



# United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
Anchorage Field Office  
4700 BLM Road  
Anchorage, Alaska 99507-2591  
<http://www.blm.gov/ak>

## **Willow Trails, Matanuska-Susitna Borough** Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2011-0013-EA

Case File, AA-092773

### **DECISION RECORD**

#### **Background**

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Borough) has applied to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Anchorage Field Office (AFO) for a right-of-way for four trails in the vicinity of Willow, Alaska. The proposed trails would benefit winter and summer recreational opportunities in Willow by providing connections to other existing trail networks. The Borough is proposing the trails in conjunction with the Willow Area Community Organization (WACO), the community council for the community of Willow. Willow is an unincorporated community within the Borough.

In August 2012, the BLM prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) (DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2011-0013-EA) analyzing the effects of issuing a right-of-way for constructing and maintaining the trails.

#### **Decision**

I have decided to implement *Alternative 1 – Proposed Action* as described in the EA, with the one exception noted below (EA, p. 4). This alternative will hereinafter be referred to as the “selected alternative.”

My decision to authorize this right-of-way to the Borough is summarized as follows (refer to EA, p. 6 for more detail):

- 1) Issuance of a **ten-year** right-of-way authorization, with an option to renew, for development and non-exclusive use and access on four trail segments, A through D (see EA, p. 6).
- 2) Allow the Borough or its advocates to perform basic maintenance on the trail segments as necessary to facilitate access.

This decision is based on site-specific analysis in the *Willow Trails, Matanuska-Susitna Environmental Assessment*, the supporting project record, as well as management decisions contained in the 2008 Record of Decision for the Ring of Fire Resource Management Plan (RMP) (BLM 2012 and BLM 2008, respectively). The Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) indicates that the selected alternative has been analyzed in an EA and has been found to have no significant environmental effects. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required and will not be prepared.

### **Rationale for the Decision**

The No Action Alternative was not selected because it would not meet the BLM's purpose for action nor would it meet the BLM's objective to grant rights-of-way to qualified parties (see EA, p. 4 and 43 CFR § 2801.2, respectively).

Alternative 1 was selected, with one exception, because it meets BLM's right-of-way objectives as defined at 43 CFR § 2801.2 to address a valid application filed by the Borough for a right-of-way authorization and because the resulting trail network will enhance recreational opportunities on public lands as well as in the community of Willow.

The EA analyzed a twenty-year term for the right-of-way authorization, however, I have decided to issue the right-of-way for an initial period of ten years. The lands involved are currently selected by the Cook Inlet Regional Corporation (CIRI). In an April 2011 letter to the BLM, CIRI requested that the BLM limit the right-of-way grant to a period of ten years, if authorized.

### **Laws, Authorities, and Land Use Plan Conformance**

The EA and supporting documentation have been prepared consistent with the requirements of various statutes and regulations, including but not limited to:

- Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA)
- Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA)
- National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA)
- National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA)

The proposed action occurs within the Ring of Fire Planning Area. The proposed action is in conformance with the following Ring of Fire Approved Resource Management Plan (RMP) Decisions, goals, and management actions (2008):

**Goal, Recreation O-1:** Manage recreation to maintain a diversity of recreational activities..."

**Management Action, M-2a:** "Lands within the planning area are classified and managed as "limited" to OHV use... OHV use will be limited to existing roads and trails whenever possible."

**Management Action, I-2n Rights-of-Way:** “The BLM may issue rights-of-way for a variety of uses including but not limited to: roads, water pipelines, electric lines and communication sites under the authority of Title V of FLPMA.”

**Public Involvement, Consultation, and Coordination**

Internal scoping was conducted by AFO staff. The WACO group conducted extensive public involvement. Due to the extensive public involvement offered by the WACO group concerning the proposed trails in and around Willow, it was determined that further public scoping by BLM was not necessary. Summaries of WACO’s public involvement efforts are available at: <http://waco-ak.org/index.php/Trails/Intro>. The Environmental Assessment was made available for public review and comment for approximately one week prior to the signing of this Decision Record. No public comments were received on the Environmental Assessment.

**Appeal Opportunities**

This decision may be appealed to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations contained in 43 CFR § 4. To appeal you must file a notice of appeal at the BLM Anchorage Field Office, 4700 BLM Road, Anchorage, Alaska 99507, within 30 days from receipt of this decision. The appeal must be in writing and delivered in person, via the United States Postal Service mail system, or other common carrier, to the Anchorage Field Office as noted above. *The BLM does not accept appeals by facsimile or email.* The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision appealed from is in error.

If you wish to file a petition pursuant to regulation 43 CFR § 4.21 (58 FR 4939, January 19, 1993) for a stay of the effectiveness of this decision during the time that your appeal is being reviewed by the Board, the petition for a stay must accompany your notice of appeal. Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulation, a petition for a stay of decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards: (a) The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied, (b) The likelihood of the appellant’s success on the merits, (c) The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted, and (d) Whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

Copies of the notice of appeal and petition for a stay must also be submitted to each party named in this decision and to the Interior Board of Land Appeals and to the Office of the Solicitor (see 43 CFR § 4.413); Office of the Regional Solicitor, Alaska Region, U.S. Department of the Interior, 4230 University Drive, Suite 300, Anchorage, Alaska 99508; at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. If you request a stay, you have the burden of proof to demonstrate that a stay should be granted.

/s/ James M. Fincher

September 5, 2012

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James M. Fincher  
Anchorage Field Manager

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Date

**Attachments**

Finding of No Significant Impact, September 2012

**References**

BLM. 2012. Environmental Assessment: Willow Trails, Matanuska-Susitna Borough. DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2011-0013-EA.

BLM. 2008. Ring of Fire Approved Resource Management Plan and Record of Decision. March 2008.



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**Willow Trails, Matanuska-Susitna Borough**  
Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2011-0013-EA

Case File, AA-092773

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

### **Background**

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Borough) has applied to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Anchorage Field Office (AFO) for a right-of-way for four trails in the vicinity of Willow, Alaska. The proposed trails would benefit winter and summer recreational opportunities in Willow by providing connections to other existing trail networks. The Borough is proposing the trails in conjunction with the Willow Area Community Organization (WACO), the community council for the community of Willow. Willow is an unincorporated community within the Borough.

In August 2012, the BLM prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) (DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2011-0013-EA) analyzing the effects of issuing a right-of-way for constructing and maintaining the trails.

### **Finding of No Significant Impact**

This action and its effects have been evaluated consistent with the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for determining *significance*. Per 40 CFR § 1508.27, a determination of *significance* requires consideration of both context and intensity. The former refers to the relative context in which the action would occur such as society as a whole, affected region, affected interests, etc. The latter refers to the severity of the impact.

#### *Context*

The requested right-of-way would allow for the development of approximately 1.5 miles of trails in total. As described in the EA, the right-of-way authorization would enhance the existing local trail system, but does not introduce altogether new trail uses (EA, p. 4). The anticipated effects are site-specific in nature; this project's effects would not affect state, regional or national resources or interests.

## *Intensity*

### *1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*

The EA considered and disclosed both potential beneficial and adverse effects of the alternatives. For example, the Environmental Assessment discloses that the project would result in the removal of approximately one acre of natural vegetation (EA, p. 16), but the EA also acknowledges that the proposed trails would enhance the existing trail system, help to limit recreation traffic on a local road, and offer trail connection opportunities (EA, p. 16).

### *2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health and safety.*

The project has potential to offer a minor benefit to public safety on Wilford Lane. The authorization of a right-of-way to build Trail D would alleviate some of the parking and recreational use occurring along Wilford Lane (EA, p. 16).

### *3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity of historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

There are no parks, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas in proximity to the Proposed Action and alternatives. There are no known cultural features within the project area (EA, pp. 10, 11, and 14).

### *4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The anticipated effects are similar to other right-of-way authorizations. The techniques used in trail development and effects of such activity are well-understood. No unique or appreciable scientific controversy has been identified regarding the effects of the Proposed Action.

### *5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

Similar to Item 4 above, the anticipated effects are similar to many other right-of-way authorizations in southcentral Alaska. The techniques used in trail development and effects of such activity are well-understood. The analysis has not shown that there would be any unique or unknown risks to the human environment.

### *6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

Per the Ring of Fire Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Record of Decision (ROD), the project area is open to the requested use. This authorization is consistent with the RMP/ROD. This proposed action neither establishes a precedent nor represents a decision in principle about future actions. Furthermore, the proposed action is consistent with other right-of-way authorizations for trail development and maintenance in southeast Alaska.

7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

Cumulative effects are addressed for each of the resources. The environmental analysis did not reveal any significant cumulative effects (EA, p. 17). Furthermore, within the project area, the past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions to be considered in context of cumulative effects is extremely limited. The BLM has not permitted other actions within the project area in the past and there are currently no pending authorizations for use in this area. Therefore, the suite of other activities or actions whose effects may interact with the proposed project is limited primarily to private lands surrounding the BLM parcel. As disclosed in the EA, the effects of increased recreational use combined with the effects of the proposed project could result in an increase in noise impacts, but would not rise to the level of significance due the limitations on the operators (e.g., snow mobiles use in winter, etc.) and the vastness of the trails in the Willow area.

8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.*

Refer to criteria #3 above. There are no known districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.

9. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

There are no Federally threatened or endangered species within the project area (EA, p. 3).

10. *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The Proposed Action and/or alternatives do not threaten to violate any law. The Proposed Action and alternatives are in compliance with the 43 CFR § 2800 regulations and are consistent with Ring of Fire RMP and ROD (2008), which provides direction for the protection of the environment on public lands (EA, p. 2).

## **Conclusion**

Therefore, on the basis of the information contained in the EA (DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2011-0013-EA), and all other information available to me, it is my determination that:

1. None of the environmental effects identified meet the definition of significance as defined by context and intensity considerations at 40 CFR § 1508.27;
2. The alternatives are in conformance with the ROD for the Ring of Fire Approved RMP (2008); and

3. The Proposed Action and alternatives do not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment.

Therefore, neither an Environmental Impact Statement nor a supplement to the existing EA is necessary and neither will be prepared.

*/s/ James M. Fincher*

*September 5, 2012*

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James M. Fincher  
Anchorage Field Manager

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Date

### **Attachments**

BLM 2012. Environmental Assessment: Willow Trails, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2011-0013-EA. Prepared by Anchorage Field Office, Anchorage, Alaska.

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management**  
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4700 BLM Road  
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**Environmental Assessment**  
DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2011-0013-EA

**Willow Trails, Matanuska-Susitna Borough**  
Case File: AA-092773

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**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Borough) has applied to the BLM Anchorage Field Office (AFO) for a right-of-way (ROW) for four trails in the vicinity of Willow, Alaska. The proposed trails would benefit winter and summer recreational opportunities in Willow by providing connections to other existing trail networks. The Borough is proposing the trails in conjunction with the Willow Area Community Organization (WACO), the community council for the community of Willow. Willow is an unincorporated community within the Borough.

**A. Purpose and Need**

The BLM action on this proposal would be the issuance of a right-of-way authorization for four trails in the vicinity of Willow.

The purpose of the action would be to provide the Borough with legal access across public land managed by the BLM for trails intended to enhance recreational opportunities for the community of Willow and members of the general public.

The need for BLM action is established by the BLM’s responsibility under Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of October 21, 1976, as amended (90 Stat. 2776; 43 U.S.C. 1761) to respond to requests uses of public.

The BLM will decide whether to grant the right-of-way authorization to the Borough and, if granted, under what terms and conditions.

## **B. Land Status**

The legal description of the parcel of land managed by AFO is within the S½SW¼ Section 7, Township 19 North, Range 4 West, Seward Meridian. The land is currently selected by Cook Inlet Regional Corporation (CIRI) under selection number AA-01115323. The land is also top-filled by the State of Alaska. The parcel is surrounded by private property and is located approximately 1.5 miles from Willow within the Tyonek C-1 USGS Quadrangle. The parcel is approximately one-quarter mile wide. The legal description of the parcel is:

Seward Meridian, Township 19 North, Range 4 West, Section 7, S½SW¼.

## **C. Scoping and Public Involvement**

Internal scoping was conducted by AFO staff. The WACO group conducted extensive public involvement. Due to the extensive public involvement offered by the WACO group concerning the proposed trails in and around Willow, it was determined that further public scoping by BLM was not necessary. Summaries of WACO's public involvement efforts are available at: <http://waco-ak.org/index.php/Trails/Intro>.

## **D. Land Use Plan Conformance**

The proposed action occurs within the Ring of Fire Planning Area. The proposed action is in conformance with the following Ring of Fire Approved Resource Management Plan (RMP) decisions, goals, and management actions (2008):

**Goal, Recreation O-1:** Manage recreation to maintain a diversity of recreational activities..."

**Management Action, M-2a:** Lands within the planning area are classified and managed as "limited" to OHV use... OHV use will be limited to existing roads and trails whenever possible.

**Management Action, I-2n Rights-of-Way:** The BLM may issue rights-of-way for a variety of uses including but not limited to: roads, water pipelines, electric lines and communication sites under the authority of Title V of FLPMA.

## **E. Issue Identification**

The following issues were identified for further consideration in this EA:

- Potential introduction and/or spread of invasive species
- Disturbance to cultural resources

- Potential effects on migratory bird populations
- Potential effects on recreation opportunities in the Willow area
- Potential effects on air quality
- Potential effects on water quality

The following issues were identified for consideration in this EA. Ultimately, these issues were not carried forward for further analysis for the reasons stated.

**Hazardous or Solid Wastes:** According to the State of Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation's web site at <http://map.dec.state.ak.us/spar/csites/webmap/index.html>, there are no known hazardous or solid wastes within the proposed project area.

**Threatened and Endangered Species:** Wildlife habitat within the project area supports a variety of species however, no federal threatened or endangered species are known in the project area. Because no threatened or endangered species are known, there is no reason to believe that implementation of the proposed action: will jeopardize the continued existence of an endangered or threatened species; result in the destruction or adverse modification of critical habitat of such species; will jeopardize the continued existence of any species proposed to be listed as endangered or threatened; or will result in destruction or adverse modification of critical habitat proposed to be designated for such species. Therefore, no consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considered necessary pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, 16 U.S.C. §1536.

**Subsistence Uses:** Subsistence, as defined by Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) Section 803, is the customary and traditional uses by rural Alaska residents of wild renewable resources for direct personal or family consumption as food, shelter, fuel, clothing, tools, or transportation; for the making and selling of handicraft articles out of non-edible byproducts of fish and wildlife resources taken for personal or family consumption; for barter or sharing for personal or family consumption; and for customary trade. Section 810 of ANILCA requires an evaluation of federal management actions on federal public lands for their effects on subsistence uses and needs. Due to the selection of the lands by CIRI, the Proposed Action does not occur on Federal Public Lands as defined in ANILCA Sec 102(3) and therefore the area is closed to the subsistence taking of wildlife as per the current Subsistence Management Regulations for the Harvest of Wildlife on Federal Public Lands in Alaska.

## 2.0 PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

### A. Proposed Action – Alternative 1

The proposed action is to grant a ROW to the Borough to build and maintain four (4) trails for a twenty-year term with the right of renewal. Each of the trails would cross through a parcel of public land that is approximately one-quarter mile wide.

In winter, these trails would be used by snowmachines, dog mushers, skiers, and walkers to access other connecting trail networks. In summer, walkers and bicyclists would be the primary trail users.

Trails A, B, and C are proposed for winter use (see Figure 1). The winter trails would be marked by lath (wooden stakes) at the beginning and end of the ROW each winter.

Trails A and B would require no construction as they enter into an area currently devoid of timber around a small lake. These trails would also be marked with lath by snowmobiles in the winter months. Winter trail maintenance would be conducted annually from November through April by a trail groomer pulled behind a snowmobile.

Trails C and D are proposed to be built by using chain-saws, Bobcat-type excavators, or a SWECO mini-dozer to clear vegetation and develop a trail. It is expected that gravel may be needed in places to harden these two trails. The applicant plans to acquire funding for this project through grants to further develop the two trails. The funding source and amount will determine whether or not gravel is used. Construction of Trails C and D would occur May through October of 2012, if funding is available.

Trails A, B, and D are proposed to be 12 feet wide and Trail C has a proposed width of 4 feet. Trails B and C are approximately 0.5 mile long and Trails A and D are approximately 0.25 miles long. The total square footage for each trail is:

Trail A: 15,850 sq. ft.

Trail B: 31,680 sq. ft.

Trail C: 10,560 sq. ft.

Trail D: 15,840 sq. ft.

**Total of 73,910 sq. ft. or 1.7 acres (approximately)**

The Approved Ring of Fire Resource Management Plan has identified required operating procedures (ROP) intended to mitigate impacts to the environment. The following ROPs and best management practices have been identified to reduce the impact of the proposed action. Additional permit terms may apply, however, the following items have been specifically identified for consideration in this EA because they have potential to reduce or altogether avoid impacts:

### **Hazardous and Non-Hazardous Wastes and Spills**

1. No hazardous materials will be stored at the site. All spills of fuel will be reported to the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) and cleaned-up in accordance with 18 AAC 75. BLM shall be notified of all reportable spills. Absorbent material shall be stored on site for any fuel spills and used in refueling of equipment.
2. Proper handling techniques should be used to reduce the potential for spills.
3. Non-Hazardous Solid Waste (trash/refuse/wood debris) will be back hauled from the area and disposed in an approved waste disposal site.

### **Cultural Resources**

4. All operations shall be conducted in such a manner as to avoid damage or disturbance to any prehistoric or historic sites or modern camp sites. The Archaeological Resource Protection Act prohibits the excavation, removal, damage, or disturbance of any archaeological resource located on public lands. Violation of this law could result in the imposition of both civil and criminal penalties of the violator. Should any historic or prehistoric site be located during the course of operations under this permit, the applicant shall immediately cease activities and notify the BLM authorized officer.

### **Vegetation**

5. In order to prevent invasive species spread, all vehicles, and equipment used in conjunction with the permit must be thoroughly cleaned prior to moving equipment across or onto BLM managed lands. Washing and/or brushing equipment to remove material that can contain weed seeds or other propagates helps insure equipment is weed and weed seed free. High pressure washing is recommended to treat the insides of bumpers, wheel wells, undercarriages, inside belly plates, excavating blades, buckets, tracks, rollers, drills, buckets, shovels, any digging tools, etc., to remove potential weeds, seeds, and soil carrying weed propagules, and vegetative material.
6. All construction materials brought on site for the project must be certified weed-free products. This includes mulch, straw, hay, gravel, top soil and any other materials that have potential to transport and propagate non-native invasive plant species.
7. Should any area used under the Grant have non-native invasive plant infestations, you must confer with the authorized officer to reduce and monitor the spread by contacting: Laurie Thorpe by telephone at 907-267-1208 or by e-mail at [lthorpe@blm.gov](mailto:lthorpe@blm.gov).

### **Wildlife**

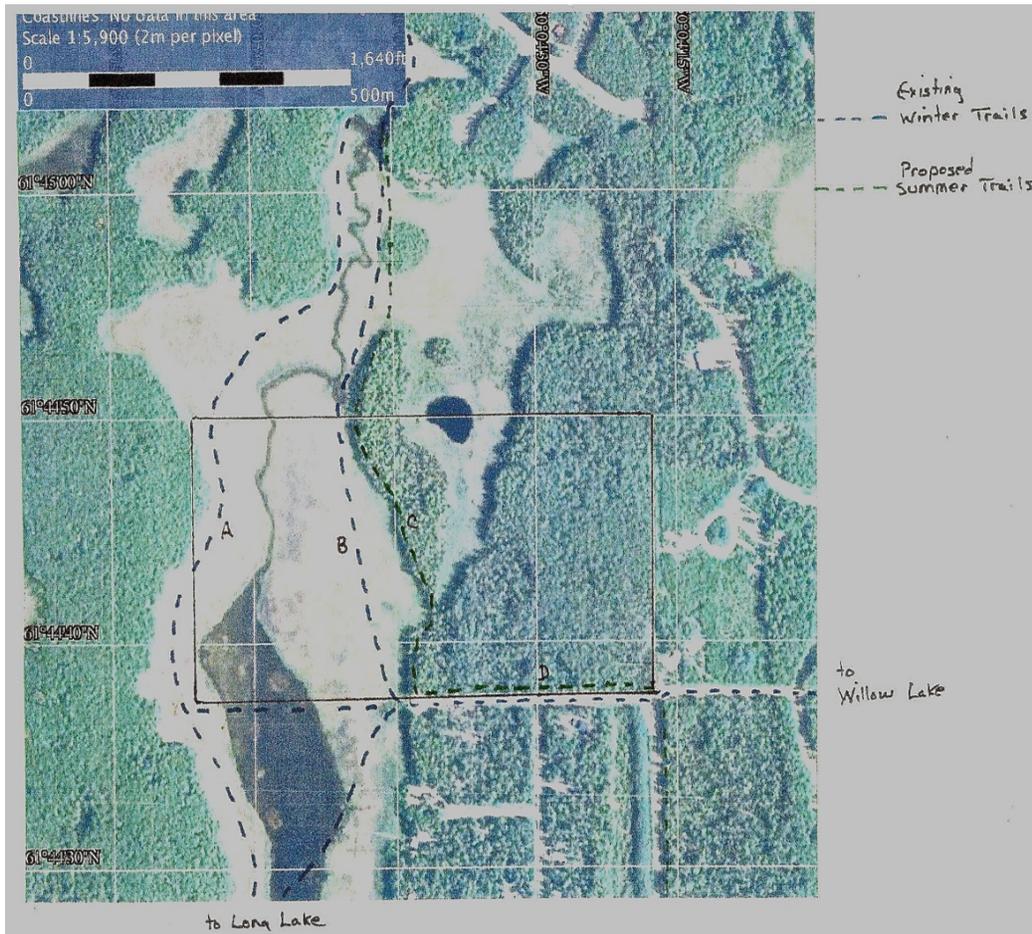
8. Operations requiring vegetation removal will avoid the migratory bird nesting period of April 15 to July 15, if activities cannot avoid the April 15-July 15 time frame, you must confer with the authorized officer and obtain a written notice to proceed prior to beginning work by developing a plan to mitigate the impacts to nesting birds by contacting: Bruce Seppi by telephone at 907-267-1282 or by e-mail at [bseppi@blm.gov](mailto:bseppi@blm.gov).
9. No surface disturbance activities will take place within one-fourth of a mile of bald eagle nest.

**Water Quality and Wetlands**

- 10. Refueling of equipment will not be conducted within 100 ft. from non-fish bearing waterbodies.
- 11. Activities in wetlands will comply with federal and state permit requirements for alteration of wetlands.
- 12. Utilize winter access whenever possible in wetlands.
- 13. In snow-free months, if wetlands cannot be avoided, low ground pressure vehicles will be used.

**General**

- 14. All equipment, personal property, and improvements must be removed within thirty (30) days after permit expiration date or as directed by the authorized officer.
- 15. Utilize existing roads and trails whenever possible.



**Figure 1: Proposed rights-of-way A, B, C, and D. Wilford Lane is south of Trail D.**



Figure 2: Showing the BLM parcel adjacent to Willow Lake.



**Picture #1, View west from Wilford cul de sac. AFO parcel is on the right, Borough lands on the left**



**Picture # 2 View west on Wilford Lane. Eastern portion of BLM land is on the right**



**Picture #3 View looking north from southern edge of parcel. Western portion of the AFO parcel is on the left side of picture**

**B. No Action Alternative - Alternative 2**

The no action alternative would be to deny the requested ROW authorization.

**C. Alternatives Considered But Not Analyzed in Detail**

AFO considered granting only select trails (e.g., granting Trail A ROW, but not Trail D ROW) to minimize impacts to the land and decrease or eliminate the need to remove brush and trees from proposed Trails C and D. However, eliminating the proposed Trail D would force users onto a public road which may endanger the public and create user conflicts. Trail C could be eliminated and would force recreation users to a low, wet area which would provide a less sustainable trail building surface.

AFO considered shortening the length of the grant as requested by CIRI. However, this alternative would have essentially the same environmental effects as the Borough proposal for a long-term ROW and therefore, would not meaningfully contribute to the range of alternatives.

### **3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

#### **A. Air Quality and Climate Change**

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards has set National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for six principal pollutants, called "criteria" pollutants (40 CFR Part 50).

EPA classifies air quality control regions as in attainment of the NAAQS, non-attainment or unclassified. Attainment of the NAAQS is determined by collection of air quality data at monitoring stations in the state. Attainment means a NAAQS is being met. Non-attainment means a NAAQS is not being met. Unclassified indicates that the region cannot be classified and is considered in attainment.

The EPA internet site (<http://www.epa.gov/>) was reviewed for Air Quality Index (AQI) for the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, with the following results:

**Geographic Area:** Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Alaska

**Date Range:** January - December 2008

**AQI Values:** Maximum 140, Minimum 2, Percentiles... 90th 52, 75th 31, 50th 15, 25th 10

**AQI Category:** Days Good 51 (89%), Moderate 5 (9%), Unhealthy/Sensitive 1 (2%)

**Main Pollutant:** Days PM<sub>2.5</sub> 47 (82%), PM<sub>10</sub> 10 (18%)

(57 Days of AQI data selected)

Climate warming in Alaska may be linked to changes occurring in the structure and function of terrestrial ecosystems throughout the State (BLM 2006). Since the 1950s, Alaska has warmed by an average of 4 degrees Fahrenheit (USEPA 2005 as cited BLM 2006). Changes include warming of permafrost throughout Alaska, decrease in area of closed basin lakes in south-central Alaska, and the altering of the ranges of some bird species (BLM 2006). Additionally, climate change has been linked to changes in disturbance regimes such as fire and insect outbreaks in south-central Alaska (McGuire 2003 as cited in BLM 2006).

BLM land use management within the Ring of Fire planning area uses management practices that are based on goals and objectives that are established for this area. These established land uses are based on numerous criteria, including land cover and historical land uses. If climate change continues to affect BLM-managed resources and programs, or use changes in the planning area, BLM will re-evaluate the land management status for the given area and adjust management accordingly (BLM 2006).

#### **B. Cultural Resources**

The Dena'ina Athabascan Indians have occupied this area historically, living in semi-permanent villages. The Euroamerican community got its start when gold was discovered on Willow Creek

in 1897. Supplies and equipment were brought in by boat to Knik. From there, a 26-mile summer trail went northwest, up Cottonwood Creek, and across Bald Mountain to Willow Creek. The winter sled trail went north, crossing the present line of the Alaska Railroad at Houston, and up the west end of Bald Mountain for 30 miles. This trail, dubbed the "Double Ender Sled Trail," is still being used by skiers, hunters, backpackers, and snowmachine enthusiasts. The sleds then followed a trail, now Hatcher Pass Road, along Willow Creek in an easterly direction. The Talkeetna Trail also passed through Willow and was used by dog teams and pack horses. Cabins to accommodate freighters and mail carriers were located at Nancy Lake, Willow, and other points north. This route was the forerunner of the Parks Highway (State of Alaska, Community and Regional Affairs community information summaries for Willow, Alaska).

During construction of the Alaska Railroad, surveyors, construction crews, homesteaders, and other settlers came to Willow. A railroad station house was constructed in 1920. During World War II, a radar warning station and airfield were built. The Trail's End Lodge was built in 1947; it subsequently became a post office in 1948. By 1954, Willow Creek was Alaska's largest gold mining district, with a total production approaching \$18 million. Land disposals, homestead subdivisions, and completion of the George Parks Highway in 1972 fueled growth in the area.

The AHRS database shows there are three known cultural resources within a mile of the project Area of Potential Effect (APE): TYO-00025, TYO-00041, and TYO-00096. These include two historic sites associated with the community of Willow and one prehistoric site. There are no known sites within the APE. The BLM AFO Archaeologist has surveyed the proposed project area, and found no cultural resources present, and a low potential for subsurface cultural resources.

### **C. Invasive Species**

Per the BLM's 2010 Invasive Species Management Policy, the BLM is required to:

Protect and enhance the health of the public lands and environment through various means including the control of invasive species. Protect the health and safety of people involved with other aspects of implementing the invasive species management program on the ground;

Ensure that invasive species management activities are integrated into all BLM programs that may be affected by or cause the establishment or spread of undesirable species.

An invasive plant survey has not been conducted within the specific project area. However, invasive species have been detected in the Willow vicinity and therefore a proactive mitigation plan is needed.

The BLM requires that best management practices be implemented to prevent invasive species spread. It also requires that all vehicles, and equipment used in conjunction with the permit/lease must be thoroughly cleaned prior to moving equipment across or onto BLM Managed Lands.

#### **D. Water Quality (Surface and Ground)**

A series of lakes run south of Willow Creek, a tributary to the Susitna River. The project area is north of Long Lake.

According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Anadromous Stream Catalogue, Willow Creek and the Susitna River are anadromous streams (ADF&G 2008). The lakes in the project area are not connected to either of these streams.

#### **E. Migratory Birds**

As stated in the BLM Ring of Fire RMP and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) (BLM 2006), over 450 species of birds have been recorded in Alaska and most of these species migrate through, breed, or are year round residents of the Ring of Fire planning area (Kessel and Gibson 1994; Gibson, Hainl et al. 2005). Birds are a key component of the ecosystem in all parts of the planning area and because many of these species range across several countries during their annual migration, are considered an international resource (Kessel and Gibson 1994). Due to the great diversity of habitat within the southcentral Alaska region, from the coastal range and temperate rainforest, alpine tundra of the Alaska, Talkeenta, Chugach and Kenai Mountains to interior boreal forest of the upper Susitna River Valley and herbaceous and low shrub tundra of the Kamishak Bay area, terrestrial bird diversity is very high (Kessel and Gibson 1994). Both migrant and resident species include the majority of the terrestrial birds that occur in the State. Many neotropical migrants breed or pass through this region on their way to breeding grounds (NatureServe 2005). The project area provides habitat for various species of migratory birds.

#### **F. Vegetation**

As stated in the BLM Ring of Fire RMP and FEIS (BLM 2006), the lowlands of southcentral Alaska support several extensive freshwater wetland areas, including the Kenai-Susitna Wetlands (Selkregg 1974-1976a). The Kenai-Susitna Wetlands consist of 5,700 square km of mostly palustrine forested wetlands transitioning from temperate rainforests to taiga. Scrub-shrub wetlands are dominated by shrubs and/or trees that are less than 20 ft tall (Cowardin, Carter et al. 1979). Scrub-shrub wetlands may also be identified as moist tundra (Viereck, Dyrness et al. 1992). Scrub-shrub wetlands are dominated by either broadleaf deciduous or needle-leaved evergreen communities of Labrador tea, tamarack (*Larix laricina*), dwarf birch, black spruce, shore pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *contorta*), mountain hemlock, western hemlock, bog rosemary, bog laurel (*Kalmia polifolia*), blueberry, crowberry, low-bush cranberry, bog cranberry, and rusty menziesia. Willow and alder are also common in many scrub-shrub communities. The herbaceous layer is dominated by skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus*), deer cabbage (*Fauria crista-galli*), goldthread (*Coptis* sp.), sedges, and grass species (Selkregg 1974-1976a; Selkregg 1974-1976b; Selkregg 1974-1976c). Scrub-shrub wetlands can provide riparian support when in proximity to streams by stabilizing banks and reducing sediments and toxicants in the water

(Adamus Resources Assessment Inc. 1987). Forested wetlands are dominated by trees taller than 20 ft (Cowardin, Carter et al. 1979). Large areas of forested wetlands exist within Alaska, mostly of the needle-leaved evergreen subclass. The tree layer consists mainly of black spruce, mountain hemlock, western hemlock, and the occasional Sitka spruce, white spruce, or shore pine. The shrub and herbaceous layers consist of the same species listed under scrub-shrub wetlands, but in lower abundance. Some saturated forested wetlands have buttressed trees and a thick sphagnum moss layer (Selkregg 1974-1976a; Selkregg 1974-1976b; Selkregg 1974-1976c).

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## **G. Recreation**

The Willow Trail Committee is a special standing committee of WACO and is a member of the Matsu Borough Trail Crew Member. The Willow Trail Committee identified and mapped three trail systems in and around Willow based upon historical use for mining, hunting, trapping, dog mushing, supply freighting, and recreational snow machining. These three trail systems are West Gateway Trail System, Haessler-Norris Trail System and Emil Stancec Trail System. The goals of WACO's Willow Area Trail Plan are:

- to identify historic and currently used trails,
- obtain public easements for recreational trails and trailheads,
- maintain trails for safe and enjoyable use,
- provide information to the public on trail safety and trail etiquette,
- provide a forum for trail conflicts,
- Recognize trails as an important natural resource that contributes to the economic well-being and quality of life<sup>4</sup> in Willow.

The proposed ROW's are a portion of the West Gateway Trail System identified by the Willow Trail Committee and enhance the winter trail system from the Willow Community Center building. The West Gateway Trail System is located directly west of Willow between the Parks Highway and the Susitna River. The trails connect Willow to Big Lake and Nancy Lake Recreation Area Trails to the south and access to the Big Su, and Deshka Rivers to the west. Willow is host to the Alaska State Winter Carnival each year and is dependent on the identified trails for the many snowmachine, dog mushing, skiing and skjoring events. The Community Center building is adjacent to Willow Lake and a winter trail system crosses Willow Lake and parallels proposed trail D. Proposed trails A, B, and C, provide continued access south to Long Lake and north to further trails identified by the Willow Trail Committee.

## 4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

### A. Air Quality and Climate Change

#### Effects of the Proposed Action

The Proposed Action would remove existing trees and vegetation along proposed Trails C and D. Approximately 47,520 square feet of vegetation would be removed or approximately 1.09 acres out of a total area of 80 acres of BLM managed lands. This loss of vegetation would reduce the ability of the vegetation located in the area to produce oxygen and consume carbon dioxide. Green house gas emissions from the engines of snowmobiles, chain saws and the small dozer proposed to clear brush associated with construction of two trails would take place over the 60-day construction phase of the proposed action.

The table below estimates the quantity of diesel fuel and pollutants that are anticipated to be generated by the proposed action.

**Table 1: Estimated Fuel and Pollutant Emissions**

| Equipment Type     | exp.hours | MaxHP | (lb/hr)<br>ROG | (lb/hr)<br>CO | (lb/hr)<br>NOX | (lb/hr)<br>SOX | (lb/hr)<br>PM | (lb/hr)<br>CO2 | (lb/hr)<br>CH4 |
|--------------------|-----------|-------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Crawler Tractors   | 40        | 50    | 0.1176         | 0.3246        | 0.2627         | 0.0003         | 0.0270        | 24.9           | 0.0106         |
| Generator Sets     | 10        | 15    | 0.0149         | 0.0684        | 0.1016         | 0.0002         | 0.0058        | 10.2           | 0.0013         |
| Off-Highway Trucks | 60        | 175   | 0.1441         | 0.7580        | 1.0305         | 0.0014         | 0.0602        | 125            | 0.0130         |
| Total pounds       |           |       | 13.49          | 59.48         | 73.35          | 0.206          | 4.75          | 8598           | 1.217          |

Source: <http://www.aqmd.gov/ceqa/handbook/offroad/offroad.html>

#### Effects of the No Action Alternative

There would be no impacts to air quality or the climate under the No Action Alternative.

### B. Cultural Resources

#### Effects of the Proposed Action Alternative

Because there are no known cultural resources within the APE, and the potential for intact subsurface resources is minimal there is no potential to impact cultural resources as a result of the proposed action.

#### Effects of the No Action Alternative

No ground disturbing activities would occur under the No Action Alternative and therefore no impacts to known or unknown cultural resources are anticipated under the No Action Alternative. Continued small scale, dispersed recreation activities would continue to occur in the vicinity, which would continue to have a negligible potential to impact on cultural resources in the area.

## **C. Invasive Species**

### Effects of the Proposed Action Alternative

Early detection/rapid response approach to invasive species is the most economic, effective, and environmentally sensitive approach for the short and long-term management in any ecological unit and/or travel corridor. A mitigation plan for the project area prior to construction will reduce the risk of new introductions or invigorating any existing infestations in the project area as well as transporting propagules to otherwise weed-free sites.

Best Management Practices for cleaning equipment and gear, and using weed-free trail construction materials are required and will help prevent the inadvertent introduction and spread of invasives in the project area.

Increased recreational use of the trails will increase the possibility of future spread of invasive species if area managers and trail users do not take precautions to prevent the spread. Off highway vehicle use within the Ring of Fire RMP is limited to existing roads and trails whenever possible. Increasing the number of recreational trails will bring more OHV use and potentially introduce and spread invasive species. If invasive species do exist in the project area prior to construction, the construction activities and subsequent trail use by OHV's would likely invigorate and spread the infestation.

Best Management Practices (as identified in BLM 2010) , if integrated into project construction and operations, to the maximum extent feasible, will mitigate the risk of ecological damage from invasive species.

### Effects of the No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the potential for non-native invasive plant species population to spread (if any do exist) would increase at slower rate than with the Proposed Action, due to the lack of disturbance to the ground and existing vegetation in the project area. The potential for the introduction of new invasive species would also be less due to less use of the area without the improved trails.

## **D. Water Quality (surface & ground)**

### Effects of the Proposed Action Alternative

Increased recreational vehicular traffic is expected with trail construction and maintenance and general recreational use after construction. The potential for fuel and oil spills by improper refueling of recreational users of OHV's would increase on public lands.

### Effects of the No Action Alternative

It is anticipated that there will still be recreational users on the lands but to a lesser extent if the trails are not developed. The potential for fuel and oil spills by improper refueling of

recreational users of OHV's would therefore decrease. Since there would be no construction or maintenance of the trails the potential of fuel and oils spills would not be present.

## **E. Migratory Birds**

### Effects of the Proposed Action Alternative

If vegetation clearing occurs outside of the spring nesting season (April 15 through July 15) it would minimize disturbance impacts to migratory birds. However, loss of migratory bird habitat would still occur due to the removal of vegetation. Approximately one acre of vegetation would be removed out of 80 acres of BLM managed lands in this vicinity.

### Effects of the No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, no vegetation would be removed. Therefore, there would be no loss of migratory bird habitat under the No Action Alternative.

## **F. Vegetation**

### Effects of the Proposed Action Alternative

Approximately one (1) acre of forest vegetation would be permanently removed from the project area. There would no effect to vegetation resources in winter months because trail use would occur on hardpacked snow. In summer months, if trail use increases this could affect vegetation along the routes because of trampling and/or crushing of vegetation.

### Effects of the No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no loss of vegetation. Vegetation would continue to grow naturally.

## **G. Recreation**

### Effects of the Proposed Action Alternative

The recreational trail system from the Willow Community Center would be enhanced by the proposed four ROWs. Trail D would provide for an alternative from recreational users using Wilford Lane. Recreational users park on this road and use it for recreational activities. The road is used by area residents for access to homes along Wilford Lane. By providing for trail D, recreational trail users would not utilize Wilford Lane. Existing winter trail usage through the BLM parcel of land on trails A and B will increase as the Borough has the authority to improve these trails by marking them to enhance the existing winter trails system north and south of the BLM parcel. Trail C would tie into the existing trail from the Willow clinic north around Willow Lake. Trail C would provide for a walking summer trail that could tie into an existing trail from the Willow Clinic.

### Effects of the No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, there would continue to be decreased recreational

opportunities for the community members of Willow as well as and visitors to the area. Decreasing recreational opportunities would negatively impact tourism and the quality of life to Willow area residents and visitors. The public's recreational use of Wilford Lane would continue and potential conflicts between home owners and recreation uses will not be addressed.

## **H. Cumulative Impacts**

Given that there is little to no potential for effects under the No Action Alternative, there is no potential for that alternative to contribute to cumulative effects.

Between 1990 and 2000, Willow's population grew from 285 to 1658. The Willow area is expected to continue to grow. Willow is located within 100 miles of Alaska's most urban center (Anchorage) and is centered close to the Parks Highway. Proximity to Anchorage and the Parks Highway contributes to Willows popularity as a recreational destination. As the population of Anchorage continues to grow, Willow will see urban encroachment in terms of tourism, recreation, and land development. The four recreational trails will add to the loss of habitat by removing a small amount of vegetation (1 acre). However, the addition of four trails will also add to the recreational appeal of Willow and indirectly add to the increased recreational draw that the community now enjoys.

## **5.0 CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION**

### **A. Persons and Agencies Consulted**

WACO, Steve Charles  
CIRI, Steve Planchon  
Borough, Bruce Paulsen

### **B. List of BLM Preparers**

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Geoff Beyersdorf    | Former Natural Resource Specialist (Subsistence) |
| Jenny Blanchard     | Archaeologist                                    |
| Stephen L. Fusilier | Former Lands Branch Manager                      |
| Jeff Kowalczyk      | Outdoor Recreation Planner                       |
| Bruce Seppi         | Wildlife Biologist                               |
| Thomas Sparks       | Natural Resource Program Coordinator             |
| Laurie Thorpe       | Natural Resource Specialist (Vegetation)         |

### **C. References**

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) 2006. Ring of Fire Proposed Resource Management Plan  
Bureau of Land Management. 2010. Alaska Invasive Species Management Policy.