Environmental Assessment
Visitor Center Construction
Kenai National Wildlife Refuge
Soldotna, Alaska

January 2010

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (KENWR) was established by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1941. Since that time it has been a popular destination for outdoor recreation enthusiasts from throughout Alaska and around the world. People come to enjoy a wide range of activities, with most of the use concentrated in the summer when fishing is at its peak. This document assesses the impacts on the human environment of the proposed construction of a new visitor center at Refuge Headquarters just south of Soldotna, Alaska.

2.0 PURPOSE AND NEED STATEMENT

The current KENWR Visitor Center occupies approximately 2,400 square feet of an administrative building located on Ski Hill Road, south of Soldotna. The current structure and original exhibits were installed in 1979. A new facility to better serve visitors at Alaska's highest-visited National Wildlife Refuge, with over one million visits recorded per year, has been a goal of ours for a number of years and is included as Objective 8.15 in the Refuge's revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) (USFWS 2009). With a new facility, Refuge visitors will be able to more effectively plan what is for many a "once in a lifetime" experience of visiting Alaska. Through informational programs, visitors will learn how to enjoy the Refuge and minimize impacts to habitat and wildlife. They can also learn about the conservation history and importance of the Refuge and the Refuge System in conserving our nation's wildlife heritage.

3.0 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Three alternatives are evaluated. Alternative A (no action) will continue current operations with the existing facility. Alternative B will be for construction of a new wing at the existing Refuge Headquarters. Alternative C (preferred alternative) will be for construction of a separate facility at the Headquarters, using the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) Visitor Center Construction Model. Alternative sites were not considered due to the location of established Refuge infrastructure.

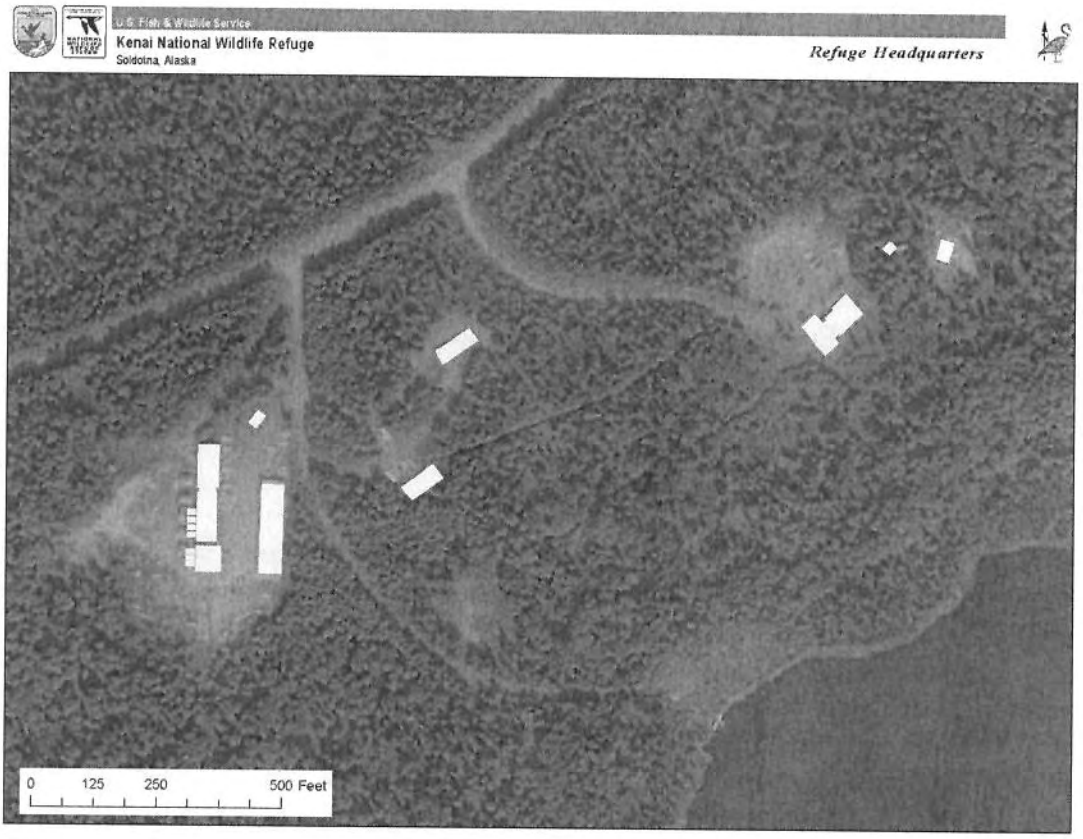

Figure 1 Aerial view showing existing structures and roads.

3.1 Alternative A: No Action

Under Alternative A, visitors will continue to be served in the existing visitor center housed in the Refuge Headquarters (administrative) building. This area has been developed since 1979 and is a focal point for local residents who use the Refuge and new visitors coming to seek information about recreational opportunities. Individual exhibits would be updated or replaced periodically as additional funding becomes available. Current visitor space is approximately 2,400 square feet, and was not originally designed as visitor space (personal communication between Doug Staller and Mike Boylan, 2008). Exhibits do not meet Federal accessibility standards or the needs of visitors. The current parking lot is inadequate during peak periods of visitation, with visitors often unable to access the building in a timely manner for information or interpretive materials.

3.2 Alternative B: Add on to existing administrative building

Under Alternative B, an addition will be made to the existing Headquarters building utilizing the heating, sanitary, electrical and other utilities that are currently in place. The parking lot will be expanded by approximately 50% to accommodate recreational vehicles and motor homes.

3.3 Alternative C (Preferred Alternative): Construct a separate building for the visitor center.

Under Alternative C, a separate facility will be designed and built to meet the needs of visitors. This facility will be placed approximately 100 yards to the southwest of the existing administrative building which contains the current visitor center. The new 6500 square foot building will sit on approximately 3 acres at the Headquarters site and meet LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards as established by the US Green Building Council.

4.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The Refuge Headquarters site is located southeast of Soldotna, Alaska within the KENWR (Figure 1). The KENWR was set aside as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System in 1941 as the Kenai National Moose Range. In 1980, under provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), the refuge name and purposes were changed and acreage was added. In 1985, as required by ANILCA, a Final CCP, Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and Wilderness Review document were published that described in detail the physical, biological, and human environments of the KENWR. A draft revised CCP/EIS was released for public review in May 2008; the document was subsequently finalized in August 2009. One of the specific objectives in the Plan is the need for a new visitor center (Objective 8.15 of the Plan, page 2-147). The sections that follow provide an overview of KENWR derived from this document.

4.1 Physical Environment

Topography: The western portion of the Kenai Peninsula is characterized by the Kenai Lowlands. These lowlands consist of ground moraine and stagnant ice terrain with low ridges, hills, and muskeg. Relief ranges from 50 to 250 feet and most of the land is less than 500 feet above mean sea level. The lowlands are within the Cook Inlet Sedimentary Basin, the reservoir for oil and gas in the area.

Soils: The Kenai Lowlands are mantled by glacial deposits that vary in texture and are overlain by well-drained to poorly drained silt loams. Depression areas such as muskeg are usually covered by peat soils produced by the slow decomposition of organic materials in the subarctic climate. Although some of the soils can be productive, most are considered submarginal for agriculture. Sloped areas are vulnerable to erosion, especially if the vegetation cover is removed.

Water Resources: The Kenai Lowlands are dotted with thousands of lakes, most of which lie within the KENWR and accounts for fifty-four percent of the watershed of the Kenai River, the largest river system on the Peninsula. As one of the ten major tributaries that feed into the Kenai River System, Beaver Creek is the main drainage in the area. Beaver Lake, the other main water body in the area, is the headwaters of the east fork of

Beaver Creek. All lakes, ponds, streams, and wetlands that drain into the Kenai River from the Beaver Creek drainage fall within the Kenai Special Management Area (Alaska Department of Natural Resources [ADNR] 1998).

4.2 Biological Environment

Vegetation: The vegetation of the KENWR may be divided into three major classes: 1) humid coastal forests dominated by Sitka spruce (*Picea stichensis*), 2) interior forests of white and black spruce (*Picea glauca, P. mariana*) with a mixture of birch (*Betula papyrifera*), and 3) mountain tundra, including glaciers and snowfields. The Refuge Headquarters is found within the interior forest zone and consists of a mosaic of spruce forest, swampy forests of black spruce, peatbogs, and grassy mires. Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) is also found with white spruce and birch.

Many fires have occurred on the Kenai Lowlands over the past 150 years. There were major fires of unknown origin in 1871, 1883, 1891, and 1910. In 1947 and 1969, two large human-caused fires burned 310,000 acres and 86,000 acres, respectively. Since 2000, more than 100,000 acres have burned on the KENWR and adjacent to its boundaries. While there is no known history of wildfires within the Headquarters area, there have been many large fires within a ten-mile radius of the Headquarters building. Historically, these fires replaced mature mixed forests with a mosaic of forest types in various states of succession. This mixture of vegetation and age classes provides excellent habitat for certain species of wildlife such as moose. However, due to the proximity of the Refuge Headquarters to the community of Soldotna and the aggressive wildfire suppression that typically occurs in wildland-urban interface areas, the vegetation has now aged to the point that moose habitat values have declined. For the past decade, the Refuge Fire staff has been actively engaged in creating and maintaining a FireWise landscape around Refuge Headquarters facilities.

Wildlife and Wildlife Habitats: The KENWR includes a variety of wildlife habitats and species. A 1984 Technical Supplement to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge EIS (Bailey 1984) acknowledges 202 species of amphibians, birds, and mammals that permanently reside in, seasonally use, or are casual or rare visitors to the KENWR. None of these species are known to be threatened or endangered. The ecologically dominant or keystone species (those species most numerous in an ecological community) for the KENWR habitats include:

Habitat Type	Ecologically Dominant Species	Representative Species
Wetlands	Caribou, sandhill crane, common snipe, wood frog, bog lemming, arctic tern, least sandpiper, northern harrier, greater yellowlegs, mew gull, red-necked phalarope	Greater yellowlegs
Mature Forest	Black bear, masked shrew, red	Three-toed woodpecker

(70-200 years)	squirrel, black-capped chickadee, spruce grouse, yellow-rumped warbler, hairy woodpecker, three-toed woodpecker, great horned owl	
Intermediate Stage Forest (40-70 years)	Black bear, lynx, wolf, porcupine, red-backed vole, spruce grouse, yellow-rumped warbler, gray jay, Dark-eyed junco, great horned owl	Myrtle warbler
Intermediate Stage Forest (20-40 years)	Wolf, moose, snowshoe hare coyote, masked shrew, red-backed vole, dark-eyed junco, white-crowned sparrow, yellow warbler, song sparrow	Moose and wolf

Wetland habitats, which include bogs and peatlands, are found in the vicinity of the Headquarters area, including isolated palustrine emergent, scrub/shrub, and open water wetlands.

Mature forest habitat, which is characterized by trees 70-200 years of age, is also found in the area. The spruce bark beetle has caused significant mortality of mature white spruce forests throughout much of the Western Kenai Peninsula. While mortality of mature spruce stands has occurred within the area, many of the older trees remain in small untouched stands, perhaps because they are somewhat isolated from each other as result of the 1969 wildfire that left a discontinuous mosaic of older trees in some areas.

Intermediate stage forest habitat, comprised of primarily 20-40 year old trees, is the dominant forest habitat type in the area since much of the area burned in 1969. Early successional stage forest habitat, dominated by trees less than 20 years old, is now rare in the area. This habitat type is the most productive for moose and snowshoe hares, and the predatory animals that feed primarily on these species such as wolves and lynx. Moose numbers in the area, though still strong, are believed to be declining as the habitat quality declines. Wolf and black bear numbers are believed to be stable. Snowshoe hare numbers fluctuate widely under normal cycles and are now rebuilding after several years of a population low. Lynx numbers generally follow the hare population cycles. Brown bears and wolverine are found in the area and their population status is of special interest throughout the KENWR because of their rarity. Red fox and marten, while once were believed to occur in the area, are now rare or absent. Bald eagles, osprey, and several species of hawks and owls are common throughout the area.

4.3 Socioeconomic Environment

Social and Economic Characteristics: The Refuge Headquarters site is within the Kenai Peninsula Borough, which has a population of 53,017 Alaska Department of

Commerce, Community, and Economic Development). More than half of the people in the Borough live in or near the cities of Kenai, Soldotna, Sterling, Kasilof, and Nikiski with the largest of these cities being Kenai. The Borough supports a diversified economy with basic industries including oil and gas extraction, petroleum refining, fishing and fish processing, recreation and tourism, timber harvesting, and transportation. Nikiski is the center of oil and gas activities on the Peninsula and the city of Kenai is the nearest population center located approximately 8 miles from the Beaver Creek Gas Field area.

Scenic Resources: The effects of ice, water, and vegetation over time have produced spectacular scenic views on the Kenai Peninsula. This aesthetic quality is noted in ANILCA as a concern to be addressed during Refuge planning. The scenic character of KENWR has been altered in some areas by electric transmission lines, roads, recreation facilities, wildlife habitat manipulation activities, oil and gas operations, and timber removal. These features and practices have created urbanization within an otherwise natural landscape.

Cultural Resources: Archeological studies on the Kenai Peninsula began in the 1930's and have revealed approximately 10,000 years of human history in the area, including occupation by Kachemak Eskimo and Athabascan Indian peoples. Most known archeological sites in the refuge are on dry terraces adjacent to major rivers and lakes. Based on geography, characteristics of the terrain and previous archaeological surveys, there is a low probability of finding new sites of cultural significance in the immediate vicinity of the Headquarters.

Historical Resources: Several sites within KENWR have been selected as historic or cemetery sites under Section 14(h)(1) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). Additionally, numerous historic cabins are also found on the KENWR. Many of these sites and structures may meet the criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places; however, none of these sites or structures occur within the area under consideration.

Subsistence: Much of the Kenai Peninsula is considered non-rural under federal subsistence management regulations and little subsistence activity occurs in the area today. Five communities: Ninilchik, Port Graham, Nanwalek, Cooper Landing, and Seldovia, have been determined to have customary and traditional use of moose in Game Management Unit 15A. This determination, and subsequent federal regulations, established a special moose hunting opportunity that allows qualified subsistence users to hunt for several days before the regular hunting season opens in August; however, the proposed project area is not open to hunting of any type due to refuge administrative activities and visitation by the public.

There are no federal waters within the proposed project area so there would be no impact on subsistence fishing opportunities. An ANILCA Section 810 subsistence determination accompanies this EA with a finding that the preferred alternative would not result in a significant restriction to subsistence uses and needs on KENWR.

Recreation: The KENWR has a higher level of recreational use than any other national wildlife refuge in Alaska, based on annual reporting requirements (USFWS 2009). This is due both to accessibility of the Refuge and its close proximity to the largest population center in the state, Anchorage. Recreational opportunities available on the KENWR include hunting, trapping, fishing, camping, hiking, canoeing, wildlife viewing, horseback riding, and snow machine use. In the headquarters area, the uses are more limited because of the proximity to occupied structures and areas of high visitation. The Headquarters Area Trails are popular with hikers, cross country skiers and snowshoers. The preferred alternative may necessitate the minor rerouting of one trail and placement of a new trail head due to construction of the new building.

5.0 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

5.1 Alternative A – No Action

There would be no additional impacts to the environment under this alternative. This alternative would result in the status quo, with little being done to provide improved educational opportunities or information services to the public. Crowding at the visitor center would continue to be a problem on peak visitation weekends during the summer.

Vegetation

No impacts anticipated.

Wildlife

No impacts anticipated.

Endangered Species

There are no known occurrences of federally listed threatened or endangered species at the site. The construction and subsequent visitation is not likely to impact any listed species.

Cultural Resources

A Cultural Resource survey of the entire headquarters site was conducted and there are no anticipated impacts.

Soil, Air, and Water

No impacts anticipated.

Refuge and Operations Visitation

No impacts anticipated.

Socio-economics

The local communities could see a slight increase in tourism as refuge visitors are drawn to the center for new exhibits, interpretation and outreach opportunities. There could be a modest increase in traffic, but congestion would not be a major concern.

5.2 Alternative B – Add on to existing administrative building

This alternative will provide expanded space within the existing facility for visitors to learn about the unique natural resources and outstanding recreational opportunities of the Kenai Peninsula. This alternative may result in a scenario where the capacity of existing facilities at the visitor center is strained or exceeded, requiring additional funding.

Vegetation

Removal of some spruce and alder on the west side of the existing Headquarters building will be required for access and site construction. Additional fill material will be required on the sloped areas. Site clearing for construction will be limited to approximately 5,000 square feet (an additional 5,000 square feet is already cleared and will need minimal work). Impacts to the building site, including expanded parking facilities, will be restricted to the smallest footprint that meets project requirements.

Encroachment of invasive plant species due to soil disturbance or importation of non-native substrates will (if necessary) be mitigated by treatment of soils and active monitoring for undesirable vegetation and reseeding or replanting with native species.

Wildlife

Approximately 2-3 acres of forested habitat will be removed to construct the new facility and parking area. The loss of habitat would have a negative but minimal impact to migratory birds and resident mammals. Because this habitat is located in a developed area with inherent human activity that will in all likelihood continue to displace wildlife, the relative value of this habitat is limited.

Disturbance from construction activities will displace wildlife (such as moose, and other terrestrial mammals) from the area, but this will be a short term effect. Clearing and construction activities will not occur during the nesting/breeding periods of native birds and will therefore not result in the incidental take of eggs or nestlings.

To minimize disturbance to paired bald eagles, the Refuge will avoid land-clearing and all other obtrusive activities during the local eagle nesting season of March 1 through August 31, or until young eaglets have fledged (i.e., achieve sustained flight). Additional mitigation measures to limit disturbance may be utilized, such as utilizing visual buffers, or having an observer on hand to monitor the behavior of eagles for signs of disturbance

Construction activities may disturb a small breeding population of nesting Aleutian terns that were recently discovered on the southwest side of Headquarters Lake approximately 700 feet from the construction site. Mitigation efforts to reduce disturbance to the Aleutian tern colony will include coordinating land clearing and construction activities to occur either before the nesting/incubation period or after chick fledging.

Endangered Species

There are no known occurrences of federally listed threatened or endangered species at the site. The construction and subsequent visitation is not likely to impact any listed species.

Cultural Resources

A Cultural Resource survey of the entire headquarters site was conducted in the late 1970's prior to construction of the current Headquarters administration building and there are no anticipated impacts.

Soil, Air, and Water

Erosion control measures used during the ground disturbance phase of construction will minimize any temporary impacts to soil and water quality. Local air quality may be temporarily reduced when heavy equipment is present and in use on the site.

Refuge and Operations Visitation

Construction activities may create some inconvenience to Refuge staff and visitors, primarily with regards to construction of additional parking; however, this disturbance will be short term and minor. New and improved infrastructure in the visitor center will increase awareness of wildlife and habitat sensitivity, resulting in reduced resource damage and decreased negative interactions with wildlife.

Socio-economics

The local communities could receive a minor positive impact from increased tourism related to expansion of the visitor center, with associated revenues to local businesses. Any increase in traffic to the area is not expected to cause a negative impact or congestion.

5.3 Alternative C (Preferred Alternative) – Construct a separate building for the visitor center

Approximately 3-4 acres of habitat in the Headquarters area will be removed to construct the new facility and parking area. Because this habitat is located in a developed area with inherent human activity that will in all likelihood continue to displace wildlife, the relative value of this habitat is limited. New and improved infrastructure in the visitor center will increase awareness of wildlife and habitat sensitivity, resulting in reduced resource damage and decreased negative interactions with wildlife.

There will be minimal loss of upland habitat as a result of this project. The access road to the proposed facility will follow the existing entrance road. The parking lot and facility will necessitate removal of approximately 3 acres of mixed white spruce and alder. The site was selected to take advantage of existing utilities and infrastructure.

The planned visitor center will be built at the site described above, which is approximately 550 feet from the nearest water body (Headquarters Lake). No fill will be discharged into this water body, and the elevation of this site is approximately 40 feet above any nearby wetland area.

Building and associated infrastructure will meet or exceed LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards as established by the US Green Building Council.

Vegetation

Some forest habitat removal will be required for access and site construction. Site clearing for access to the construction area and temporary facilities may be required. Impacts to areas adjacent during the construction will be temporary, as these areas will be able to regenerate after construction is completed. Impacts to the building site, including adjacent parking facilities, would require permanent removal of only the minimum vegetation necessary within the 3 acre construction area.

Encroachment of invasive plant species with soil disturbance or because of importation of non-native substrates could be mitigated by treatment of soils and active monitoring for undesirable vegetation and reseeding or replanting with native species.

Wildlife

Approximately 3 acres of forested habitat will be removed to construct the new facility and parking area. The loss of habitat will have a negative impact to migratory birds and resident mammals. Because this habitat is located in an area with inherent human activity which might continually displace wildlife, the relative value of this habitat is limited.

Disturbance from construction activities will displace wildlife (such as moose, and other terrestrial mammals) from the area, but this will be a temporary effect. Clearing and construction activities will not occur during the nesting/breeding periods and will therefore not result in the incidental take of eggs or nestlings.

Construction activities may disturb nesting bald eagles, which have historically returned to one of the 3 nests near the Headquarters Building each year. The closest bald eagle nest to the site is approximately 300 feet away. Mitigation efforts to reduce disturbance to the bald eagle pair will avoid land-clearing and all other obtrusive activities during the local eagle nesting season of March 1 through August 31, or until young eaglets have fledged (i.e., achieve sustained flight). Additional mitigation measures outside these periods will be researched to limit disturbance to the nesting pair, such as utilizing visual buffers, or having an observer on hand to monitor the behavior of the pair for signs of disturbance.

Construction activities may disturb a small breeding population of nesting Aleutian terns that were recently discovered on the southwest side of Headquarters Lake approximately 700 ft from the construction site. Mitigation efforts to reduce disturbance to the Aleutian tern colony will include coordinating land clearing and construction activities to occur either before the nesting/incubation period or after chick fledging.

Endangered Species

There are no known occurrences of Federally listed threatened or endangered species at the site. The construction and subsequent visitation is not likely to impact any listed species.

Cultural Resources

A Cultural Resource survey of the entire headquarters site was conducted and there are no anticipated impacts.

Soil, Air, and Water

Erosion control measures used during the ground disturbance phase of construction will minimize minor impacts to soil and water quality. Local air quality may be temporarily reduced when heavy equipment is present and in use on the site.

Refuge and Operations Visitation

Construction activities may create some inconvenience to Refuge staff and visitors; however, these will be short term. Improved information delivery will result in reduced resource damage and decreased negative interactions with wildlife because visitors will be better informed.

This facility will improve the understanding of the purpose and mission of KENWR visitors who use the Refuge. The ultimate goal is better informed constituency and users who will support our mission and participate in outdoor recreation activities in ways that minimize disturbance to wildlife and damage to habitat.

This project will increase use both in the facility and on Refuge trails in the immediate area. However, the additional public use will give Refuge staff more opportunities to provide enhanced awareness and education on the mission of the Refuge system as well as ways to use the Refuge that minimize disturbance and damage to wildlife and habitat. The visitor will have an increased understanding of our mission and the work we do to conserve wildlife habitat and monitor the effects of climate change, and they will become better stewards of the land through the knowledge they glean from these efforts.

Visitation to the facility and trails will be monitored, and use patterns will be analyzed in concert with localized biological monitoring to mitigate any adverse impacts in a timely manner.

Socio-economics

The local communities could receive a minor positive impact from increased tourism activities to the new Visitor Center and associated revenue to local businesses. Increased traffic to the area is not expected to cause a negative impact or congestion.

5.4 Cumulative Effects

The Kenai Soldotna Area has grown rapidly over the years and is the major tourist destination in south central Alaska.

Environmental Consequences

Alternative A, the "no action" alternative does not include the construction of a new visitor center; however, this area is currently used for refuge operations and by visitors, and receives a relatively high level of disturbance. Further, there would be no increase of economic benefits to the local community from potential expanded visitation.

Alternative B would result in a short-term disturbance to wildlife and Refuge visitors. Parking areas and access roads would be congested. Local effects from destruction of habitat and disturbance of wildlife would be minor and effects refuge-wide or at a population level would likely not be measurable.

Under Alternative C, in addition to the cumulative impacts of Alternative B there would be additional impacts from increased parking on a local scale. As the area population grows, especially in the community, visitation to the Refuge will also continue to increase as people seek areas to experience wildlife and natural places. The improved delivery of conservation messages will better prepare visitors and those in the local

community to experience the outdoors and Refuge in ways that minimize negative impacts.

Based on the analysis above and in the context of anticipated local and regional population increases and associated land development and use, the proposed construction and operation of the visitor center does not represent a significant impact on the human environment.

6.0 CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

6.1 List of Agencies/Persons Consulted

6.2 Public Participation

A public notice regarding the availability of this environmental document was posted on August 14, 2009, in the Kenai Peninsula Clarion, and the documents were made available for public review on the Kenai NWR web site at http://kenai.fws.gov/current.htm simultaneously for a 30-day period. No public comments were received regarding the EA during the comment period.

7.0 REFERENCES

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (1985). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan/Environmental Impact Statement/Final Wilderness Review.* Anchorage, Alaska.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2009). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Comprehensive Conservation Plan/Environmental Impact Statement.* Anchorage, Alaska.

Appendices

Appendix I: Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Evaluation of the Effects on Subsistence Uses and Needs

Appendix II: Compatibility Determination

Appendix III: Finding of No Significant Impact

Appendix I

KENAI NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTS ON SUBSISTENCE USES AND NEEDS
(ANILCA SECTION 810 EVALUATION)

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (us or we), acting for the Secretary of Interior, is required by Section 810 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) to evaluate the effects on subsistence uses and needs in determining whether to withdraw, reserve, lease, or otherwise permit the use, occupancy, or disposition of public lands on national wildlife refuges in Alaska. The evaluation of effects of this proposed action/use on subsistence uses and needs is documented below. If this evaluation concludes with a finding that the proposed action would result in significant restriction to subsistence uses and needs, and we wish to proceed, we must initiate further procedural requirements of Section 810.

PROPOSED ACTION/USE: This evaluation looks at preferred alternative of the 2010 Environmental Assessment which calls for construction of a new visitor center at the Refuge Headquarters site on Ski Hill road, south of Soldotna, Alaska.

EVALUATION:

1. Subsistence Resources, Uses and Needs in the Affected Area:

Subsistence use has differing interpretations depending on the various authorities and associated definitions. For example, subsistence use of natural resources on federal lands by qualified rural residents within Alaska is a priority use protected under provisions of Title VIII of ANILCA. For the purpose of this determination, the definition of subsistence users and resources is applied only to those uses commonly accepted under Title VIII of ANILCA.

Subsistence use has occurred on the Kenai Peninsula, and on what now is the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (KENWR), for thousands of years. Evidence from archaeological investigations demonstrate that both Indian and Eskimo cultures existed in the area for extended periods, utilizing the abundant fish, game, and vegetation resources for their survival. Early Russian and American miners, fur trappers, traders, and others settled the area in the late 18th century. Subsistence use of natural resources was

commonly practiced during this period as well, and was largely responsible for the survival of many early settlers in the Kenai area. As the area grew in population and urban infrastructure of the 20th century, subsistence lifestyles were altered but still practiced in some form in many areas.

Important resources included salmon, trout, char, moose, bear, caribou, ptarmigan, grouse, ducks, sheep and goats, as well as berries, firewood, shellfish, furbearers, and other natural resources. While interest in harvesting all of these resources still exists, primary interest today focuses on moose and salmon. Federal subsistence regulations for the Kenai area currently provide for a preferential moose hunt for qualified rural residents living in Ninilchik, Nanwalek, Port Graham, Cooper Landing, and Seldovia. Harvest from this special season has resulted than no more than a few moose each year in recent years; however, many more moose are taken during the regular State seasons in the area. A small harvest of black bears also occurs by residents of Port Graham and Nanwalek under a preferential Federal season. Subsistence fishing opportunity exists in the area for all qualified rural residents in Alaska; however, harvest must be in accordance with State of Alaska seasons, bag limits, and methods restrictions.

The proposed site is closed to hunting because of safety concerns of visitors, students and employees alike. There are no Federal waters open to subsistence fishing near the proposed site of construction.

2. Concerns Expressed by Potentially Affected Subsistence Users and/or the State:

This ANILCA Section 810 Evaluation, the Draft Environmental Assessment, and Draft Compatibility Determination are being made available for a 30-day pubic review and comment period. Final documents will be prepared after evaluation of these comments. Comments should be sent to: Refuge Manager, Kenai National Wildlife Refuge; P.O. Box 2139; Soldotna, AK 99669. Comments must be received by September 14, 2009 in order to be used in preparation of the final 810 Evaluation, Environmental Assessment, and Compatibility Determination.

3. Effects of the Proposed Action or Use on Subsistence Uses and Needs:

The proposed action will not have an impact on subsistence uses and needs as the area under consideration is not open to hunting or fishing.

4. Availability of Other Lands for the Purposes Sought to be Achieved:

Other lands within the Refuge would be available for this purpose; however the location chosen best meets the needs and does not impact subsistence resources or opportunities.

5. Other Alternatives Which Would Reduce or Eliminate Use of Public Lands Needed for Subsistence Purposes:

These lands are not needed for subsistence purposes.

FINDING: The proposed action would not result in a significant restriction to subsistence uses and needs on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

AGENCY DECISION: The proposed action maybe implemented without additional procedural requirements relative to Section 810 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.

SIGNATURES:

Refuge Manager — Date: 1-28-2010

Concurrence:

Regional Chief, National Wildlife Refuge System — Date: 2/1/10

REFERENCES:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2009). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Comprehensive Conservation Plan/Environmental Impact Statement.* Anchorage, Alaska.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2010). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Assessment Visitor Center Construction*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2010). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Compatibility Determination Visitor Center Construction*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2010). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Finding of No Significant Impact Visitor Center Construction*

Personal communication between Mike Boylan, Region 7 Refuge Supervisor, and Doug Staller, Kenai NWR Deputy Refuge Manager on November 14, 2008.

Appendix II

COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Construct a visitor center on Refuge lands on Ski Hill Road near the current Refuge Headquarters (administrative) site, south of Soldotna, Alaska.

Refuge Name: Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities: The Refuge was first established as the Kenai National Moose Range by Executive Order 8979 on December 16, 1941. The boundaries were modified, purposes expanded, and name changed to Kenai National Wildlife Refuge under the provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) on December 2, 1980 (Public Law 96-487 Stat. 2371).

Refuge Purposes: The 1941 Executive Order purpose was primarily to "... protect the natural breeding and feeding range of the giant Kenai moose on the Kenai Peninsula, Alaska..." ANILCA (1980) purposes for the Refuge include: "(i) to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including, but not limited to moose, bear, mountain goats, Dall sheep, wolves and other furbearers, salmonids and other fish, waterfowl and other migratory and non-migratory birds; (ii) to fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats; (iii) to ensure to the maximum extent practicable and in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in paragraph (i), water quality and necessary water quantity with the Refuge; (iv) to provide in a manner consistent with subparagraphs (i) and (ii), opportunities for scientific research, interpretation, environmental education, and land management training; and (v) to provide, in a manner compatible with these purposes, opportunities for fish and wildlife oriented recreation." The Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577) purposes are to secure an enduring resource of wilderness, to protect and preserve the wilderness character of areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System, and to administer this wilderness system for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness.

Policy (FWS 603 2.8) directs that pre-ANILCA purposes remain in force and effect, except to the extent that they may be inconsistent with ANILCA or the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and that such purposes only apply to those areas of the Refuge in existence prior to ANILCA. The Executive Order purpose to protect Kenai moose,

however, is treated as complimentary to the broader ANILCA purpose of conserving fish and wildlife populations; therefore, no special attention is given the Executive Order purpose in this compatibility review process.
Section 4(a) of the Wilderness Act provides that the purposes of the Act are to be within and supplemental to the purposes for which national wildlife refuges are established and administered. These purposes are applied to the approximately 1.3 million acres of congressionally designated wilderness within the Refuge. While these purposes do not apply to the remaining approximately 700,000 acres of Refuge lands that are not designated as wilderness, we must consider the effects of uses on any Refuge lands that might affect the wilderness areas.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission: Our Mission is "Working with others...to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans".

Description of Use: This Compatibility Determination is meant to cover the construction of a visitor center. This facility will improve the understanding of the purpose and mission of KENWR visitors who use the Refuge. The ultimate goal is better informed constituency and users who will support our mission and who will participate in outdoor recreation activities in ways that minimize disturbance to wildlife and damage to habitat.

Designs for the proposed facility will be developed in accordance with the USFWS standard design.

Availability of Resources: Adequate refuge personnel and base operational funds are available to manage this additional facility.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use: In general, impacts from the addition of this facility may increase the number of users coming to the Refuge Headquarters area. This area has been developed since 1981 and is a focal point for local residents who use the Refuge as well as new visitors coming to seek information about recreational opportunities. This facility may increase use both in the facility and on Refuge trails in the immediate area. However, the additional public use will give Refuge staff more opportunities to provide enhanced awareness and education on the mission of the Refuge system as well as ways to use the Refuge that minimize disturbance and damage to wildlife and habitat. The visitor will have an increased understanding of our mission and the work we do to conserve wildlife habitat and monitor the effects of climate change, and they will become better stewards of the land through the knowledge they glean from these efforts.

Public Review and Comment: This Compatibility Determination has been prepared simultaneously with an Environmental Assessment and Section 810 evaluation of the impacts of this use on subsistence resources and activities. Legal notice of these draft documents was published in the Kenai Peninsula Clarion on August 14, 2009. Publishing initiated a 30-day public comment period. The notice and related documents were posted

on the Kenai Refuge website at http://kenai.fws.gov/current.htm for the same 30 day period. No comments were received.

Determination (check one below):

_____ Use is Not Compatible

____X____ Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility: The facility will be designed with the minimal footprint needed to safely construct the facility and conduct anticipated uses. A focus of the informational and educational materials will be to inform the public on how they can minimize disturbance to wildlife and damage to habitat while using the Refuge. The facility will also be designed to meet or exceed Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards as established by the U.S. Green Building Council. Visitation to the facility and trails will be monitored, and use patterns will be analyzed in concert with localized biological monitoring to mitigate any adverse impacts in a timely manner.

Justification: Providing opportunities for education and interpretation is clearly stated in the purposes of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Facilitating this mandate with increased public awareness through education provided at the new visitor center, we will be minimizing impacts to other resources as those informed visitors explore additional parts of KENWR, and the combined effect will not materially interfere with, or detract from the Refuge's ability to meet all of its purposes, and the requirements of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission.

References:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2010). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Assessment Visitor Center Construction*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2009). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Comprehensive Conservation Plan.* Anchorage, Alaska.

Signature (Refuge Manager): Douglas Stalte 1-28-2010
Signature and Date

Concurrence (Regional Chief): 2/1/10
Signature and Date

Mandatory 10-year Re-evaluation Date: 2/1/2020

NEPA compliance for Refuge Use Decision:

_____ Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Memorandum
_____ Categorical Exclusion and Environmental Action Memorandum
__X____ Environmental Assessment and Finding of No significant Impact
_____ Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision

Appendix III

United States Department of the Interior

KENAI NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
P.O. Box 2139
Soldotna, Alaska 99669-2139
(907) 262-7021

Finding of No Significant Impact

ABSTRACT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service or We) proposes to construct a new visitor center at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters site on Ski Hill Road, south of Soldotna, Alaska.

FINDINGS

Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (KENWR) is the highest visited National Wildlife Refuge in the state of Alaska. On average, KENWR receives over 1 million visitors each year which equates to approximately 75% of all recreational visits to the refuges in Alaska.

The Environmental Assessment (EA) referenced below examined three alternatives to addressing the issue of constructing a facility. Alternative A was the no action alternative which would continue current operations with the existing facility. Alternative B evaluated adding a wing onto the existing headquarters building and dedicating the space to meeting the needs of visitors. Alternative C discussed constructing a stand alone building located approximately 100 yards from the existing building. Alternative C was selected as the preferred alternative to better meet the needs of visitors and take best advantage of the existing utility infrastructure.

Based on a review of the information referenced below, I have determined that the proposed action is not a major federal action which would significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. The EA we prepared supports the conclusion that the impact does not exceed a threshold of significance. Accordingly, the preparation of an environmental impact statement on the proposed action is not required.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2010). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Assessment Visitor Center Construction*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2010). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Draft Compatibility Determination Visitor Center Construction*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2010). *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Draft Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Evaluation of the Effects on Subsistence Uses and Needs (ANILCA Section 810 Evaluation)*

Refuge Manager

1-28-2010
Date