



# NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

ALASKA

2025: Annual Manager's Report

# Steese

National Conservation Area



# Map



Figure 1. Map of the two units of the Steese National Conservation Area (NCA) in interior Alaska.

# Accomplishments

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The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Eastern Interior Field Office (EIFO) accomplished work in several programs in the Steese National Conservation Area (NCA) in Fiscal Year (FY) 2025. These accomplishments included stream and floodplain monitoring, caribou habitat assessment, federal subsistence hunt outreach, facility maintenance, and special recreation permit (SRP) and visitor use monitoring. Partners involved in this work included Salcha Delta Soil and Water Conservation District (SDSWCD), U.S. Geological Service, American Conservation Experience (ACE), Department of Defense (DoD), ABR Inc., and the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). EIFO also implemented a new fire management option change in collaboration with the Fairbanks District, Alaska Fire Service, the State of Alaska, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



**Figure 2. Caribou moving across the landscape in the north unit of the Steese NCA.**

# Challenges

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Staffing shortages limited the EIFO recreation program's ability to monitor and maintain designated trails, public use shelters, and visitor use during the summer in the Steese NCA. However, through cross-program collaboration, ecology program staff conducted maintenance on two public use shelters along the Pinnell Mountain Trail while in the field to monitor vegetation.



**Figure 3. BLM staff stain a public use shelter along the Pinnell Mountain Trail in the Steese NCA**

# Visitors

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Visitation in the Steese NCA was down slightly in FY25 from the previous year with an estimated 32,000 visits. The Steese NCA is a prime destination for hunters seeking caribou, moose, sheep, bear, gamebirds, and waterfowl and saw its highest levels of visitation during the fall big game hunts, which attracted hunters from many areas. Berry picking, hiking, bird watching, cross-country running, and trapping were also popular activities. New map signs were installed at the Eagle Summit and Twelvemile Summit waysides to provide visitors with information about land status and designated trail use.



**Figure 4. BLM staff install a new map sign at the Eagle Summit wayside.**

# Partnerships

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EIFO worked closely with the U.S. Geological Survey Water Resource Division, the National Weather Service River Forecast Center, and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation to inventory stream flow and monitor water quality and meteorological conditions in the Steese NCA on the Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River (WSR). This collaboration benefits data sharing and coordinated field logistics, significantly reducing individual agency costs and travel.

EIFO continued to work with ACE interns to collect stream restoration data using BLM National Aquatic Monitoring Framework's field protocols for lotic and riparian and wetland systems. Working with ACE members increased the BLM's ability to accomplish additional work, while providing on-the-job experience to ACE members.

EIFO collaborated with UAF to work on surface drift macroinvertebrate samples collected in the Steese NCA, as well as permafrost (soil) monitoring.

The Steese NCA is a core use area for the Fortymile caribou herd, with caribou range as one of the specified resources, objects, and values identified in designating legislation. EIFO worked with the SDSWCD to install four caribou exclosures to study how excluding foraging pressure affects plant (specifically lichen) growth and composition.



**Figure 5. One of the four caribou exclosures deployed. Two exclosures were deployed in each unit of the Steese NCA.**

# Science

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EIFO collaborated with ACE and the DoD SkillBridge program to collect data in the Steese NCA for a stream restoration effectiveness study, following protocols developed under the BLM National Aquatic Monitoring Framework to quantify aquatic and riparian habitat metrics. Four Harrison Creek sites surveyed in 2024 were re-surveyed in 2025. ABR, Inc. was contracted by BLM EIFO to collect data at 10 sites on the Harrison Creek main stem. The data will be used to assess ecosystem function before and after restoration and reclamation.

The BLM Alaska State Office assisted EIFO and the BLM National Operations Center (NOC) to develop and test a new Lotic and Riparian Integration (LRI) pilot protocol at multiple locations, including Harrison Creek. The LRI protocol integrates the BLM Lotic and the Riparian and Wetland AIM protocols. Data collection followed the pilot LRI protocol and will be used to finish developing it. The intention of the new LRI protocol is to survey floodplains more effectively.

EIFO staff and ACE members also collected surface drift macroinvertebrate samples at Harrison Creek. The samples were sent to a UAF lab, where students and an EIFO ACE intern processed the samples to identify and count the macroinvertebrates they contained. The data will be used for pre- and post-stream restoration and reclamation effectiveness assessments for restoration work planned at certain streams in 2026 and beyond.

Additionally, UAF continued to conduct permafrost monitoring along Pinnell Mountain Trail as part of a study assessing conditions associated with off-highway vehicle use.



**Figure 6.**Surface drift macroinvertebrate sample processing using a dissection microscope. Red dye is used to see the specimens better.

# Outreach and Special Events

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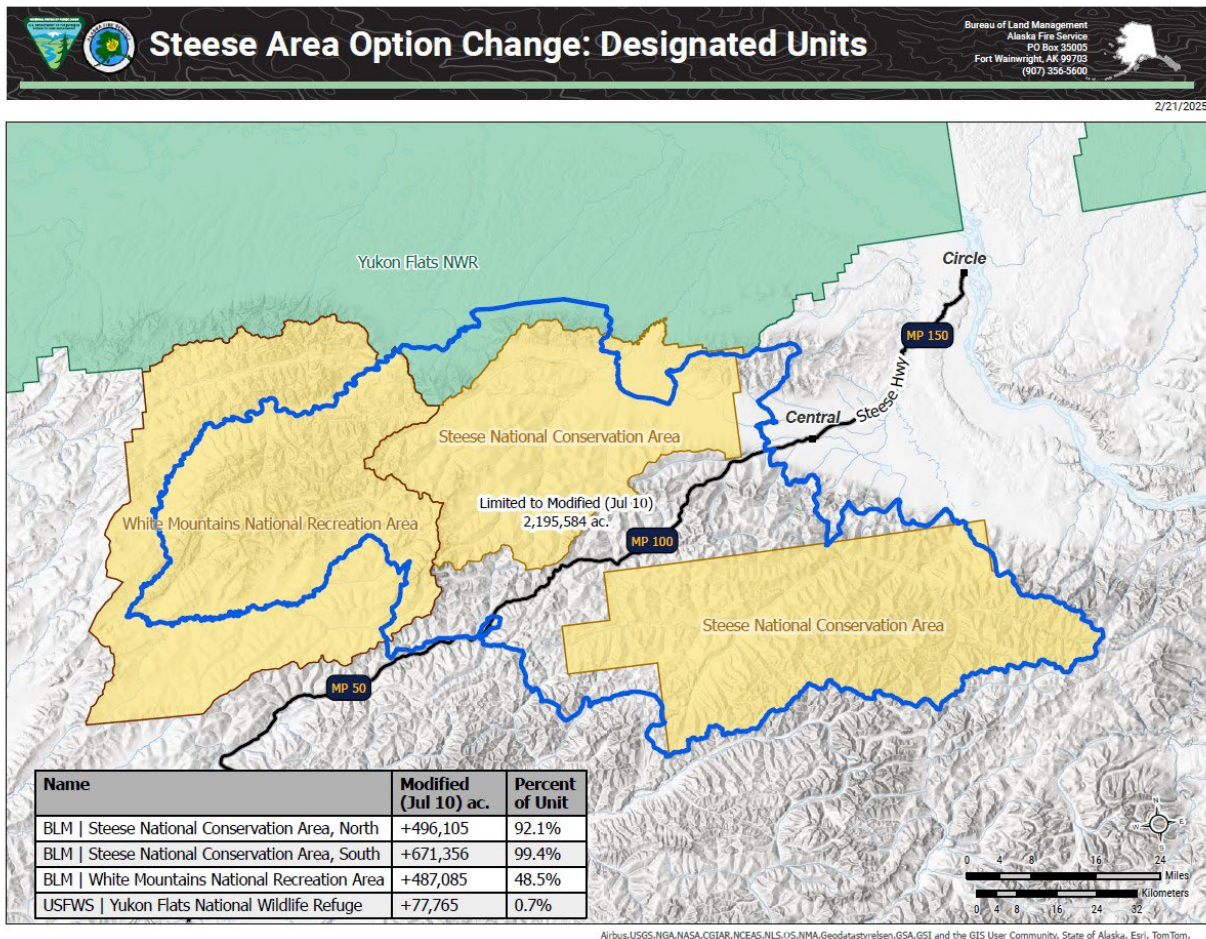
In February 2025, the Yukon Quest Alaska Sled Dog Races started in Fairbanks, Alaska passing through the Steese NCA and Birch Creek WSR to finish in Central, Alaska. Checkpoints along the course provide rest, safety, and welfare checks for dogs and mushers. BLM sites along the Steese Highway and in Central are important for the success of the event and the safety of the competitors.



Figure 7. Official logo for the 2025 Yukon Quest Alaska, an annual sled dog race that passes through the Steese NCA.

# Staff Topic of Choice

Studies show that caribou avoid lichen-rich habitat that has been burned by wildfire, typically for decades. To protect important lichen habitat for the Fortymile caribou herd, fire management within the Steese NCA markedly changed in FY 2025. Fire management on the majority of the Steese NCA changed from Limited to Modified where lichen-rich habitat for caribou was identified. Under Limited management, when a wildfire ignition is identified, the initial response is to assess its potential to affect neighboring values and conduct surveillance (monitoring) and site protection as warranted. Typically, wildfires are allowed to burn under this management option if no other values are identified for protection. Under the new Modified management option, when wildfire ignitions are identified before July 10<sup>th</sup>, the initial action is to mobilize resources to protect the area and/or sites and suppress the fire while minimizing risk to public and/or firefighter safety. As a cross-agency effort to conserve lichen habitat, State jurisdiction lands running between the north and south Steese NCA, and portions of the west side of the adjacent Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge were also changed to Modified.



**Figure 8.** Area outlined in blue depicts the portions of lands now under Modified fire management. BLM lands are depicted in yellow, Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge in green and State of Alaska lands in grey/white.



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## **STEESE**

### **National Conservation Area**

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