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Organization: Alaska Huts Association

Title: Executive Director

Comments: February 19, 2016

Re: Chugach Forest Land Management Plan Comments

Dear Forest Supervisor Marceron,

Please accept comments for the Proposed Revised Land Management Plan for the Chugach National Forest (The Forest). The Alaska Wilderness and Mountain Huts Association (Alaska Huts) has proposed building backcountry huts within The Forest within the Placer River Valley, along the Spencer and Grandview Whistle Stop sections of the Alaska Railroad. Our non-profit business plan is currently under review with the Forest Service.

We support the Forest Service goals of increasing access to the Forest in a sustainable manner. The Forest is an incredible public resource. It is important that the public is able to recreate on and learn about their public lands in a safe and environmentally conscious way. We encourage the Forest to continue exploring partnerships to help increase access and provide accommodation while simultaneously managing the land in a way that conserves it for generations to come.

Constructing the Whistle Stops at Spencer Glacier and Grandview has sparked interest and created recreational demand in the Placer River Valley. It is projected these demands will only increase as the planned Glacier Discovery Trail continues to be built. There is a demonstrated public desire for more recreational opportunities in the Whistle Stop corridor, as evidenced by the Spencer Bench Cabin's popularity in its first summer of operation, and scarcity of available summer bookings for 2016. This is a unique project, giving the opportunity to expand public access into a new area of The Forest without the construction of new roads or the loosening of regulations.

Without adequate infrastructure to accommodate visitors, there is potential for negative impacts on The Forest. Given the challenges and limitations in Forest Service funding for recreational facilities, our organization is well positioned to partner with the Forest Service to help achieve the goals as outlined in the Chugach Forest Plan. The business model proposal from Alaska Huts would consolidate use in and around hardened structures providing simple overnight stay accommodations, minimizing the impact from the visitors while helping to provide them with a safe structure during their visit to the area. This would provide opportunities to users across the recreational spectrum and a venue for environmental education programming, while preserving the ecological integrity of the area.

In "Part 3 -Management Area Management Direction", Forest Service cabins are deemed suitable for a wide range of management areas and objectives, including the backcountry area that covers the proposed Whistle Stop Project (pp. 42-43). Under the "Descriptions of Use or Activity", they are specifically noted as "structures built and maintained by the Forest Service." We request for that to be amended to state "cabin or multi-party structure built and maintained by the Forest Service, or other permitted non-public organizations."

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. We are excited about the prospect of providing sustainable infrastructure and recreational support facilities in the Whistle Stop corridor, and look forward to a strong partnership with the Forest Service in the coming years.

Sincerely,

Tom Callahan, Executive Director
Alaska Huts Association