
sparkling platinum raindrops
over tundra fragrant with the sunny
spice of Indian tea.

So many things here remind me of you.

These steep cliffs with their crowds
of Violet-green swallows frolicking and
bouncing in noisy thermals,
jubilant in their eternal chase
after buzzing mosquitoes,
chased themselves by hunting
Peregrine falcons
eager to feed screaming hungry chicks,
all giving dance and wonder
to these silent limestone bluffs,
as we scale their crumbling rocks
to find and count their raucous young.

From our aerie perch

I search below
among magenta
fireweed blooming
on wild cobbled
beaches,
beyond rafts of scaups and scoters
floating on river mirrors,
suddenly spilling their feathers up
into the cotton-clouded sky
where Bald eagles and Ospreys soar and
plummet to their prey,
careening close to a mother moose
and calf
ambling cautiously by
under our watchful eye.

I hear the wail of a Pacific loon
as it beelines upside down
across our long sinuous river horizon,
ever wary of the gray bubble of our
human intrusion.

Back from the aerie,
we head down the river again,
ready for the first gravel bar to call us in
to camp.

Later, across the wispy smoke



of an evening fire
we banter about wilderness sunset skies
and our tenuous place
below these basaltic rampart cliffs
and ancient limestone canyons
rimming the muddy river,
as Say's phoebes bounce
from willow to willow,
feeding ravenous young in late twilight
breezes,
and the white sun
steps light across high falcon ridges
that huddle close against the sky,
then slowly hides its westering eye,
telling me finally the day is night again
and it is time for sleep.

I think of you often here, Olaus and
Mardy,
and I'll remember you
on this river of the Porcupine.

*(On the Porcupine River with Fran Mauer
July 1994) ❖*

Sierra Borealis / alaska report

is the newsletter of the Alaska Chapter of the Sierra Club

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(replaces www.alaska.sierraclub.org/ (click on newsletters))



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