

Compatibility Determination

Uses: Environmental Education, Interpretation, Wildlife Observation, and Photography

Supporting and Incidental Uses: Boating (motorized and non-motorized), snowmobiling, snowshoeing, firewood cutting, natural resource gathering, camping, cross-country skiing, skijoring, dog sledding, hiking and backpacking, picnicking, birding, wildlife viewing, wildlife photography, videography, fixed-wing aircraft landings, swimming, and beach use.

Refuge Name: Selawik National Wildlife Refuge

Establishment and Acquisition Authority: The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) established the 2.5-million-acre Selawik National Wildlife Refuge (Selawik refuge, refuge) as part of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Wildlife Refuge System (Department of the Interior) on December 2, 1980.

Selawik Refuge Purposes: As stated in ANILCA Section 302 (7) (B), the purposes for which the Selawik refuge was established and shall be managed include:

- (i) to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including, but not limited to, the Western Arctic caribou herd (including participation in coordinated ecological studies and management of these caribou), waterfowl, shorebirds and other migratory birds, and salmon and Sheefish;
- (ii) to fulfill international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats;
- (iii) to provide, in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in subparagraphs (i) and (ii), the opportunity for continued subsistence uses by local residents; and
- (iv) to ensure, to the maximum extent practicable and in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in subparagraph (i), water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge.

The purpose of the congressionally designated Selawik Wilderness Area is to secure an enduring resource of wilderness, protect and preserve the wilderness character of the area as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS), and administer the area for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave it unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as designated wilderness.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is 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 (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended [16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee]).

Description of Uses

This determination re-evaluates the following activities: wildlife observation, wildlife and resource photography (and videography), environmental education, and interpretation. These uses were found to be compatible in the 1987 Comprehensive Conservation Plan and in 1994. Some visitors come to the refuge specifically to engage in one or more of these non-consumptive activities. Many visitors include these activities as part of regular subsistence activities or hunting and fishing trips. Compatibility for these uses is evaluated separately. Associated activities such as camping, backpacking, dog sledding, hiking, boating, and other incidental uses are considered part of these activities in this evaluation. Wildlife observation and photography are the most common.

Interpretive and educational efforts occur primarily in and around the community of Selawik (within the refuge boundary). The refuge staff has formed a partnership with community and school organizations to provide culture and science camps that feature resources on refuge lands, sharing of traditional knowledge, and current subsistence practices. Occasionally groups conducting educational programs utilize the refuge's administrative field cabin on the Selawik River. Limited, informal interpretive and environmental education services are provided during contacts with visitors on the refuge by staff working on resource projects or on law enforcement related patrols.

Visitors take advantage of opportunities to view and photograph wildlife, plants, and landscapes within the refuge. Most of these activities predate the establishment of the refuge in 1980. These activities are concentrated along the Selawik or Tagagawik rivers or large lakes adjacent to them. These areas provide reliable access and opportunities for observing wildlife. Typical forms of access for all areas of the refuge include fixed-wing airplanes, motorboats, non-motorized boats, and snowmobiles. Most non-local visitors access the refuge by commercial air taxis from Kotzebue or Galena. Private boats and airplanes are the most common means of access for local visitors. Day trips to the refuge are uncommon for visitors interested in wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and sightseeing but do occasionally occur. Camping on the refuge usually extends for 7–10 days and is often associated with hunting activities. Campers use tents ranging from small backpacking tents to larger multi-person tents that can be easily transported by air. People engage in these activities on the refuge year round with most use occurring in the fall months.

Availability of Resources

Adequate refuge personnel and base operational funds are available to manage these activities at current and projected levels. Administrative staff time primarily involves phone conversations, written correspondence, and interaction with visitors, schools, and community and tribal organizations. Staff will also be involved with any subsequent step-down planning (visitor services plan) and recreational monitoring.

Field work associated with administering this use primarily involves conducting patrols to increase visitor compliance with State and Federal regulations. Refuge staff members opportunistically conduct outreach to visitors to minimize the impacts of camping and to improve understanding of subsistence activities and awareness of private property located within the refuge boundary.

For commercial videography, administrative staff time would involve issuing permits and establishing permit stipulations. Field work associated with administering the program would primarily involve monitoring permit holders' compliance with the terms of the permits. Estimated staff time to administer and monitor these permits is less than one week per year.

Anticipated Impacts of Uses

Negligible impacts to habitats within the refuge from disturbance are anticipated. Possible localized adverse impacts to some plant and wildlife species could occur, but the proposed plan would not have any long-term population-level impacts on refuge plants and wildlife. The introduction of invasive plant species, perhaps from seeds carried on boats, airplane floats, snowmobiles, or straw used in conjunction with dog sledding could affect refuge resources. To date, no invasive species introduction is known to have occurred on the Selawik refuge. Refuge staff will be vigilant to prevent such introductions. Positive effects on the local economy, though small, are anticipated from these uses.

Public Review and Comment

Public comments were solicited concurrently with the revision of the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (USFWS 2010). Public comments on compatibility determinations were accepted during the public review period for the draft plan and announced in the Federal Register. The public comment period was October 21, 2010 to March 15, 2011, which provided 145 days for public review. We mailed the full draft plan and a summary to the individuals and organizations on our mailing list. We invited public comments through an advertisement in a local newspaper and attended city council meetings in Selawik and Noorvik to receive comments on the draft plan. Planning team members met with the Citizen's Advisory Commission on Federal Areas to discuss the issues at Selawik refuge and alternatives that were proposed in the draft plan. The draft compatibility determinations were posted on the Service's Region 7 Web page.

We received no comments on the draft of this compatibility determination. The Northwest Arctic Borough commented that the comprehensive plan should support local and regional communities in creating jobs and developing the community through tourism.

Refuge Determination (check one below)

Use is not compatible

Use is compatible

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

Visitors will be required to comply with any regulations in place such as seasonal closures for resource protection.

Permits are required for all commercial videography, including filming of documentaries, travelogues, feature stories, and advertising. Liability insurance and bonding may be required, depending on the specific production activities proposed. Additionally, a \$100 fee may be required. News gathering organizations are exempt from fee, insurance, and bonding requirements but may be required to obtain a special use permit to ensure compatibility with refuge purposes; avoid conflict with established public uses or scientific research; or to protect fish, wildlife, and their habitats on refuge lands.

Justification

All lands in the Selawik refuge are open to public access unless specifically closed. The proposed uses represent four of the six priority public uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act (as amended). The law calls for the Service to ensure that opportunities are provided for these uses and requires that they receive enhanced consideration

over other public uses in planning and management. Selawik refuge provides ample opportunity to those seeking to view and photograph wildlife, and it provides interpretive and educational experiences in nearby communities. The current and projected amount of these activities has been found to have insignificant adverse physical and biological effects in the draft revised comprehensive conservation plan for the refuge. After fully considering the impacts of these activities, as described previously in the "Anticipated Impacts of the Uses" section of this determination, it is my determination that wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation activities within the refuge do not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes of the refuge or mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Supporting Documents

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1987. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Wilderness Review and Environmental Impact Statement. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska. 378 pp.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1987. Record of Decision: Selawik National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness Review, and Wild River Plan. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska. 15 pp.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010. Draft Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, AK. 285 pp (plus ten appendices).

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. Final Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, AK.

Refuge Determination

Refuge Manager/
Project Leader Approval:



Lee Anne Ayres

14 July 2011
Date

Concurrence

Regional Chief
National Wildlife
Refuge System:



Mitch Ellis

7-20-2011
Date

Mandatory 15-Year Re-evaluation Date (for priority public uses): 2026

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