

**Issue Statements for Selawik Refuge CCP**  
**April 16, 2009**

***How will the refuge protect fish, wildlife, habitat, subsistence, and the wild character of the refuge while addressing community needs?***

When asked what they valued most about the refuge, people overwhelmingly mentioned either subsistence or the refuge's wild beauty, abundance of wildlife, and natural habitat. Many people mentioned both. Considerable public interest exists from many sectors of the public to maintain the refuge in its current state, which includes unspoiled habitats, opportunities for subsistence activities, and experiences of solitude and remoteness in a wild, natural setting. Many people did not favor increased visitation to the refuge. Others commented on the need for local community and economic development, including tourism, timber harvesting, gravel extraction, and energy options. The high cost of living and lack of infrastructure in communities within and adjacent to the refuge elevate the importance of this question. Opinions differed on community development issues among both local and national publics.

Representative comments include:

*"It is a beautiful habitat and I subsistence [hunt and fish] frequently in the area. Just keep it the way it is."*

*"I value the whole refuge because it is great country that everyone should visit. It's a good subsistence area."*

*"[The refuge] supports our livelihood—hunting caribou and moose, trapping, fishing, and picking berries. ... Preservation of how we use the land is of utmost importance."*

*"Keep it wild."*

*"We like its remote location and natural, safe environment for all the animals and fish and also its abundance of wildlife."*

*"... [I]t is imperative that the refuge continues to be an undisturbed and quiet retreat for both species and people alike."*

*"[Keep] it the way it is but [make] way for future work for roads and whatever is planned for our lands."*

*"I wouldn't encourage ecotourism—at least that's my view."*

*"We don't want to see more visitors on the refuge. We like it how it is."*

*"Resource development issues should be addressed in the plan. For instance, does the refuge have information on natural gas seeps in the area?"*

*"How we used to get logs for house, cache, or lumber is not the same anymore. The regulations on harvesting live timber have completely ignored our way of harvesting"*

*them. Now it requires a lot of work and gas to get a few logs, too far back from the river and too few from one place.”*

*“Develop tourism with locals building, managing, and guiding tourists.”*

*“Is it possible to lay fiber-optic cable across the Refuge to improve the region’s broadband capability?”*

***How will the refuge address long-term transportation needs in the region and access to refuge lands?***

None of the communities in the Northwest Arctic Borough are linked by road, and no roads connect this region to the rest of the state. Public discussion of road development in the region has been resurrected recently in response to skyrocketing fuel costs and economic hardships in outlying villages. Selawik, Noorvik, and Kiana, villages centrally located in the region and within or adjacent to the refuge, are likely to be among the early targets for road development, should it occur. Opinions on roads are divided, as evident in the public scoping comments. The refuge needs to explore options for addressing future road development and its many ancillary effects.

During scoping, refuge staff and a non-governmental organization identified various forms of motorized transportation such as ATVs and helicopters as a concern. None of these forms of motorized transportation appear to be key planning issues at this time, but have potential to become issues in the future.

Representative comments include:

*“I’d like to see a road from Kiana to Selawik, especially now that I’m getting old.”*

*“What about roads between the villages? We need roads between the villages to reduce the cost of fuel.”*

*“I wouldn’t go for it, for roads connecting villages. There’s no point in connecting Noorvik, Kiana, and Selawik. What purpose would we use these roads for?”*

*“For safety, roads would be good between the villages. Early and late in the winter people still try to travel when the conditions are dangerous. We’ve fought roads for so long, but maybe it would be good.”*

*“Regarding helicopters, we strongly support prohibitions on recreational helicopter access in all refuges in Alaska including Selawik.”*

*“[We] strongly urge the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to restrict jet-ski use on Selawik Refuge and believe jet skis should not be allowed on Alaskan refuges.”*

***How will the refuge maintain fish and wildlife populations?***

Considerable support for maintaining fish, wildlife, and their habitats was expressed in the public scoping comments. Several people mentioned wildlife as what they valued most about the refuge, while others listed wildlife management as an important future issue facing the refuge. Other comments addressed changes in the caribou migration, the need for additional research on fish and wildlife, and protection of sheefish. The most frequently mentioned wildlife concern was management of the beaver population. Many people in Selawik believed the local beaver population was too high, and some wanted the refuge to take a more active role in managing this animal. With the State of Alaska and other partners, the refuge will explore ways to address this concern.

Representative comments include:

*“Wildlife understandings [are important to me]—about how the local animals live, [how to] help predict game declines, and research why.”*

*“Caribou migration routes keep changing.”*

*“[I’m] concerned about the possibility of overharvesting sheefish.”*

*“Will there be wildlife left for our grandchildren?”*

*“We have too many beaver. They are blocking creeks and polluting water. We have too many. We’ve been complaining to young hunters that they need to harvest them.”*

*“Control the beaver population. The beaver is affecting the Selawik River fish and spawning areas, damming the lakes and rivers, and polluting the water....”*

*“We’re getting more and more beaver. It’s hard to say what Fish and Wildlife Service should do about beaver. It would be good to clear out those close to the village—that’s the only source of water around here and we need to keep it clean.”*

***How will the refuge maintain hunting opportunities within the refuge boundary?***

The conflict between non-local hunters and subsistence hunters is a significant and long-standing concern in the Northwest Arctic region. State and federal agencies have attempted to effectively address this issue for years with mixed results. Past management actions in one part of the region frequently displaced the conflict to another part of the region. As a result, a multi-stakeholder group called the GMU 23 Working Group formed in 2007 to address the user conflict issue on a unit-wide basis in a deliberate and coordinated way aided by a facilitator. The group expects to conclude its initial recommendations by 2010.

This user conflict is generally less intense on the refuge than in other more-heavily hunted parts of the region. Nonetheless, it remains a serious concern to local residents as evident in the public scoping comments. Many people expressed concern about the numbers of non-local hunters, the lack of limits on transporters, and the impact of hunting guides and aircraft traffic on subsistence hunters. Because the refuge is an active

participant in the GMU 23 Working Group, the user conflict issue is expected to be resolved through the Working Group and not addressed specifically in this plan.

In other comments, a handful of people expressed interest in a muskox hunt on the refuge. One person requested a prohibition on hunting on the refuge, and another expressed concern that non-local hunters were being unreasonably restricted in their hunting on the refuge.

Representative comments include:

*“Too many fly-in hunters.”*

*“There should be a limit on the number of clients a transporter can take.”*

*“Transporter issues should be addressed. The agencies should look at transporter concession areas, like the big game guides have. Give them a concession area that they have motivation to treat well. The guides seem to do a good job; it’s the transporters who create problems.”*

*“Aircraft interfere with the caribou migration and turn them back. Caribou are very touchy—the first herd migrating is very touchy.”*

*“Hunting guides are the biggest issue. It only takes one operator to ruin the whole [caribou] migration by moving them away from local hunters. Residents are restricted to areas they can access by boat, so if guide messes it up, it’s really bad for the whole community.”*

*“The double standard of allowing unlimited harvest of wildlife by Native hunters while excluding non-Native hunters through limited permits and denied access has made the area of little value to most Americans.”*

*“We appreciate the Refuge’s active participation in the Game Management Unit (GMU) 23 Working Group and on-going efforts to resolve user conflicts through this interagency cooperative process.”*

*“I would like to be able to hunt lone bull musk ox in the Selawik River basin—excellent meat and a useful skin.”*

***How will the refuge address local public use needs on the refuge, including trails, shelter cabins, the Singauruk Bridge, and the Hot Springs?***

Several established winter trails cross the refuge that link Selawik to Buckland, Noorvik, Kiana, Ambler, and Shungnak. With no roads in the area, these trails serve as the “highways” of the region, providing critical transportation routes for subsistence activities and inter-village travel. Many are heavily travelled from fall freeze-up to spring break-up. Maintaining the trail markers and the emergency shelter cabins along these routes is an annual demand involving numerous individuals and communities and coordinated by the Northwest Arctic Borough. Many comments were received during the scoping process on the marking of existing trails and the maintenance of shelter cabins on

the refuge. Other comments suggested possibilities for additional marked trails and shelter cabins.

Several comments expressed concern about the design or location of the Singauruk Bridge, which spans a major stream on the Noorvik-Selawik trail. Designed for snowmachine use, the bridge was built by the Selawik Refuge and Northwest Arctic Borough to traverse an area with chronic overflow and open water. For several reasons, the bridge is not as useful as had been hoped, largely because the approaches are too narrow and too steep.

The Hot Springs, located at the far eastern edge of the refuge, is an important public use area for local residents. Several comments expressed the need for cabin improvements at the Hot Springs, better trail marking, and an improved trash disposal system.

Representative comments include:

*“Have GPS coordinates for the winter trails and have those available on a website so residents can download a map and important coordinates.”*

*“I have concerns about the conditions of the shelter cabins. I want users of the cabins to be more respectful of cabin conditions (e.g., how they leave the cabin when finished there). Cabins are important resources for winter travelers.”*

*“I’d recommend permanent markers for the trails. Just putting little pieces of spruce or willow isn’t enough.”*

*“A trail south of Selawik to winter hunting area might be a good idea.”*

*“The [Singauruk] bridge has too much arc. It’s hard to get up with a loaded sled, and [the sled load] pushes you down on the other side. [It] needs to be about 150 feet further downstream.”*

*“We could use more stakes on the Hot Springs trail. Sometimes it gets real stormy on the tundra and people get lost.”*

*“The cabins at Hot Springs are getting old and rotten. It would be good to fix them up.”*

*“Need a good incinerator at the Hot Springs so bears and other animals won’t get into it.”*

### ***How will the refuge monitor and address the effects of climate change?***

Climate change was frequently mentioned in the scoping comments as one of the most important issues facing the refuge in the future. Both the local and national publics seem to be well-aware of the change occurring in the arctic and its implications for humans and wildlife alike. As one of only a handful of refuges north of the Arctic Circle, the Selawik Refuge is situated to experience the direct impact of these changes. Though uncertain, predicted changes for the refuge include warmer temperatures, especially in winter; a longer growing season; thawing permafrost; drying wetlands; increased precipitation, but

drier conditions due to warmer temperatures; and a possible increase in fire frequency and intensity.

Public scoping comments on climate change were a mix of personal observations of environmental change, requests for continued monitoring of changes, and interest in information exchange and outreach on this issue.

Representative comments include:

*“Climate change has been observed. Less snow has really reduced hunting due to poor traveling conditions these last couple of years. Birds seem to be coming later and leaving more suddenly.”*

*“Things are a lot different now. We don’t have the cold weather we used to. We don’t have the storms. When I was a boy going to school, we used to have deep, deep drifts. We used to have cold spells for two to three weeks, one month. ... The permafrost is melting—the ground drops right down.”*

*“Climate change is one of the greatest threats facing ecosystems and wildlife populations today, and the refuge should make this issue a priority....”*

*“[Expanding] weather monitoring across the refuge would be important for understanding both wildlife and habitat management goals.”*

*“It would be good to keep people informed about what is happening today.”*

***How will the refuge address water quality and quantity issues?***

Public scoping comments indicated a concern about contamination of water and subsistence resources from specific sites off the refuge, including aging village garbage dumps, sewage facilities, and an abandoned submerged airplane in the Selawik River. Demand for water for ice road construction within the refuge boundary was identified internally as a potential issue. The refuge will work cooperatively with appropriate land owners and managers, including the State of Alaska, to address water quality and quantity concerns.

Representative comments include:

*“The dump really needs to be cleaned up. During the spring it overflows and runs into the river.”*

*“We have water quality concerns. We have the plane in the river, the dump along the river, and water always coming in and going out. Is there a way the borough, city, tribal council, and FWS could write a letter to get the plane out of the water?”*

***How will the refuge enhance its relationship with communities, provide more outreach, and better communicate with the public?***

Many public scoping comments addressed the broad topic of education, outreach, and the refuge's relationship with local communities. The specifics of these comments ranged widely, covering such issues as search and rescue, traditional knowledge, elder involvement, youth programs, environmental education, communication of research results, local hiring of refuge staff, clarification of refuge regulations and policies, and location of office facilities. Many comments were complimentary of refuge staff and programs, while others pointed out new opportunities or areas needing improvement. The refuge highly values good relationships with its neighbors and partners, understands the importance of timely and relevant communication with the public, and appreciates the need for environmental education and programs for youth. The challenge for the refuge is to prioritize the many possibilities given available staff time and resources.

Representative comments include:

*"It would be good to get word out in the [Arctic] Sounder (local newspaper) or in EPA newsletter about climate change (local environmental program partnering with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency). We would like to know more about it in this area."*

*"When something happens on public lands—NPS or FWS—I wonder about search and rescue. It's always up to the villages to carry out search and rescue, but I wonder what the agency policies are for search and rescue."*

*"Do you have any plans to place a more extensive refuge office in the Village of Selawik?"*

*"We need an update on any changes that happen, [such as a] monthly newspaper."*

*"What are the regulations for gathering firewood?"*

*"Really positive about what FWS is doing with the kids and the Elder camps. [It] has made a big difference in what people think of the agency."*

*"It would be good to have FWS staff teach survival ... Young people need to know about survival."*

*"More consultation from elders [is needed]."*

*"Glad to see local people more involved."*

*"It would be good to work with children more. Let them know what you do and what kind of employment opportunities there are. Let them learn about the outdoors."*

*"FWS research is good in general, but I would like to see researchers communicate better back to the people what they find as results."*