

COLVILLE RIVER SPECIAL AREA MANAGEMENT PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Summary

The BLM's Arctic Field Office has initiated a management plan and environmental assessment (EA) for the Colville River Special Area, located in the southern and eastern portions of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPR-A). This Special Area was designated by the Secretary of the Interior in 1977 to provide maximum protection for the Arctic peregrine falcon, then an endangered species. Currently, protections for the Arctic peregrine falcon are not consistent across the three NPR-A planning units. In addition to consistency, a plan is needed to facilitate maximum protections of important surface values in the Colville River Special Area in accordance with the National Petroleum Reserve Production Act of 1976, as well as Records of Decision for Integrated Activity Plans for NPR-A which were signed by the Secretary of Interior. The EA will compare two alternatives: (1) develop a consistent management plan that is applicable through the entire Colville River Special Area; (2) prepare a plan that catalogs protections inconsistently for each of the three NPR-A planning areas. The EA will focus on protections for the peregrine falcon, in addition to evaluation of impacts relating to subsistence, recreation, and paleontological activities. This management plan and EA is expected to be completed by summer of 2008.

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A Brief Overview

Background

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has initiated development of a management plan and environmental assessment (EA) for management of the Arctic peregrine falcon in the Colville River Special Area. The Colville River Special Area was designated by the Secretary of Interior in 1977, primarily to protect the then endangered Arctic peregrine falcon. Since that time a number of planning documents have been prepared for NPR-A, but a consistent plan that addresses peregrine falcon management for the entire Colville River Special Area, has not been developed.

Focus of the Plan

This management plan and EA will focus on consolidating and ensuring consistency of protections for the Arctic peregrine falcon in the Colville River Special Area.

The Plan **Will Not** Address

- The cleanup of a contaminated site near Umiat
- Wild and Scenic River studies - *However, actions developed in the plan will consider important surface resources values so as to not preclude Wild and Scenic River studies as part of future land allocation plans.*
- Wilderness
- Oil and gas leasing - *However, the plan may identify areas/locations of special concern where additional terms and conditions could be applied to future permits and authorizations associated with oil and gas operations.*

Purpose and Need

A management plan is needed for the Colville River Special Area to ensure that the habitat for Arctic peregrine falcons is afforded maximum protection under the requirements of the Naval Petroleum Reserves Production Act of 1976. The Records of Decision for the 1998 Northeast NPR-A Integrated Activity Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (IAP/EIS) and the 2004 Northwest NPR-A IAP/EIS also addressed the need to consider impacts to subsistence, paleontological resources, and recreation within the Colville River Special Area. Such information will be useful when considering future oil and gas activities in NPR-A.

Therefore, to comply with the 1998 and 2004 Records of Decision, a unified management plan for peregrine falcons in the Colville River Special Area is needed.

The boundary of NPR-A including the Colville River Special Area is another issue. The boundary definitions described in President Harding's Executive Order (E.O.) 3797-A were ambiguous, so in the early 1980s the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation and Sohio Alaska Petroleum Company sued the U.S. government to resolve definition of NPR-A's east boundary. Although the court decision was made more than 20 years ago, many implications for falcon management along this portion of the Colville River have not been fully resolved.

The Arctic peregrine falcon was removed from Threatened and Endangered Species status in 1994, but these birds remain a species of special concern by the State of Alaska (ADF&G 2007) and a continental species of conservation concern by the Audubon Society (Audubon 2007). A comprehensive management plan is needed for the Colville River Special Area because the

Colville River and its tributaries are important breeding and rearing areas for the Arctic peregrine falcon.

The purpose of the plan is to use recent survey data and new geographic information system (GIS) technology to identify key habitat features for the Arctic peregrine falcon, and other raptors, in the Colville River Special Area; develop and refine planning criteria into a single planning document; and identify priorities for research and monitoring so that future planning and decision-making will include the best available information.

Alternatives

Alternative 1 – Proposed Action

A management plan for the Colville River Special Area, using the best available information and most up-to-date environmental protections that would apply consistently across the three NPR-A planning areas, would be prepared and adopted. Protections outlined in previous documents (Federal Register 1977 [Vol 42, No. 107, page 28724], BLM 1983, BLM and MMS 1998, BLM 1999, Federal Register 1999 [FR Vol. 64, No. 65, pg 16747, April 6 1999]; BLM 2000; BLM and MMS 2004; BLM 2006; BLM and NSB 2007), would be compiled and consolidated to a single planning document to ensure consistent implementation of the management plan.

The plan would provide updated information on the distribution and abundance of Arctic peregrine falcons and other raptors (gyrfalcon and rough legged hawk) that inhabit the Colville River Special Area. The proposed action would also include an analysis of information needs (detailed mapping to proactively identify nesting sites; additional research and monitoring such as prey abundance and distribution or disturbance studies). The plan would outline actions needed to provide maximum protection for the Arctic peregrine falcon. Based on the impact analyses and information needs identified through the process, additional mitigation to protect the Arctic peregrine falcon would be proposed, evaluated, and possibly adopted.

Alternative 2 – Develop a Plan to Continue Implementing Existing Protections

A management plan for the Colville River Special Area, using existing environmental protections as they currently apply inconsistently across the three NPR-A planning areas, would be prepared and adopted. Protections for the Arctic peregrine falcon would remain the same per existing guidelines. That is, the NPR-A Oil and Gas Leasing EIS (1983 Record of Decision), Northeast NPR-A IAP/EIS (1998 Record of Decision), and Northwest NPR-A IAP/EIS (2004 Record of Decision). Monitoring would continue periodically to provide information on population trends and distribution. These protections would not apply consistently across planning units within the Colville River Special Area. This alternative represents the *de facto* No Action alternative.

BLM Decision Process

This EA will consider the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of two alternatives: (1) Development and implementation of consolidated and consistent protections for the Arctic peregrine falcon in the Colville River Special area; and (2) development of a management plan that implements existing protections for the Arctic peregrine falcon inconsistently across the three NPR-A planning units that overlap with the Colville River Special Area. The EA will be prepared in accordance with NEPA of 1969 [42 USC 4321 et seq.], Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Parts 1500-1508.

The environmental assessment (EA) will provide a discussion of the affected environment and environmental consequences of the alternative plans to provide protection for the Arctic peregrine falcon. The following elements of concern have been identified for analysis.

- Arctic Peregrine Falcon
- Recreation
- Subsistence
- Paleontological Resources
- Other Wildlife
- Cultural Resources
- Environmental Justice and Social Values
- Fisheries and Essential Fish Habitat
- Access

This EA will provide the decision-maker, the Manager of the BLM's Arctic Field Office, with the information necessary to evaluate the impacts associated with the alternatives. The decision-maker will take into account environmental and social issues, and the ability of the respective alternatives to meet the purpose and need.

Process for Public Participation and Consultation

In compliance with the regulations from the Council on Environmental Quality's Regulations for Implementing NEPA (40 CFR 1506.6), the Arctic Field Office will provide opportunity involvement and consultation with agencies, organizations, Native tribes, industry, and landowners regarding the development of the management plan and EA for the Colville River Special Area. This briefing provides initial scoping information on the plan and EA.

You or your organization has the opportunity to be involved with the planning process. Your comments on the proposed plan and EA are welcome at any time. The best times to comment or to provide suggestions for consideration in the document would be early in the process (by late January 2008), or during a 30 day review period for the EA, expected to begin during June or July of 2008.

To comment and for additional information, please contact:

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