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Comments: Our family and friends have worked, recreated and subsistence harvested in Prince William Sound (PWS) for over 3 decades. We have an intimate knowledge of PWS that very few people have the privilege of obtaining. Not only do we depend on PWS for our annual fish, meat and berry resources, many of us depend on PWS for our livelihood.

Since the opening of the Whittier Tunnel to vehicular traffic, we have noted a remarkable increase in the number of PWS visitors, many of them consumptive users. In the intervening years, we have seen the black bear population plummet, as have halibut and rockfish stocks. Deer populations have been overharvested throughout western PWS. Shorelines have been degraded by thoughtless campers and partiers. Commercial fishing effort has exploded in the last ten years with the increased hatchery output and additional focus on species other than salmon. Lodges are springing up and expanding in Western PWS, bringing more exploitative clients to the area.

In addition to the increased direct human pressures on PWS resources, global warming is clearly have a significant deleterious impact on those same resources. Glaciers throughout the Sound are receding at a remarkable rate, exposing more land to potential human exploitation. Water temperatures in PWS are at an all-time high, leading to the disappearance of forage fish and the crash of species that depend upon them, such as the common murre. Silver salmon stocks have fluctuated wildly over the past several years. Global warming impacts and increased human activity in PWS are clearly having a detrimental impact on the PWS ecosystem. All of this argues for more protection of PWS resources, not less.

The proposed Chugach Forest revised management plan, calls for dropping several PWS areas from Wilderness Study Area (WSA) classification. All of these areas, Knight Island, College Fiord and the Columbia Glacier area, are true wilderness, far more so than any Lower 48 wilderness. Removing WSA classification from these areas strips them of the extra management protection conveyed by that classification. In this time of severe environmental stress, it makes no sense ecologically to eliminate WSA protection for these areas. Furthermore, WSA management is relatively easy and inexpensive compared to having to manage the same areas when they become exploited by extractive industries such as logging and mining. Onshore development will certainly follow the elimination of WSA protection, leading to increased degradation of the PWS environment.

It makes no sense environmentally or economically to eliminate WSA protection for such a large portion of PWS. In fact, it makes more sense to designate additional areas to fall under WSA protection. That is why we strongly oppose the removal of any PWS area from the WSA. Instead, we strongly encourage the Chugach Forest to designate Montague Island for inclusion in the WSA. Montague Island is the largest uninhabited island in the United States. It is the most remote, least visited, wildest, and largest island in PWS. Its position as the Sound's largest barrier island protects inner PWS and creates rich sheltered waters for countless animals. Montague's subsistence resources are also essential to hundreds of people.

For these reasons, our family not only opposes the Chugach Forest's proposal to eliminate WSA classification for some PWS areas, we alternatively encourage the inclusion of Montague Island in the WSA.