Proposal to close a 2-mile-wide corridor along the Ambler Road to hunting and trapping - as follows:

5 AAC 92.510. Areas closed to hunting.

(a) The following areas are closed to hunting as specified:

(21) Units 23 and 24: the area within one mile of each side of the center line of the Ambler Road right-of-way, a planned industrial road extending west from Mile Post 161 of the Dalton Highway for approximately 211 miles to the Ambler Mining District and consisting of a strip of land 250 - 400 feet wide and including access roads, turnout lanes, culverts, and bridges, as shown in ADL 421741 – Ambler Road Right-of-Way Appendix A – Alignment Overview Map A-1 of 19, issued by the northern regional office of the division of mining, land and water, Department of Natural Resources, and dated January 28, 2022, incorporated by reference, is closed to hunting from July 1, 2029, through January 1, 2036, unless extended by the board.

5 AAC 92.550. Areas closed to trapping. The following areas are closed to the trapping of furbearers as indicated:

(11) Units 23 and 24: the area within one mile of each side of the center line of the Ambler Road right-of-way, a planned industrial road extending west from Mile Post 161 of the Dalton Highway for approximately 211 miles to the Ambler Mining District and consisting of a strip of land 250 - 400 feet wide and including access roads, turnout lanes, culverts, and bridges, as shown in ADL 421741 – Ambler Road Right-of-Way Appendix A – Alignment Overview Map A-1 of 19, issued by the northern regional office of the division of mining, land and water, Department of Natural Resources, and dated January 28, 2022, incorporated by reference, is closed to trapping from July 1, 2029, through January 1, 2036, unless extended by the board.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department Fish and Game

WHAT WOULD THE PROPOSAL DO? This proposal would close a 2-mile-wide corridor (1 mile from each side of the road including the driveable surface) along the Ambler Road to hunting and trapping from July 1, 2029 to January 1, 2036. However, hunters and trappers would not be prohibited from crossing the corridor to access open areas for hunting and trapping.

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT REGULATIONS? Hunting seasons within the impacted portions of Units 23, 24A, and 24B are primarily administered with a mix of general season harvest tickets and registration permits; there is also a drawing permit for moose within the portion of Unit 24A within the Dalton Highway Corridor Management Area. Refer to the *2025-2026 Alaska Hunting Regulations,* the *2025-2026 Alaska Trapping Regulations*, and the *2025-2026 Alaska Migratory Bird Hunting Regulations* for specific details about hunting and

trapping seasons within Units 23, 24A, and 24B.

Some of the moose and caribou herds in the area have positive intensive management findings, which can be found in 5 AAC 92.108. Most species within the area have positive customary and traditional use findings, which can be found in 5 AAC 99.025. The amounts necessary for subsistence uses for applicable species can be found in 5 AAC 99.025.

WHAT WOULD BE THE EFFECT IF THE PROPOSAL WERE ADOPTED? Hunting and trapping would be prohibited within a 2-mile corridor, along the length of the proposed 211-mile-long road to the Ambler Mining District. The road originates at the Dalton Highway in Unit 24A and will extend west across Unit 24 and terminate in the Ambler Mining District in Unit 23. There would be a loss of hunting and trapping opportunity, for all species with open seasons, within the corridor, encompassing 420 square miles.

BACKGROUND: The access road for the Ambler Mining District is a proposed 211-mile-long road that will originate from the Dalton Highway in Unit 24A and will extend west through Unit 24 and terminate in the Ambler Mining District in Unit 23. The proposed road is for commercial purposes only, is private, and access to it will be controlled by a locked gate that is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. The first 5 miles of the road will originate from the Dalton highway and will cross the Dalton Highway Corridor Management Area (DHCMA), to the west, in Unit 24A. The DHCMA is a 10-mile-wide corridor, extending 5 miles either side of the Dalton Highway. The DHCMA is closed to hunting; however, big game, small game, and fur animals may be taken in the area by bow and arrow only, and small game may be taken by falconry. The proposed Ambler road would then continue west, roughly through the center of Unit 24B, and into the eastern portion of Unit 23. The proposed road route would cross lands owned and managed by various agencies and organizations. The proposed route would also cross several RS2477 rights-of-way trails, navigable waters, and existing trapline trails.

Moose: The department regularly conducts moose surveys in Units 24A and 24B to estimate abundance and track trends in population size. Moose abundance in Unit 24A is currently estimated at 790 moose (0.2 moose/mi^2) based on extrapolated densities from other nearby survey areas and similar habitat. Moose abundance in 24B is currently estimated at 3,200 moose (0.24 moose/mi^2) based on a 2024 survey within the subunit and extrapolation to the entire subunit. Both populations are characteristic of low-density populations that exist at the extent of their northern range for interior Alaska. Over the past 5 years, an average of 137 hunters harvested 37 moose per year in Unit 24A and residents account for 61% of the harvest. Over the same time period, an average of 94 hunters harvested 39 moose per year in Unit 24B and residents account for 74% of the harvest. Moose abundance in the eastern portion of Unit 23 is assessed through the Upper Kobuk moose survey which is conducted every 5 years. The survey area encompasses all drainages into the Kobuk River from the community of Ambler upstream to the river's headwaters at the Unit 23/Unit 24 border. The most recent abundance

estimates from surveys in 2014 and 2019 averaged 664 moose (0.13 moose/mi^2) and are also characteristic of low-density populations. Over the past 5 years, an average of 40 hunters harvested 14 moose per year within the Upper Kobuk survey area and residents account for 100% of the harvest.

Caribou: The proposed road route would cross the historical range of the Western Arctic Caribou herd (WAH). This portion of their range is an important wintering area for the WAH. The department regularly conducts photocensus surveys of the WAH to estimate abundance. The most current population estimate of the WAH occurred in 2025 and estimated the herd at 121,000 caribou. The WAH has been in decline since 2003 from a high of 490,000. Other caribou herds exist either to the north or south of the proposed road and include the Teshekpuk, Central Arctic, Hodzana Hills, Ray Mountins, and Wolf Mountain caribou herds. Over the past 5 years, an average of 72 hunters harvested 26 caribou per year in Unit 24A and residents account for 82% of the harvest. However, most of this harvest has been from the Central Arctic or Porcupine caribou herds in the northern portion of Unit 24A and north of the proposed road route. Over the same time
period, an average of 12 hunters harvested 4 caribou per year in Unit 24B and residents account for 50% of the harvest. Unit 23 caribou harvest is estimated to be approximately 12,000 caribou annually from the WAH. Department subsistence household harvest surveys suggest the average caribou harvest for the communities adjacent to the Ambler mining district and proposed road (Ambler, Kobuk and Shungnak) is approximately 675 caribou per year. Caribou harvest rates can be highly variable based on access to the caribou and the timing of their arrival near communities. Additional harvest takes place within the proposed road corridor from hunters travelling from nearby communities including; Selawik, Kiana, Noorvik, Kotzebue, Huslia and others.

Sheep: Potential sheep habitat is generally classified as mountainous terrain above 3,000' of elevation. The proposed road route does not appear to traverse any sheep habitat but comes into close proximity to the most southern portion of potential sheep habitat in the Brooks Range.
Although the department regularly conducts sheep surveys in a portion of Unit 24A to estimate composition the survey area is in northern Unit 24A and north of the proposed road route. Over the past 5 years, an average of 37 hunters harvested 7 sheep in Unit 24A and residents account for 39% of the harvest. Over the same time period, an average of 7 hunters harvested 1 sheep in Unit 24B and residents account for 0% of the harvest. Sheep abundance in the Schwatka mountains of Unit 23, north and east of Kobuk, have not been completed in recent years due to low and declining abundance observed throughout the remainder of the Unit. Correspondingly, sheep hunting throughout Unit 23 has been closed under state regulation since regulatory year 2014.

Brown and Black Bears: The department does not conduct brown or black bear surveys in Units 24A, 24B, or 23. Black bear harvest in all of these units is unknown because harvest

reporting and sealing are not required. However, the harvest of brown bears is tracked across these units through general season reporting, subsistence permits, registration permits, and sealing requirements. Over the past 5 years, an average of 9 brown bears were harvested per year in Unit 24A and residents accounted for 44% of the harvest. Over the same time period, an average of 4 brown bears were harvested in Unit 24B per year and residents accounted for 25% of the harvest. For the portion of Unit 23 in the Upper Kobuk, over the past 5 years, an average of 2 bears were harvested per year and residents accounted for 75% of the harvest.

Muskox: Muskox are not formally surveyed in Unit 24A, 24B, or the Upper Kobuk portion of Unit 23, but have, on a few occasions, been observed while conducting surveys for other wildlife. An established population is not known to be present within the proposed Ambler road corridor. However, muskox in Unit 23 are expanding geographically. There are no established muskox hunts near the proposed Ambler road route.

Furbearers: Furbearers exist throughout all of Unit 24A, 24B, and 23 and include wolves, wolverine, marten, lynx, fox, coyote, mink, weasel, beaver, river otter, and muskrat. With the exception of wolves, no furbearer surveys are conducted in the area to determine population size and trend. The most recent wolf survey in Unit 24B resulted in an estimate of 14.5 wolves/1,000
mi^2. Harvests of furbearers are unknown for most species as reporting is not required. However, for those species that are required to be sealed, average annual harvest over the past 5 years, across Units 24A, 24B, and the Upper Kobuk in Unit 23 combined, was 43 for wolves, 30 for wolverines, 30 for lynx, and 9 for river otters.

Small game and Waterfowl: Small game including spruce grouse, ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, ptarmigan, and snowshoe hares occur in Units 24A, 24B and 23, year-round, including in the proposed road corridor. Abundance is unknown for all species. Harvest levels are unknown as reporting is not required for any species. The department estimates harvest to be low and similar to other areas of the state. Waterfowl are present in Units 24A, 24B, and 23 during the breeding season, from roughly late April through early October. These game management units are largely devoid of waterfowl during the remaining months of the year. Waterfowl species that may commonly breed in these units include greater white-fronted geese, Canada geese, trumpeter swan, northern shoveler, American wigeon, mallard, northern pintail, green-winged teal, canvasback, lesser scaup, harlequin duck, bufflehead, common goldeneye, Barrow's goldeneye, white-winged scoter, surf scoter, common merganser, and red-breasted merganser. Harvest levels of waterfowl in these units are unknown.

DEPARTMENT COMMENTS: The department submitted and **SUPPORTS** this proposal. The Ambler road has not been constructed and submission of this proposal will assist in the planning process for future construction and use of the road.

The department has no biological concern for any species as a result of the proposed road. Effects on animal movement in relation to the road can be mitigated by reducing activity and

traffic temporally during identified times of day and season, and spatially for known, and identified wildlife movement corridors.

The road corridor closure area is estimated to be 420 square miles. This proposal eliminates all hunting and trapping within the corridor for approximately 6.5 years, unless the board extends the closure. The proposal will allow access across the corridor to access areas where hunting and trapping seasons are open. Based on harvest data the level of harvest in the corridor is low. However, there are known active trap lines and hunting areas within the corridor. The department anticipates additional regulatory action may be needed to address any issues that arise once road construction begins and operational use starts. Additional regulatory needs will be addressed through regularly scheduled board cycles, and other avenues when warranted. Issues such as access to mining claims and hunting and trapping on spur roads within the corridor; intersection of navigable waters and the corridor and permitted activities on the waterways; and enforcement of fish and wildlife regulations within the road corridor have been voiced by the public. These issues are largely outside the purview of the board and department but are being illuminated because such questions from the public have been posed to the department.

To meet the board's statutory responsibility to the subsistence law, it should consider whether regulations continue to provide a reasonable opportunity for subsistence uses if the proposal is adopted.

COST ANALYSIS: Adoption of this proposal would not result in additional costs for the department. Once the road is constructed the department anticipates the need for an outreach effort to provide pertinent regulatory information to hunters and trappers and this effort will result in additional costs to the department.

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