



United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge
101 12th Ave. Room 264
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701



PUBLIC NOTICE

October 21, 2014

Notice of Availability: Compatibility Determination: Rocket & Payload Impact and Recovery

This notice invites the public to review and comment on the effects of proposed use of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in removing rocket debris from the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) lands. The refuge manager is preparing a compatibility determination for proposed activities associated with the Poker Flats Research Range sounding rockets recovery and removal project on the Refuge. In this compatibility determination the refuge manager will evaluate how this project will affect refuge lands located within the potential impact areas described in NASA's 2013 Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

What is the use? The use, as described by the applicant, will be the, "Impact of one or more stages of multistage rocket and entrance onto refuge lands to recover spent motors." Since 1969, NASA, in cooperation with the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, has launched sounding rockets from the Poker Flats Research Range, near Fairbanks, Alaska, for the purposes of exploring upper atmospheric phenomena. Since the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1980 by the Alaska National Interests Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), debris from these rockets has been deposited across Refuge land. The applicant is proposing to implement rigorous recovery efforts of past and future launch related debris from these lands. All recovery operations will be coordinated with the Refuge prior to entry.

Where would the use occur? The landings could occur across the entire Yukon Flats region between Stevens Village and Chalkyitsik. These impacts would be predominantly from the early stages of the rocket vehicle.

When would the use occur? The Refuge is considering issuing a Special Use Permit for deposition and removal activities for an average of four, but no more than eight, launches per year, and removal of any debris located from previous launches. The Special Use Permit would cover a ten year period. The majority of rocket launches and subsequent deposits will occur between January and March beginning 2015, with removal activities occurring throughout the year as weather permits.

How would the use be conducted? After a launch occurs, the applicant will aerially survey the predicted impact area for rocket material via a small helicopter. Locations of equipment will be recorded and two person crews will attempt to recover the rocket debris. Efforts will be less than one day on site. Debris of historic rocket launches will also be removed as located.

Why is the use proposed? The National Aeronautics and Space Administration has released a *Final EIS for the Sounding Rockets Program at Poker Flat Research Range*. This document describes the project, including the proposed use covered by the compatibility determination. To facilitate their continued atmospheric research based out of interior Alaska, NASA and their collaborators have requested approval to conduct equipment retrieval missions on the Refuge.

Public comments must be in writing and received at the refuge headquarters by 11:59 pm AKST on November 4, 2014 to be considered. Both U.S. Mail and e-mail comments will be accepted. The final compatibility determination on this use should be available November 30, 2014. Copies can be obtained from the refuge manager. Anyone providing comments will be notified of the final compatibility determination and provided a copy of the final compatibility determination. This determination will only evaluate the effects of the activity on Refuge lands and focus on how the project would affect the ability of the refuge to achieve its purposes.

We invite the public to provide relevant information and express their views on whether or not this project will materially interfere with or detract from refuge's ability to meet its mandated purposes. Refuge purposes include: preserving unique wildlife, wilderness and recreation values; conserving fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity; fulfilling international treaty obligations with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats; providing the opportunity for continued subsistence uses by local residents; and ensuring water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge. The 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act requires the refuge manager to determine whether any proposed or existing public use will "materially interfere with or detract from" the refuge's conservation mandates before it is permitted or allowed to continue. These lands were once refuge lands that were deeded to Alaska Native Village Corporations under the provisions of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act Section 22(g) with specific restrictions, called covenants, on their use "...such lands remain subject to the laws and regulations governing use and development of such Refuge." When making compatibility determinations on 22(g) lands refuge managers focus on how the impacts of the proposed use would affect adjacent refuge lands and the degree that the proposed use would materially interfere with the refuge's ability to achieve its legally mandated purposes. This is the fundamental protection provided to the parent refuges from the effects of uses of 22(g) lands that Congress provided in Section 22(g) of ANCSA.

The draft compatibility determination is available for review on the US Fish and Wildlife Service – Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge Web site, http://www.fws.gov/refuge/yukon_flats/ and at <https://www.facebook.com/YukonFlatsNationalWildlifeRefuge?ref=hl>

For more information or to provide comments by November 4, 2014, 1) write to the Yukon Flats NWR address provided above; 2) call 907-456-0408 or 3) write to yukonflats_refuge@fws.gov.