



Sen. Jesse Bjorkman, R-Nikiski, speaks during a joint luncheon of the Kenai and Soldotna Chambers of Commerce in Kenai, Alaska, on Wednesday, June 4, 2025. (Jake Dye/Peninsula Clarion)

Opinion: Alaskans deserve a real voice in decisions about public land

By Sen. Jesse Bjorkman

Friday, January 2, 2026 12:37pm | [OPINION](#) [ALASKA LEGISLATURE](#) [FORESTRY](#) [OPINION](#)
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Like many Alaskans, I was caught off guard when meetings were announced about the idea of creating a state forest on the Kenai Peninsula. Since then, it has been very encouraging to see how many people care deeply about the public lands that are such an important part of our lives. I feel the same way. Protecting access to the places where we camp, fish, hunt, snowmachine, and explore with our families is something I take to heart.

I want to be clear from the start: this idea did not come from me, and I'm not pushing a proposal. My office simply shared meeting information so Alaskans could be informed and comment, and a staff member passed along a map that DNR had provided. Most importantly, land covered under the Caribou Hills Management Plan will not be included in any state forest designation.

Even so, it's healthy for us to talk about the longterm future of our public lands. Alaska is changing, and the Kenai Peninsula is changing with it. If we want our kids and grandkids to enjoy the same access we have today, we can't just hope things stay the same. We need to think ahead.

Right now, the Division of Mining, Land and Water (DMLW) can already permit many of the activities people are worried about. These include land sales into private ownership, mining, farming, and other commercial uses. These actions can happen without the Legislature being involved. Some of these uses may make sense in certain places, but Alaskans deserve a real voice in decisions about public land. A state forest, a recreation area, or another legislative designation could be one way to protect public access and ensure the public stays involved and your opinions are valued.

People have also asked why a state forest would matter if DNR can already sell timber. The difference is that state forests are managed with longterm public use in mind. They support reforestation after beetle kill or wildfire, help with planning and improvements, and allow for infrastructure like roads and firebreaks that reduce wildfire risk and improve wildlife habitat. They're designed to keep land open and healthy for the long haul.

If a state forest were ever formally proposed via legislation, local residents would have a major say in what land, if any, should be included. Whether the right answer ends up being a state forest, a recreation area, or something else entirely, having a plan is the best way to protect the places we love.

It's also important to remember that DNR hasn't drawn any lines on a map about an official state forest proposal. They're gathering input first. Only the Legislature can create a state forest, and nothing moves forward without a public process.

A state forest wouldn't take away the activities we enjoy. People would still camp, hunt, fish, and snow machine. Because trees take more than a century to mature, only a very small portion of timber would ever be eligible for harvest in a given year, with protections for fish habitat and water quality built in.

Some folks have wondered whether this is tied to carbon projects. It isn't. State forests existed long before carbon credits. Carbon projects can already happen on DMLWmanaged land without any new designation.

If you'd like to learn more or share your thoughts, there's a public meeting in Homer on January 6 at 6 p.m. at Kenai Peninsula College, and a recording of a recent online meeting is available on DNR's YouTube channel. Comments are welcome until 5 p.m. on January 16 at stateforests@alaska.gov or by mail to the Alaska Division of Forestry & Fire Protection, ATTN: Special Projects Coordinator, 550 W. 7th Ave. Ste. 1450, Anchorage, AK 99501.

Sen. Jesse Bjorkman, R-Nikiski, represents District D on the Kenai Peninsula in the Alaska State Legislature.



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