

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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*Alaska Wildlife Alliance – Alaska Wilderness League – Alaskans FOR Wildlife – Defenders of Wildlife – Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges - National Wildlife Refuge Association – Wilderness Watch*

### **Groups urge the public to submit written comments on controversial Kenai Refuge baiting and trapping rule after agency cancels final public hearing**

Yesterday, advocates for healthy wildlife and safe hunting practices encouraged the public to [comment in writing](#) after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shut down a third scheduled public hearing on its proposal to allow brown bear baiting and trapping without permits in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

The agency had previously [extended](#) the public comment period due to extensive opposition to the proposed rule and had set up three virtual hearings on Oct. 26-28. It scrapped the last hearing after two days of overwhelming opposition to the proposed rule.

“We heard from officials in D.C. that they didn’t see the point of another hearing because of so-called low turnout, but we also heard from people that they had multiple problems registering and had received inconsistent and confusing messages about when they were supposed to speak,” said Nicole Schmitt, executive director of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance. “So instead of correcting and adapting the virtual hearings to help more people be heard, the agency shut it down.”

In the first two hearings, 64 people testified against the new rule, including many Alaskans who live near and use Kenai Refuge recreation areas. Only four people spoke in support of the proposed rule, including two Safari Club representatives and a state official.

The agency proposed the new rule for the Kenai Refuge in June. This rule would allow the killing of Kenai brown bears over bait, after decades of prohibiting the practice because of its harm to wildlife health and diversity. The rule would also open new areas to trapping, including trails and trailheads, campgrounds and roads, and remove accountability measures, such as requiring that traps are checked regularly, trap locations are identified, and trapping methods reduce the likelihood of killing protected furbearers and eagles.

Over 34,000 public comments were submitted during the initial comment period, in addition to tens of thousands of petitions submitted in opposition to the proposal.

Kenai Refuge users, community members, and the general public can [comment](#) on the proposed rule through Nov. 9.

Quotes from last week's hearings:

Kenai resident, Teresa Becher: *"I fully oppose the proposed regulations in the Kenai Rule... We hear a lot about what Alaskans want these days. Well real Alaskans don't want to liberalize hunting and trapping restrictions to benefit only a few, especially where it will clearly harm the animal population. Real Alaskans are stewards of the wildlife population both for its own sake and for basic subsistence."*

Cooper Landing resident and business owner Lorrain Temple: *"My businesses cater to out of town guests and one of the most frequently asked questions is "where can we see a bear?" I suggest they drive the Skilak Loop Road. But how many bears will there be after seasons of baiting for senseless trophy hunting? Certainly, it will decrease opportunities for wildlife photographers who come from around the world. And who wants to hear discharging of firearms along the river? This is unacceptable regarding safety and imposes on the serenity and simple sounds of pure wilderness. If the Rule passes, there is inevitably an economic burden to the Refuge permittees and related businesses who depend so heavily on a short season to 'make it', like me."*

25-year Soldotna resident Anna-Maria Mueller: *"Dropping the 1-mile trap safety buffers will take us straight back to all the conflict between dog owners and trappers that occurred before the current regulations were put in place. When I listened to the hearing on Monday, I was struck by two things: Out of the 18 comments I heard, 16 were in strong opposition to the proposed changes. There was only a single voice in support, which came from the Safari Club International, of elephant and lion trophy fame, the very organization who gave thousands of dollars in campaign contributions to Ryan Zinke, whose Secretarial orders precipitated all of this. They are now trying to frame this as a State rights vs federal issue, as if this was about federal regulations imposed on a local population against their will. This is not at all the case here. Local Alaskans appreciate the Kenai NWR, its purpose and federal protection, just as much as out of state visitors. Its main purpose has been and must remain the conservation of the great magic show of natural diversity."*

Former attorney for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Deborah Williams: *"The state and the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge have very different legal frameworks. Deferring to state regulations that allow Kenai brown bears to be killed over bait, or allowing trapping without any of the conditions listed in the Refuge's own Compatibility Determination for trapping, violates the Refuge's responsibility to manage the Kenai Refuge under ANILCA and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. It also violates the Administrative Procedures Act because it is arbitrary and capricious."*

Fran Mauer of the Alaska chapter of Wilderness Watch: *"This entire exercise should be abandoned immediately because if implemented it would seriously harm the ecological integrity the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge which the Fish and Wildlife Service has a responsibility to protect. Also, there is strong public support for the current protective rules, and equally strong opposition to these proposed rule changes."*

David Raskin of Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges: *"Brown bear baiting would deplete a major predator, contrary to Refuge mandates, threaten a declining bear population of concern, and create safety problems for recreational visitors by bears adapted to human foods at bait sites."*

Nicole Schmitt of Alaska Wildlife Alliance: *"We also ask the Service to assess how trapping along roads would impact the new wildlife underpasses on the Sterling Highway. Over \$10 million was spent to create safe wildlife crossings on the Refuge which would, if this rule passes, funnel those same wildlife into multi-million dollar death traps – how can the Service defend that such a rule change falls within refuge purposes?"*