

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has prepared this Proposed Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement (PRMP/FEIS) to provide direction for managing their public lands within the Ring of Fire planning area boundaries, and to analyze the environmental effects that would result from implementing the alternatives presented in the PRMP/FEIS.

The exterior boundaries of the planning area encompass approximately 61.4 million acres, or twice the size of the State of New York. Within this vast area, the Ring of Fire RMP/EIS will analyze the future management of approximately 1.3 million acres that are under BLM's jurisdiction, roughly two percent of the lands within the exterior boundaries of the planning area.

Approximately 60,000 acres of the 1.3 million included in the plan are withdrawn for military purposes for Fort Richardson Army Post (FRAP) and Elmendorf Air Force Base (EAFB). BLM's management of these lands is circumscribed by the withdrawals. Of the remaining acres analyzed by the plan, approximately 486,000 acres are unselected BLM-managed lands, and approximately 798,000 acres are selected by the State of Alaska or Native corporations, but not yet conveyed by BLM (see Chapter 3, Table 3.1-1). Because the State of Alaska and Native corporations have selected lands in excess of their entitlements, BLM will ultimately retain management of some of the selected lands. However, management measures outlined in the PRMP/FEIS only apply to BLM-managed lands within the planning area; measures that have been developed do not apply to private, State, or other Federal agency lands.

The PRMP/FEIS was prepared using BLM's planning regulations and guidance issued under the authority of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976, and under requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500-1508), the BLM's NEPA Handbook 1790-1, and the BLM's Land Use Planning Handbook 1601.

Purpose and Need

The Ring of Fire RMP will provide the Anchorage Field Office (AFO) with a comprehensive framework for managing lands within the planning area under the jurisdiction of BLM. The purpose of an RMP is to provide a public document that specifies overarching management policies and actions for BLM-managed lands. Implementation-level planning and site-specific projects are then completed in conformance with the broad provisions of the RMP. The RMP is needed to update the Southcentral Management Framework Plan, approved in 1980, and to provide a land use plan consistent with evolving law, regulation, and policy. The approved RMP will meet the BLM statutory requirement for a master land use plan as mandated by Section 202 of FLPMA (1976), which specifies the need for a comprehensive land use plan consistent with multiple use and sustained yield objectives.

Planning Regions

The Ring of Fire planning area has been subdivided into four regions, which include: Alaska Peninsula/Aleutian Chain, Kodiak, Southcentral, and Southeast regions. These regions represent physiographic provinces that are distinct from one another given the physical

boundaries and characteristics of each area. Dividing the project area into these four regions also provides consistency, continuity, and a logical approach to management prescriptions discussed throughout this PRMP/FEIS.

Decisions to be Made

Land use plan decisions are made on a broad scale, and guide subsequent site-specific implementation decisions. The RMP will make the following types of decisions to establish direction in the Ring of Fire planning area:

- Establish resource objectives and desired future conditions.
- Describe actions to achieve objectives and desired future conditions.
- Identify land use classifications and designations.
- Make land use adjustments.

Management under any of the alternatives would comply with State and federal regulations, laws, standards, and policies. Each alternative considered in the PRMP/FEIS allows for some level of support of all resources present in the Ring of Fire planning area. The alternatives are designed to provide general management guidance in most cases. Specific projects for any given area or resource would be detailed in future integrated activity plans or site-specific proposals, and additional NEPA analysis and documentation would be conducted as needed.

After the comments on the Ring of Fire Draft RMP/EIS were reviewed and addressed, the responsible officials can decide to:

- Select one of the alternatives analyzed for implementation; or
- Modify an alternative (e.g., combine parts of different alternatives) as long as the environmental consequences are analyzed in the PRMP/FEIS.

The alternative selected for implementation will be presented in the PRMP/FEIS. Following a 60-day Governor's Consistency Review and a 30-day protest period and the resolution of any protests, a Record of Decision (ROD) will be signed, and an approved RMP will be released.

Issues

A planning issue is an area of controversy or concern regarding management of resources or uses on the lands within the planning area. Issues for the Ring of Fire were identified through public scoping, concerns raised to BLM staff in interactions with public land users, and resource management concerns of the BLM and other federal and State agencies. These issues drive the formulation of the plan alternatives, and addressing them has resulted in the range of management options across the PRMP/FEIS alternatives. Additional discussion on issues raised during scoping can be found in Chapter 1 (Sections 1.3.1 and 1.3.2). Issues of primary concern in the development of the PRMP/FEIS include:

- Haines Block: Recreation use, and potential conflicts with wildlife in the area.
- Knik River: Off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, and potential degradation of natural resources.

- Coalbed Natural Gas (CBNG): Concerns with effects to surface lands and their owners from development activities.
- Land Tenure Adjustments: Scattered, small parcels of BLM-managed lands within the Ring of Fire planning area create management difficulties.

Alternatives

Alternatives were developed using an interdisciplinary team process that included BLM staff specialists and a representative of the State of Alaska. Each alternative analyzed in the PRMP/FEIS allows for some level of support of all resources and programs for which BLM is responsible in the Ring of Fire planning area, and is designed to guide future management and resolve land management issues identified during the early stages of the planning process. Implementation of decisions in any alternative would be subject to the limits of available funding. Under all alternatives, the BLM would manage their lands in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, and BLM policies and guidance.

Four alternatives were developed and carried forward for detailed analysis in the PRMP/FEIS. One alternative describes the continuation of current, existing management and serves as the No Action Alternative (Alternative A). Three other alternatives (Alternatives B, C, and D) describe proposed changes, as well as what aspects of current management would be carried forward. These three alternatives were developed with input from the public, collected during scoping, from the BLM planning team, and through collaborative efforts conducted with the State of Alaska and the Alaska Resource Advisory Council (RAC). The alternatives provide a range of choices for meeting BLM planning and program management requirements and resolving the planning issues identified through scoping.

Alternative A: No Action (Current Management)

Alternative A represents the continuation of current management practices, also called the No Action Alternative. This alternative would include continued management under guidance of the existing Southcentral Management Framework Plan (MFP) for those lands covered by that plan, and other management decision documents. Direction contained in existing laws, regulations, and policy would also continue to be implemented, sometimes overriding provisions in the Southcentral MFP. The current levels, methods, and mix of multiple use management of BLM land in the planning area would continue, and resource values would receive attention at present levels. No lands would be open to oil and gas leasing, including leasing for coalbed natural gas (CBNG), and large tracts would remain closed to the operation of the mineral laws due to retention of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) 17(d)(1) withdrawals. No special management areas, other than the existing Campbell Tract Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA), such as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), or SRMAs would be designated or recommended in this RMP for BLM-managed lands within the planning area, and lands would remain unclassified for off-highway vehicles (OHVs) and visual resources. In general, most activities would be analyzed on a case-by-case basis and few uses would be limited or excluded as long as their actions were consistent with State and federal laws.

Alternative B: Resource Development

Alternative B highlights actions and management that would facilitate resource development. Nearly all unselected lands, and those selected lands whose selection would be otherwise

relinquished or rejected, would be open to oil and gas leasing and development. All ANCSA 17(d)(1) withdrawals would be revoked, allowing increased potential for mineral exploration and development. The BLM-managed lands within the planning area would be designated as “open” to OHV use. As with Alternative A, no special management areas (SMAs) would be designated, and visual resources would be managed as Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class IV (see p. 2-31 for a description of VRM Classes). Resources would also be protected through Required Operating Procedures (ROPs) and/or stipulations as described in Appendix D.

Alternative C: Resource Conservation

Alternative C emphasizes actions and management that would protect and enhance resource values. Oil and gas leasing and mineral exploration and development would be more constrained than in Alternatives B or D, and on a substantial portion of the BLM-managed lands within the Ring of Fire planning area, leasing and mineral location would be excluded to protect important resources. One ACEC and two SRMAs are established if these lands remain in long-term BLM ownership. Implementation plans would be developed in future planning efforts for these areas that would outline specific measures to protect or enhance values within these areas. All BLM-managed lands within the planning area would be designated as “limited” to OHV use, allowing limitations to protect habitat, soil and vegetation, and recreation experiences. ANCSA 17(d)(1) withdrawals would be maintained as an interim measure while BLM pursues withdrawal or other appropriate land management actions in order to protect or maintain resource values. Fourteen river segments were determined eligible, but not suitable as Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSR). The ACEC and two other smaller parcels would be managed as VRM Class II, and most of the remainder of the BLM-managed lands within the planning area would be managed as VRM Class III. As with Alternative B, resources would also be protected through stipulations and/or ROPs.

Alternative D: Proposed Action

Alternative D provides a balance of protection, use, and enhancement of resources. The majority of unselected lands and those selected lands, whose selections were relinquished or rejected, would be open to oil and gas leasing and development and mineral location, though certain unique or sensitive areas would remain closed. One ACEC and two SRMAs are established if these lands remain in long-term BLM ownership. Implementation plans would be developed in future planning efforts for these areas that would outline specific measures to protect or enhance values within these areas. While two small parcels and the ACEC would be managed for VRM Class II, other lands would be managed for VRM Class IV. All BLM-managed lands within the Ring of Fire planning area would be designated as “limited” to OHV use, allowing limitations to be placed on OHV use to protect habitat, soil and vegetation resources, and/or recreation experiences. All ANCSA Section 17(d)(1) withdrawals would be revoked, allowing increased potential for mineral exploration and development. As with Alternatives B and C, resources would be protected through the NEPA process and the application of the appropriate stipulations and/or ROPs.

BLM Proposed Action

Alternative D was selected as the proposed action based on examination of the following factors:

- Balance of use and protection of resources.
- Extent of environmental effects.

This alternative was chosen because it best resolves the major issues of the Ring of Fire planning area, while providing for common ground among conflicting opinions. It also provides for multiple use of public lands in a sustainable fashion. Alternative D provides the best balance of resource protection and use within legal constraints.

Environmental Consequences

Selection of Alternative A, the No Action Alternative, would maintain the current rate of progress in protecting resource values and levels of resource development. It would allow for use levels to continue along current patterns throughout the Ring of Fire planning area, with mitigation efforts being applied on a case-by-case basis in most instances. OHV use would remain unrestricted on BLM-managed lands, resulting in continued resource degradation in certain areas.

Implementation of Alternative B would allow for the highest level of resource development opportunities, with the fewest planning area-wide constraints. Uses would generally be least restricted by management actions under this alternative, though legal constraints and ROPs and/or Stipulations (Appendix D) would be applied. Opportunities for resource extraction would be the greatest under this alternative, although mineral development potential outlined in Appendix G would remain low. All BLM-managed lands within the planning area would be designated as “open” to OHV use, which would continue current effects to natural resources. This alternative would result in greater effects on the physical and biological environment than would implementation of Alternatives C or D.

Alternative C would have the fewest potential effects to the physical and biological resources from BLM actions. More areas of BLM-managed lands would be closed to potential mineral development or rights-of-way (ROW) construction (see Table 2.5-1) than in Alternatives B or D. Three SMAs are identified, requiring future integrated implementation planning, that would provide further protections to wildlife, vegetation, visual, and other natural resources in those areas. All BLM-managed lands would be designated as “limited” to existing roads and trails for OHV use (consistent with the *Generally Allowed Uses on State Land* found in Appendix E), which would result in less areas of resource degradation.

Implementation of Alternative D would allow for potential increased levels of resource development, while providing site-specific and some area-wide protection of resources through future integrated implementation planning. Fewer areas would be removed from potential mineral development in Alternative D than in Alternative C; however, there are more areas removed than in Alternative B. Three SMAs are identified under this alternative. All BLM-managed lands would be designated as “limited” to existing roads and trails for OHV use (consistent with the *Generally Allowed Uses on State Land* found in Appendix E), which would result in less areas of resource degradation. However, limitations within the three SMAs would be defined through the development of implementation plans, and may include instituting seasonal closures, closure of some portions of the SMAs to OHVs, the designation of, and/or limitations to designated trails, and/or the opening of some portions of the proposed Knik River SRMA to OHV use.

Public Participation

Public involvement has been an integral part of the BLM Ring of Fire planning effort. In order to engage the public during the timeframes involved in the development of an RMP/EIS, newsletters were mailed throughout the process to updated interested parties on the progress of the document formulation.

Consultation, coordination, and public involvement have occurred through scoping and alternative development meetings; meetings and briefings with Federal, State, and Tribal government representatives; and informational meetings with interested individuals and organizations. Seven public scoping meetings were hosted by BLM between April 28 and May 13, 2003, in Juneau, Skagway, Haines, Palmer, Kenai, Kodiak, and Anchorage. An agency meeting was also held on May 14, 2003 in Anchorage. In addition to the public scoping meetings, and at the request of the Chilkat Indian Village in Klukwan, near Haines, an informal meeting with the Ring of Fire RMP/EIS project team was held on April 30, 2003. Locations of other informal scoping meetings are listed in Chapter 5.

On September 30, 2005, a Notice of Availability (NOA) of the Draft RMP/EIS was published in the Federal Register (Federal Register 2005), marking the beginning of a 90-day public review period for the document. At the same time, print copies and CDs of the Draft RMP/EIS were made available at public libraries throughout the planning area and by request from the BLM AFO, and at public hearings held within the planning area. Copies of the document were also distributed to other federal and State agencies. Public hearings were held between November 15 and December 15, 2005 in Juneau, Skagway, Haines, Palmer, Kenai, Kodiak, and Anchorage. An agency meeting was also held on December 14, 2005 in Anchorage.

The 90-day public review period was originally scheduled to end on December 29, 2005. A comment period extension was requested as a result of a specific mapping error. BLM produced an errata sheet and new maps, and distributed these to the entire project mailing list. The public comment period was extended by 30 days, and officially ended on January 30, 2006.

After the 120-day comment period, comments were evaluated. The Comment Analysis Report summarizes the submissions and testimony received during the public review of the Draft RMP/EIS (Chapter 6 of the PRMP/FEIS). Substantive comments may have lead to changes in one or more of the alternatives, or changes in the analysis of environmental consequences. If protests are received on the PRMP/FEIS, they will be reviewed and addressed by the Director of the BLM before an ROD and Approved Plan are released.