

White Mountains National Recreation Area Resource Management Plan Amendment

Scoping Report

Eastern Interior Field Office, Alaska
September 2005

Introduction

Overview/Purpose and Need for the Plan

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, as amended, provides the authority for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land use planning on public lands. Section 202 (a) of the act requires the Secretary of the Interior, with public involvement, to develop, maintain, and when appropriate, revise land use plans. The White Mountains National Recreation Area Resource Management Plan (RMP) was approved in 1986. The RMP provides management direction for the 1.0 million acres of public land within the national recreation area. As directed by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), the area is to be administered to provide for public outdoor recreational use and for the conservation of scenic, historic, cultural, and wildlife values, and for other uses if they are compatible or do not significantly impair the previously mentioned values.

This RMP amendment was triggered by a need to consider monitoring and evaluation findings, changes in circumstances, and proposed actions that could result in a change in the terms, conditions, and decisions of the RMP. The RMP was completed in 1986 and has guided the use and management of the national recreation area for 20 years. Reviews of the RMP conducted in 2000 and 2003 determined that the preponderance of the planning data and decisions are still sound and appropriate, and are being implemented effectively. The RMP reviews did determine, however, that decisions in the RMP relating to the management of off-highway vehicles (OHVs) should be revisited even though the basic zoning of the planning area (into the Primitive, Semi-Primitive Motorized, Research Natural Area, and Wild River Corridor Management Units) and the over-arching OHV designations of open, limited and closed are working well. When the RMP was completed, OHVs were much less numerous and their technology was less refined. In the 20 years since approval of the RMP, the Eastern Interior Field Office has gathered a good deal of inventory and monitoring data on OHV use, and has gained considerable practical experience building, maintaining, and managing OHV trails in the national recreation area.

Pursuant to the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) at 43 CFR 8342.1, the BLM's regulations for OHV management, "[t]he authorized officer shall designate all public lands as either open, limited, or closed to [off-highway vehicles]." These designations were made for the national recreation area in the existing RMP and through subsequent RMP implementation. After evaluating their effectiveness and applicability, the Field Office has determined there is not a

need to amend these over-arching designations. However, modification to the more detailed guidance in the RMP is needed, especially with regard to the application of thresholds and prescribed restrictions to use. For example, the existing RMP lists four situations where “a semi-primitive area open to [OHV] use would be closed or restricted.”¹ Given their subjective nature, however, these thresholds are difficult to identify, and management actions other than closure or restriction (as prescribed by the RMP) may be preferred.

The RMP assumed that additional study and monitoring would lead to the establishment of “threshold[s] as to when impacts are becoming excessive.” The RMP also set initial thresholds beyond which “[OHV] use would be closed or restricted.” Implementation of these thresholds has proven difficult and unrealistic given their subjective nature. The only instances of increased OHV restrictions have resulted from adjustments to the boundaries of OHV “limited” areas to improve enforcement by using boundaries that are identifiable on the ground, and to reduce the likelihood of summer OHV users traveling into the river corridor area. Through the public involvement process, an amended RMP will improve the quality of OHV access to the national recreation area and, at the same time, increase the level of protection provided to fragile landscapes and fish and wildlife without resorting to arbitrary threshold standards.

The BLM’s implementing regulations for resource management planning are contained at 43 CFR 1610. BLM Manual 1601, Land Use Planning, and the Land Use Planning Handbook recently revised in March 2003 (H-1601-1) provide procedures and guidance for the planning process. 43 CFR 1610.5-5 provides specific requirements for plan amendments, and states that, “[a]n amendment shall be made through an environmental assessment of the proposed change, or an environmental impact statement, if necessary, public involvement as prescribed in Sec. 1610.2 of this title, interagency coordination and consistency determination as prescribed in Sec. 1610.3 of the title and any other data or analysis that may be appropriate.” We anticipate this amendment will be made through an environmental assessment.

Brief Description of the Planning Area

The White Mountains National Recreation Area is located approximately 60 miles northwest of Fairbanks. The Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge adjoins the area to the north, and the Steese National Conservation Area lies to the east. Millions of acres of State land extend to the south and west of the area. The national recreation area encompasses most of the Beaver Creek component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Beaver Creek is managed by the BLM as a wild river area pursuant to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

The national recreation area is within the jurisdiction of the Eastern Interior Field Office, which is one of three field offices of the Fairbanks District Office. The White Mountains National Recreation Area constitutes one geographic management unit within the Eastern Interior Field

¹ The RMP states that, 1) a watershed would be closed to OHV use when more than 5 percent of the miles of trail become difficult to negotiate with a small three-wheeler or other like-sized OHV due to erosion and sedimentation or poor trail conditions, 2) a watershed would be closed to OHV use when water pollution from OHV trails or disturbances becomes noticeable in Beaver Creek or its major tributaries, 3) an area will be closed to OHV use from the beginning of breakup to the time when willows and dwarf birch are in full leaf if there is extensive cross-country damage or rutting on trails as a result of the use of light OHVs, and 4) OHV use would be restricted or prohibited as necessary to protect recreation, wildlife, watershed, and/or scenic values.

Office. The planning area consists of the lands within the designated boundaries of the national recreation area plus the federal lands within T4N, R2W and T4N R3W, Fairbanks Meridian. There are four parcels of private land within the planning area.

Table 1. Land Status Within the Planning Area

| Landowner | Acreage |
|---|------------------|
| BLM public lands within the national recreation area | 998,000 |
| BLM public lands outside the national recreation area | 12,000 |
| Private lands within the national recreation area | 166 |
| Private lands outside the national recreation area | 10 |
| Other lands | 0 |
| Total | 1,017,166 |

Note: All acreage figures are rounded to the nearest 1,000 acres, except acres for private lands, which have been surveyed and are rounded to the nearest 1 acre. No warranty is made by BLM as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data. For official land status and boundary information, refer to cadastral survey plats, master title plats, and land status case-files.

Brief Description of the Scoping Process

Notice of Intent

A Notice of Intent to prepare an amendment for the White Mountains National Recreation Area RMP was published in the Federal Register on March 15, 2005. The notice advertised a public meeting and provided information on submitting comments on the proposed amendment. The notice also stated that the 60-day scoping comment period would begin upon publication of the notice. The scoping comment period ended on May 16, 2005.

Meetings

One public scoping meeting attended by approximately 40 people was held in Fairbanks on April 20, 2005. At this meeting, the public requested that they have another opportunity to view the alternatives.

In response to this request and to address concerns from OHV users that their input was not being considered, an additional meeting was held on September 7, 2005, in Fairbanks after the close of the comment period. Additional information regarding the alternatives and their effects to OHV opportunities in the national recreation area was shared with the approximately 40 individuals in attendance.

Contacts

In addition to the Fairbanks District Office's standard mailing list, a project-specific mailing list of an additional approximately 50 names was used for distributing information to people and agencies specifically requesting involvement.

Cooperating Agencies/Invitees

The BLM funds a position within the State of Alaska's Department of Natural Resources to further coordination efforts on this and all other RMP efforts currently ongoing across the state. This State RMP Project Coordinator has been and will continue to be closely involved in this amendment effort.

Collaboration and Consultation with Tribes

Letters were sent to Birch Creek Village, Beaver Creek Village, and Stevens Village Tribal Councils inviting government-to-government participation in the RMP amendment process, though no responses have been received. Additional correspondence will be sent prior to finalizing the Proposed RMP Amendment, Environmental Assessment, and Finding of No Significant Impact.

Issue Summary

Summary of Public Comments

State of Alaska comments:

- Recognize the State's authorities that overlay BLM's land management responsibilities.
- Make the plan consistent with the Tanana Basin Plan, the Alaska Recreational Trails Plan, and the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan – Alaska's Outdoor Legacy.
- Tanana Basin Trails Plan.
- Recognize R.S. 2477 Rights-of-Way.²
- Comply with ANILCA provisions.
- Consider access to mineralized areas.
- Protect federal land from significant impacts from OHV use in sensitive areas. Use designations, seasonal restrictions, and trail hardening are options.
- Work with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the Division of Natural Resources to determine traditional access routes and protect sensitive areas.
- Protect cultural resources.

² There are three R.S. 2477 rights-of-way claimed by the State in the planning area as shown on the digital map submitted with their comments: Snowshoe-Beaver Trail, U.S. Creek-Nome Creek Trail, and Sourdough Creek Trail.

Public comments were summarized into the response categories shown in the table below.

Table 2. Summary of Public Comments

| Response Category | Number of Responses | Percent of Respondents (N=37) |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Manage to a non-degradation standard and/or eliminate summer OHV use. | 19 | 51 |
| I enjoy the area, good job, etc. | 15 | 41 |
| Improve enforcement and user accountability for actions. | 13 | 35 |
| Improving trails for OHVs is counter-productive: too expensive and/or actually increases impacts overall. | 12 | 32 |
| Restrict motorized use to existing or designated trails only. | 7 | 19 |
| Add more winter trails and cabins. | 6 | 16 |
| Change the design standards for cabin sites, trails, etc. | 5 | 14 |
| Keep motorized access into backcountry. | 2 | 5 |
| Keep gold panning in Nome Creek Valley. | 2 | 5 |
| Charge user fees for OHVs. | 2 | 5 |
| Trails that are damaged should be closed. | 2 | 5 |
| Improve public education efforts. | 2 | 5 |
| Separate motorized from non-motorized uses. | 2 | 5 |
| Manage OHVs to control impact. | 1 | 3 |
| Coordinate with the Geophysical Institute on rockets. | 1 | 3 |
| Close particular trails to motorized use. | 1 | 3 |
| Allow suction dredging in Nome Creek Valley. | 1 | 3 |
| Maintain vehicle access in the mined area in Nome Creek Valley. | 1 | 3 |
| Coordinate with the State and other landowners. | 1 | 3 |
| Designate more non-motorized areas close to the road. | 1 | 3 |
| Limit snowmachine use. | 1 | 3 |

No comments were received recommending broad changes to the existing OHV designations of “open,” “limited” or “closed” (per 43 CFR 8342.1).

Issues Identified During Scoping

Only one RMP-level issue was identified: How should we manage summer OHV use in the semi-primitive motorized management unit to provide for public use and enjoyment of the national recreation area, to provide for compliance with applicable laws and regulations, and to provide for protection of natural resources? All other issues and concerns identified during scoping, as described below under *Issues Raised That Will Not be Addressed*, were either outside the scope of the amendment or are site-specific and will be addressed through later implementation-level planning.

Anticipated Decisions to be Made

The decisions to be made in this plan amendment will be guided by the Comprehensive Trails and Travel Management section of Appendix C in the BLM’s Land Use Planning Handbook, H-1601-1.

The following travel management areas were designated in the existing RMP. These areas will not be affected or changed by this amendment:

- Primitive Management Unit,
- Semi-Primitive Management Unit,
- Wild River Corridor,
- Resource Natural Areas, and
- Two conceptual Transportation Corridors.

Identification of the two conceptual transportation corridors in 1986 has been made moot by the improvement and development of the U.S. Creek Road and the Nome Creek Road, as well as the abandonment of placer mining claims in the area that originally drove the potential need for a corridor.

The existing RMP has defined a travel management network through a system of areas, roads, and trails. The amendment may modify the travel management network in concept and in some details, though overall designations will be unchanged. This amendment will likely change some of the interim guidance related to travel management contained in the existing RMP. The modifications to be considered include restriction of summer OHV travel to designated trails, use of trail hardening, and a non-degradation threshold for summer OHV use.

The existing RMP designated areas as either “open,” “limited” or “closed” to OHVs pursuant to 43 CFR 8342.1. These designations are not anticipated to change as a result of amendment decisions.

Issues Raised That Will Not be Addressed

The following issues and concerns will not be addressed as part of this RMP amendment for the reasons explained below:

- Enforcement – This is a staffing and funding decision, not an RMP decision.
- User fees for OHVs – The authority to charge such fees has not been delegated to this decision level.
- Gold panning and suction dredging in the Nome Creek Valley – Public interest in this issue is minimal and existing management is adequately and effectively addressing current activity levels.
- Winter use by snowmachines – Public interest in changing the existing RMP guidance for winter use is minimal and existing management is adequate and effective.
- Activity-level planning, site planning, and design decisions, including design details, trail layout, cabin locations, and site criteria – These types of decisions are better dealt with on a case-by-case basis during RMP implementation rather than in the RMP itself.

Valid Existing Management to be Carried Forward

The existing OHV designations of “open,” “limited” and “closed” and the winter management actions will be carried forward, as will all other non-OHV related RMP decisions.

Special Designations, Including Nominations

No special designations will be affected by this amendment.

Draft Planning Criteria

The RMP amendment will be prepared according to the following draft planning criteria:

1. Compliance with applicable laws and regulations.
2. Protection of water quality in Beaver Creek, a component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.
3. Eventual development of a sustainable OHV trail system where adverse impacts from use both on and off trails are mitigated or decreased.
4. No change from the current OHV designations (“limited” or “closed”) in the existing RMP.
5. No change in the basic “zoning” of the Primitive Unit and Semi-Primitive Motorized Unit travel management areas.
6. Summer OHV use will be allowed where appropriate within the Semi-Primitive Motorized Unit.
7. The RMP amendment will provide for changes in management in response to new technology, experience with trail management and OHV enforcement, unanticipated resource or social impacts, changes in funding and staffing, and eventual development of sustainable trails. It will not rely on thresholds and emergency closures to limit damage from OHVs.³

Data Summary/Data Gaps

The plan amendment will be completed with existing data, including the most recent GIS trails data layers.

Summary of Future Steps in the Planning Process

- November 2005 – A Proposed RMP Amendment, Environmental Assessment, and Finding of No Significant Impact will be released.
- November 2005 through January 2006 – A 30-day protest period and 60-day Governor’s Consistency Review period will be held.
- January 2006 – A Decision Record and Approved RMP Amendment will be released.

³ Note 43 CFR 8341.2(a), which states, “... where the authorized officer determines that [off-highway] vehicles are causing or will cause considerable adverse effects upon soil, vegetation, wildlife, wildlife habitat, cultural resources, wilderness suitability, other authorized uses, or other resources, the authorized officer shall immediately close the areas affected to the type(s) of vehicle causing the adverse effect until the adverse effects are eliminated and measures implemented to prevent recurrence.” Also, note the 1986 Record of Decision for the White Mountains National Recreation Area RMP, which states on page 25, “[w]ith the current information on [OHV] impacts and the documented need for areas open for [OHV] use, it appears that this area [the Semi-Primitive Motorized Unit] is appropriate for the recreational use of light [OHVs]... [OHV] monitoring and use of emergency closures when necessary will provide sufficient protection for other values.”