



IN REPLY REFER TO:

United States Department of the Interior

KENAI NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

P.O. Box 2139
Soldotna, Alaska 99669-2139
(907) 262-7021

Compatibility Determination

Use: Cabins (new public use cabins, historic or existing cabins designated as public use cabins, and historic or existing cabins designated as administrative cabins but made available to the public for overnight accommodation)

Refuge: Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

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

Refuge Purposes:

Executive Order Purpose: "...protect[ing] the natural breeding and feeding range of the giant Kenai moose on the Kenai Peninsula, Alaska...". Policy (FWS 603 2.8) requires 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, but 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.

ANILCA Purposes: "(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, salmonoids and other fish, waterfowl and other migratory and nonmigratory 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 within 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. Sec. 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 Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. They are also applied to the remaining approximately 700,000 acres of Refuge lands (that are not designated as wilderness) in any way that a Refuge use might affect the designated wilderness areas.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission: The National Wildlife Refuge System Mission is, "To administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of 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: Cabins of varying sizes, uses, and locations have long been associated with Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Most historic cabins were used as shelters by early trappers, hunting guides, or gold miners. Some cabins were built to serve as short-term overnight shelter for occasional use while others served as long-term accommodations. A few more recent cabins were constructed to facilitate fish and wildlife research and management operations. Less than a dozen historic structures remain in useable condition (and seven currently are described as public use cabins made available on a first come first served basis), and there are over 100 known cabins or cabin ruins that remain on the Refuge that are no longer serviceable as shelters, but have varying degrees of historic significance.

This compatibility determination looks at public use associated with all historic cabins and proposed new public use and administrative cabins as described in the preferred alternative of the 2004 Environmental Assessment. Compatibility determinations are required by law to look at public uses on national wildlife refuges, and all such uses, to be legally permitted, must be found to be compatible with the Refuge's established purposes, and the Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Such determinations do not examine the compatibility of structures themselves (such as boat ramps, trails, or in this case cabins) but look at the uses associated with the structures. Public use cabins, or administrative cabins that provide for incidental overnight use by the public, facilitate a variety of public uses on the Refuge including hunting, fishing, boating, wildlife viewing, photography, camping, trapping, snowmobiling, skiing, hiking, snowshoeing, and other related outdoor recreational experiences. These activities would take place in the absence of cabins, but use levels, locations of use, safety, and the enjoyment of the experience may all be impacted by the presence of cabins. Cabins also can serve as a focus of historic education and interpretation and can be the sole reason for some visits to the cabin sites.

The Environmental Assessment preferred alternative calls for an enhanced cabin management program on the Refuge. It would allow for up to six new public use cabins to be constructed in non-Wilderness areas, increased opportunity for overnight stay and enjoyment of several historic

cabins, a reservation and permit system for some cabins, increased levels of maintenance and patrols associated with cabins, and enhanced historical interpretation of cabins and cabin sites. The public is currently allowed to use public use cabins on the Refuge without a permit, fee, or reservation. Overnight stay limits are controlled by Refuge-specific regulations, but there are no particular standards required for the cabins or their use by the public. (See the Environmental Assessment for specific information on the existing and proposed cabin programs, individual cabin assessments, and related information.)

Availability of Resources: The preferred alternative in the Draft Environmental Assessment requires additional resources than are currently available to manage a cabin program. An ideal annual operational budget of approximately \$120,000 for administration of the cabin program (including salaries for one staff member and a seasonal crew), construction, maintenance, administration of the reservation system, interpretation, and enforcement, was proposed. Congressional funding of \$173,000 in Fiscal Year 2003 provided the necessary funding to stabilize many of the existing public use cabins that were in disrepair, complete a cabin planning exercise, and purchase three new cabin kits. Additional construction money in Fiscal Year 2004 will help complete existing cabin upgrades, construction of new cabins, complete historic preservation activities, and begin implementation of the cabin plan. Additional maintenance funding is anticipated in 2005 and some funding to support ongoing cabin management is expected via returns from reservation fees collected as part of a Fee Demonstration Project.

Anticipated Impact of the Use: Both positive and negative impacts from the proposed action are anticipated. The increased enjoyment, safety, and interpretive values from staying in historical structures are counted as positive impacts of an expanded cabin program that provides for increased maintenance, new cabins, and more public use opportunities. Negative impacts could come from the increased cost in time and other resources necessary to administer an enhanced cabin program should adequate resources be unavailable in the long-term, increased wildlife and habitat disturbance potential around some cabin sites, increased potential for vandalism from individuals who may not support the new cabin program, and increased potential for accidental wildfire ignition.

Implementation of the modified preferred alternative would allow for the construction of up to six new cabins; however, overall public use at cabin sites on the Refuge may change little as recent changes in permitted tent cabin site use has diminished in recent years. The proposed reservation system will draw more attention to the availability of some Refuge cabins, but because of a reservation, permit, and fee requirement there may be more days that older existing public use cabins will remain unoccupied compared to the current system of allowing public use on a first come first serve basis without a required fee or permit. Overall the public use associated with cabins on the Refuge is not anticipated to significantly change, although the enjoyment of outdoor recreational experiences is expected to increase for many visitors that use cabins.

New cabins will be sited to minimize impacts to important wildlife habitats. Several existing cabins have identifiable concerns with trumpeter swan nesting, brown bear movements, or other wildlife issues. These potential impacts will be monitored closely and the proposed alternative of the cabin management plan allows for cabins to be moved or eliminated if significant wildlife

concerns arise at any particular site. Older cabins that are to be replaced will be evaluated for wildlife impacts and may be relocated to mitigate such impacts.

Public Review and Comment: Scoping comments were received from 23 individuals following a published solicitation in 2003 on the Refuge website and in local newspapers. These comments helped form the Draft Environmental Assessment. The Draft Environmental Assessment, this Draft Compatibility Determination, and a Draft ANILCA 810 Evaluation on potential effects to subsistence activities, were distributed for a 30-day public comment period which closed April 30, 2004. Significant comments were received regarding the proposed action; however, few comments received referenced any potential compatibility concerns.

Determination (check one below):

Use is Not Compatible

Use is Compatible With Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility: The following stipulations are to be included in the implementation of the cabin management strategy for the Refuge to help ensure compatibility with Refuge purposes and the System mission:

- 1) The enhanced cabin management program will only be fully implemented and sustained if adequate resources are available to ensure adequate administration of the program, maintenance to uphold public safety standards, monitoring for wildlife concerns, historic preservation legal compliance, and enforcement of applicable regulations.
- 2) Seasonal or other restrictions on cabin use (or their ultimate removal or relocation) will be imposed to reduce or eliminate documented problems with wildlife.
- 3) A three to seven day maximum length of stay by any group at one site will be imposed.
- 4) No new cabin construction will occur in Kenai NWR designated Wilderness areas.

Justification: Cabins have a long history of use on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and have special mention in the establishing legislation (Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act). While public use created by the availability of cabins on the Refuge can have negative impacts to Refuge resources, cabins also serve as important features to facilitate the use and enjoyment of Refuge resources and in such a manner help support appropriate Refuge uses and Refuge purposes. They can also provide important public safety contributions for emergency use in remote locations. The levels of use, and anticipated impacts associated with the public use of cabins on the Refuge is not believed to approach the threshold of compatibility. Less than 20 cabins will be maintained for public use on nearly 2 million acres of wild lands. Additionally, mitigation measures will be instituted to further ensure compatibility.

Signatures:

Refuge Manager:

 for Robin West
(Signature and Date)

Acting Regional Chief Concurrence:

 Steve Janderbark
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10 or 15 year Re-evaluation Date:

May 27, 2019