

Record of Decision

Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan
Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska
November 17, 2009

This Record of Decision (ROD) is for the *Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska*, dated August 2009; (*Revised Conservation Plan/EIS*). It documents my decision and includes a summary of public involvement in the decision making process and the basis for making this decision. The Revised Conservation Plan will guide management of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for the next 15 years or until it is revised.

Decision

It is my decision to adopt Alternative E (the Preferred Alternative), as described in the Final *Revised Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* for Kenai Refuge with two minor modifications based upon concerns of the State of Alaska. Alternative E reflects my intent to manage Kenai Refuge to achieve the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and meet the purposes for which the Refuge was established. Alternative E conserves the fish, wildlife, and habitats of Kenai Refuge and facilitates subsistence and recreation in settings that emphasize natural and unaltered appearing landscapes.

Management of public use will continue much like in the past. Increased effort will be made to identify user conflicts and work toward resolution; law enforcement efforts will be improved. Access and uses that have been occurring since the Refuge was established in 1941 will continue. If monitoring shows changes in conditions or use patterns that are detrimental to the natural resources or other values of the Refuge, steps will be taken to protect those at-risk resources. This decision continues the recommendation for Wilderness designation (approximately 195,000 acres) from the 1985 Record of Decision (1985 ROD) for the original *Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, and Wilderness Review (1985 Conservation Plan/EIS)*. This recommendation will remain in effect unless withdrawn or until revised or submitted to Congress.

General Management Direction

Although most of the general management direction described in Alternative A will continue, some specific direction and actions occurring under current management will be altered or not pursued under Alternative E. The Refuge Goals and Objectives presented in section 2.2 and the Management Direction, Policies, and Guidelines presented in Volume 2, Appendix C apply.

The five management categories previously applied to the Refuge will be reduced to four in the short term and eventually to three categories.

Intensive Management – 54,500 acres (2.7 percent)

Moderate Management – will be reduced and eventually eliminated. 129,550 acres (6.5 percent) will convert to Minimal management immediately. The remaining 49,450 acres (2.5 percent) will convert to Minimal management after current projects are completed.

Traditional Management – will be eliminated. All of the 189,000 acres (9.6 percent) currently classified in this category will be reclassified as Minimal management.

Minimal Management – 514,550 acres (25.9 percent) of the Refuge will be classified as Minimal management immediately. After current projects are completed, 49,450 additional acres will be reclassified from Moderate to Minimal management for a total of 564,000 acres or 28.4% of the Refuge.

Wilderness Management – 1,320,500 acres (66.4 percent) will be managed under the Wilderness management category.

Management Direction

This section describes how management was conducted with previous direction, highlights of selected management (Alternative E), and the differences between selected and previous management.

Previous Management

Previous Refuge management was as prescribed in the *1985 Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* for Kenai Refuge and its ROD, as modified by subsequent laws, regulations, and step-down management plans.

The majority of the Refuge (76%) was managed to protect wilderness values. This included the 66.4% of the Refuge designated as Wilderness and the 9.7% of the Refuge classified as Minimal management. The lands in Minimal management were recommended for Wilderness designation. Fish and wildlife management outside Wilderness was focused on species of special interest such as moose, wolves, trumpeter swans, and salmon. Populations of predators were maintained at relatively natural levels in relation to prey. Hunting, fishing, and trapping were allowed consistent with State and Federal regulations.

Use of wildland fire (naturally occurring fires) was allowed to improve habitats for select wildlife species. Prescribed fire was allowed in the Intensive, Moderate, Traditional, and Minimal management categories, though its use was limited in areas of Minimal management. Use of wildland fire was allowed in the Moderate, Traditional, Minimal, and Wilderness management categories.

At the completion of industrial projects, most industrial roads and facilities were expected to be removed and the sites restored, camping facilities would not have been provided, and bicycles would not have been allowed.

The development of new trails would have been allowed in all management categories except Wilderness. Maintenance decisions were driven by the availability of funding.

Personal collecting of berries, mushrooms, and other edible plants, and/or the collecting of shed antlers was not allowed.

Selected Management (Alternative E)

Use of fire will be the principle management tool to improve wildlife habitats, reduce hazardous accumulations of wildland fuels, and maintain or restore natural fire regimes. Fire will be the default management action in the Minimal and Wilderness management categories.

At the completion of industrial projects, most roads and facilities will be removed and the sites restored, though some will be retained and maintained for public and administrative uses. Up to two additional developed campgrounds will be provided in the Swanson River Oil and Gas Unit. Bicycles will be allowed on some roads and trails in former industrial areas.

A trail needs assessment will be developed to identify and prioritize construction and/or maintenance needs and construction standards for a variety of trails.

A formal rest stop will be developed on the Sterling Highway at MP 62.

Regulations to allow personal collecting and use of berries, mushrooms, and other edible plants; and up to eight naturally shed moose or caribou antlers per person per year will be developed.

Major Differences Between Selected and Previous Management:

Fire will become the *principle tool* for habitat management, to reduce fuel accumulations, and restore natural fire regimes. Fire will be the default management action in Minimal and Wilderness Management categories.

More roads will be retained for public and administrative uses.

Up to two additional developed campgrounds will be provided in the Swanson River Oil and Gas Unit. Bicycles will be allowed on some roads and trails in former industrial areas.

A trail needs assessment will be developed to prioritize needs and develop standards.

A formal rest stop will be developed on the Sterling Highway at MP 62.

Regulations on personal collection of natural resources will allow collection.

Within the Swanson River / Swan Lake Canoe System dispersed campsites will be monitored and evaluated using standard protocols and actions implemented as needed. Regulations requiring appropriate disposal of human waste will be adopted.

The Refuge will consider a rule change that could allow the Refuge Manager to issue permits for airplane access to lakes in designated Wilderness to successful applicants in the State's limited drawing hunt program.

The Environmentally Preferable Alternative

While the differences in environmental effects among the five alternatives evaluated in the *Revised Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* are small, Alternative E is the environmentally preferable alternative because it has the least potential for adverse effects to the biological and physical environment and best protects, preserves, and enhances refuge resources. Alternative E includes the greatest amount of land in the Minimal Management category—514,550 acres until completion of current projects, eventually 564,000 acres. The Minimal management category focuses on protecting fish and wildlife habitat and providing subsistence and recreational opportunities while maintaining the natural environment with very little evidence of human-caused change.

Subsistence Use Evaluation and Finding (Alaska National Interests Land Conservation Act: Section 810)

A subsistence use evaluation and finding of no significant restriction is found in Section 4.9 of the final *Revised Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*. None of the alternatives contained actions that would reduce subsistence uses or change the availability of resources by altering their distribution, migration, or location; or place any limitations on access to harvestable resources used for subsistence purposes.

Public Involvement and Comments Received Draft Plan

Public involvement and comments have been requested, considered, and incorporated throughout the planning process. The notice of intent to revise the *1985 Conservation Plan/EIS* was published in the *Federal Register* on November 26, 2003 (Vol 68, No 228, 66476). Open houses were held in communities on the Kenai Peninsula and in Anchorage, the plan revision was discussed during refuge staff visits to local communities, and the Refuge Manager was interviewed on radio 5 times regarding the planning process. Planning updates discussing opportunities for and results of public involvement were distributed. Comments and concerns received during this time were used to identify issues and draft alternatives for evaluation in the environmental impact statement.

The notice of availability for the *Draft Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge* was published in the *Federal Register* on May 8, 2008 (Vol 73, No 90, 26140); public comments were accepted through September 1, 2008. We received 53 responses with comments on the Draft Plan of which 47 contained original language. The remaining 6 responses were organized response campaign (form) letters. The Summary of Public Comment (presented in Appendix D of the Final Plan) is based on the 47 original responses and the text of the form letter's master copy.

Final Plan

The Notice of Availability for the Final *Revised Conservation Plan/EIS* for Kenai Refuge was published in the *Federal Register* on September 18, 2008 (Vol 74, No 180, 47943). We received two comment letters, one from an individual and the other from the State of Alaska.

The individual asked for clarification on acreage values. These have been clarified.

With consideration to comments from the State of Alaska, the management direction provided by the selected alternative will be modified as follows;

- We will alter the opening date of seasonally closed lakes from September 30 to September 10, to coincide with that of the Alaska Board of Game's Kenai Controlled Use Area in Game Management Unit 15A, when Refuge regulations are updated. These lakes then remain open for public use until May 1 (approximately when the ice melts) each spring.
- Under current regulations, the operation of aircraft between May 1 and September 30 on any lake where nesting trumpeter swans and/or their broods are present is prohibited. Over the next several years we will examine swan brood survey data and other information to determine if swan abundance has increased to the point that this restriction has created a de facto closure of so many lakes as to significantly impact access to the refuge back-country. We will evaluate our current closure regulations in light of these findings.

Following Service policy, any Refuge regulations will be developed in collaboration with the State of Alaska and other partners.

Measures to Minimize Environmental Harm

All practicable measures to avoid or minimize environmental impacts that could result from implementation of Alternative E have been identified in the final *Revised Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* or will be identified in subsequent step-down plans. Stipulations are identified in the Refuge compatibility determinations to ensure that public and other uses are compatible with the purposes of the Kenai Refuge.

Findings and Basis for Decision

In making my decision I reviewed and carefully considered the impacts identified in the draft and final *Revised Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*; relevant issues, concerns, and opportunities; public input received throughout the planning process including comments on the draft and final *Revised Conservation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*; and other factors including refuge purposes and relevant laws, regulations, and policies. For the following reasons, I selected Alternative E.

Alternative E best accomplishes refuge purposes; best helps achieve the missions of the National Wildlife Refuge System and the Service, and best meets the vision and goals identified in the plan. It best provides long-term protection of fish and wildlife populations and their habitats while allowing for appropriate levels of fish and wildlife-dependent recreation, subsistence, and other public uses.

Alternative E classifies the most refuge land, 514,550 acres or 25.9% (564,000 acres or 28.4% after current projects are completed), in the Minimal Management category. This management category focuses on protecting fish and wildlife habitat and providing recreational and other use opportunities in a natural environment while minimizing human-caused change. Management under this category most closely reflects the Service's vision statement for the Refuge.

My decision adopting Alternative E, with modifications, is effective immediately.


Regional Director

11/17/09
Date