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Opinions

Opinion: It's time to speak up for Alaska's national wildlife refuges

By Marilyn Sigman

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Volunteers head out to conduct research on bear and salmon at Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge. (Lisa Hupp/USFWS).

Huge herds of migrating caribou. Musk ox in their shaggy coats. Bears, wolves, wolverines. Sheep and goats high in the mountains. Millions of swirling seabirds. Nesting ducks and geese and songbirds! Fish! And then there's the habitat — tundra, meadows, wetlands, cliffs and forest. Alaska's sixteen National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs) not only conserve and protect all that "nature" but contribute to the lives of Alaskans and to Alaska's economies. At a combined 76 million acres, they make up 88% of the lands in the entire National Wildlife Refuge system. They range from the 19-million-acre Arctic NWR to the 2,400 islands, islets, headlands, rocks and spires that make up the 4.9 million-acre Alaska Maritime NWR.

While our refuges — unlike parks, meant for people — are primarily managed for wildlife and habitats, they are not "empty." They allow for hunting, fishing, recreation and subsistence uses, and include visitor centers and youth camps. The Kenai Refuge alone hosts more than a million visits each year. Scientific research on these lands deepens our knowledge of the world and adds to responsible management decisions.

Here's the problem: as important as they are, refuges are low-key and low-profile. Devastating budgetary cuts are simply not as visible as those in most other parts of our government. These cuts, begun by DOGE and now being solidified in proposed budgets, are putting the lands and wildlife at risk and causing both environmental and economic harm to Alaska and Alaskans.

Consider this: The refuge system has never been sufficiently staffed for its mission. According to the National Wildlife Refuge Association, staffing of the refuge system nationally was reduced by 30% over the last 15 years; in Alaska it has been a bare-bones operation. Now, actions by DOGE have resulted in a reduction of an estimated 20% of refuge staff in Alaska since January, and more retirements and resignations are anticipated. A hiring freeze remains in place. The huge 22% budget cut for the National Refuge system proposed in the president's

budget for next year will reduce the capacity to manage Alaska's refuges even further.

While it's hard to track numbers and results precisely, we know that in Alaska only four of the 16 refuges now have managers. Six of the largest refuges have only three or four employees. Only two pilots remain to fly fish and wildlife surveys on all the refuges and to transport researchers, and one of the two is set to retire. Maintenance staff barely exist. A shortage of visitor center staff means that centers will be partially or fully closed and programs reduced. (Visitor centers are cornerstones of tourism economies in many towns and villages.) Volunteers, including those from the non-profit Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges, are stepping up but can only do so much without staff oversight.

These cuts mean that the refuges can no longer fulfill their missions of managing not just wildlife and habitats but the subsistence, recreational, and educational needs of Alaskans. And, if a goal of the Trump administration is resource development in and around the refuges, there will be little scientific data or environmental protections available for informed decision-making.

Alaskans may disagree among themselves about the management of refuge lands — witness the long-running controversy about oil and gas development within the Arctic refuge — but few would think that neglect and abuse are desirable or that skilled, dedicated federal employees aren't important. Professional management and research are essential not just for protecting our lands but to contribute to decisions about future land-use decisions.

There are many aspects of President Trump's agenda to be concerned about, with many risks to health, safety and our economy, and our public lands may not be at the top of everyone's minds. As the Friends group for Alaska's National Wildlife Refuges, we're asking Alaskans, though, to give some attention to the values of our public lands and what will be lost if hiring freezes and ill-advised budget cuts

are allowed to persist. Calls and emails to our congressional delegation can make a difference, as can asking others, inside and outside of Alaska, to raise their voices.

Marilyn Sigman chairs the board of the non-profit organization [Friends of Alaska National Wildlife Refuges](#) and is a writer and a retired state and federal wildlife and habitat biologist and environmental and science educator.

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Sources of factual statements: The staff reduction statements have been verified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The magnitude of past staffing reductions and budget cuts to the National Wildlife Refuge System has been tracked by the National Wildlife Refuge Association.

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