

July 31, 2009

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
United States Senate
709 HSOB
Washington, DC 20510-0203

The Honorable Mark Begich
United States Senate
144 RSOB
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Denali National Park Mountaineering Fees

Dear Senators Murkowski and Begich:

We write today to request your help in ensuring that the operations of Denali National Park are fully funded.

We are the owners and operators of Alaskan small businesses that serve clients who wish to experience the grandeur of Denali National Park firsthand. We have recently learned of a possible Park fee increase which would directly affect our clients and adversely impact our ability to run our businesses and operate in the Park.

On May 9, 2009 representatives from several Alaskan guide services, climber advocacy organizations, and other interested parties met with Denali National Park Superintendent Paul R. Anderson to discuss a number of issues related to climbing in the Park. During the course of this meeting, Mr. Anderson expressed concern over the Park budget and indicated that he may be forced to increase the fee for attempting Mt. McKinley and Mt. Foraker from \$200 to \$500. We request your help in assuring that Denali National Park is funded adequately so that the Park does not inappropriately look to the climbing community and small business owners to shoulder budget shortfalls.

Fees in Denali National Park

Every visitor to Denali National Park must pay an entrance fee of \$10.00 per person or \$20.00 per family. The special-use fee for climbers on Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker was originally \$150 and was first charged in 1995. In 2005, the fee was increased to \$200. No other user groups are charged such a fee. Hikers, backpackers, hunters, snowmobilers and other backcountry users are not currently charged fees for accessing the backcountry, though they incur significant amounts of management time and expense.

The \$200 per person climbing fee for Denali and Foraker is not proportional to like recreation fees charged elsewhere on federal lands. Before the NPS looks to expand mountaineering fees, the Park should look at other, non-mountaineering related programs to determine how much it costs to provide these services and what percentage of these costs are passed on to the visitors who use them.

The NPS website for Denali states that part of this \$200 mountaineering fee goes towards hiring seasonal staff, providing mountaineering booklets and information, and keeping the mountain environment clean. Other user groups requiring seasonal staff, educational

programs (such as bear education for campers in the north part of Denali NP) or clean-up efforts are not charged a similar fee. It appears that climbers are inappropriately being singled out. While some climbers on Denali are wealthy, many can just barely afford to make the climb. An even higher fee could make the climb prohibitively expensive for the general public as well as our clients.

From our perspective, this management practice may be counter to NPS policies, which state that “[f]ee rates will be reasonable and equitable, and consistent with criteria and procedures contained in law and NPS guidance documents.” NPS Policy Manual Section 8.2.6.1.

We suspect that climbers are currently being targeted for a fee increase for expediency. Climbers have already been paying fees so an easier solution to a budget deficit is to increase the fee on climbers rather than creating a more equitable structure with new fees for other groups.

Nationwide Support

The three national nonprofit organizations dedicated to serving and representing the interests of the climbing community have endorsed our position. The Access Fund¹, American Alpine Club² and the American Mountain Guides Association³ consider this a national issue affecting all American climbers and are deeply concerned by the prospect of the federal government unfairly shifting more of the burden of the Park’s budget onto the shoulders of climbers.

Possible Solutions

Unless all user groups pay fees to equitably offset their management costs (which is a future scenario for which we certainly do not advocate), the best solution is for the federal government to adequately fund the Park so as to avoid a budget deficit. Superintendent Paul Anderson indicated that the South Side Rangers and other services directed toward climbers cost the park approximately \$1.3 million a year. As Congress sets the Federal Budget for the upcoming fiscal year, we ask that accommodations are made to cover an approximate \$1 million shortfall between what the Park needs to operate the South Side Ranger Station and the considerable existing contribution by the climbing community.

¹ The Access Fund is a non-profit advocacy group representing the interests of approximately one million rock climbers and mountaineers in the United States. The Access Fund’s mission is to keep climbing areas open and to conserve the climbing environment. For more information please visit www.accessfund.org.

² The American Alpine Club (AAC) inspires and supports the climbing community and protects its playgrounds around the world. The AAC is perhaps best known for publishing the American Alpine Journal, caring for the world’s leading mountaineering library and offering annual climbing, conservation and research grants to budding adventurers. Learn more at www.americanalpineclub.org.

³ The American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) is an educational non-profit that is the premier source for training, credentials, and services for professional mountain guides and climbing instructors in the United States. AMGA Certified Guides & Climbing Instructors are the leading influences in the mountain community. For more information please visit www.amga.com.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue affecting Alaskan small businesses and Americans wishing to visit one of our greatest national treasures, Denali National Park.

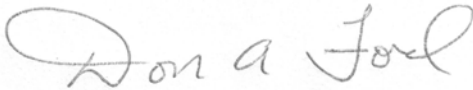
Best regards,



Todd Burleson, President, Alpine Ascents International



Colby Coombs, Owner, Alaska Mountaineering School



Don Ford, Alaska Branch Director, National Outdoor Leadership School



Dunham Gooding, President, American Alpine Institute



Paul Rodrick, Owner, Talkeetna Air Taxi



Matt Szundy, Owner/Director, Ascending Path LLC



Susan Rust, Owner, K2 Aviation



Todd Rutledge, Co-owner, Mountain Trip Guides

cc: Brady Robinson, Executive Director, Access Fund
Betsy Novak, Executive Director, American Mountain Guides Association
Phil Powers, Executive Director, American Alpine Club