

Executive Summary

A. Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has prepared this Draft Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to provide direction for managing public lands within the Kobuk-Seward Peninsula Planning Area boundaries and to analyze the environmental effects that would result from implementing the alternatives presented in the Draft RMP/EIS.

The exterior boundaries of the planning area encompass approximately 31 million acres in northwestern Alaska. Within this area the Draft RMP/EIS will analyze proposed management on approximately 13.1 million acres administered by the Fairbanks District Office, including approximately 8.2 million acres of lands that are selected by the State of Alaska or Alaska Natives. The BLM is responsible for management of selected lands until conveyance occurs or until the selections are relinquished back to the BLM because of overselection. The planning area also includes private land (including Native Corporation land), State land, and lands managed by other Federal agencies. Management measures outlined in the Draft RMP apply only to BLM-managed land in the planning area; no measures have been developed for private, State, or other Federal agency lands.

The Draft RMP/EIS was prepared using BLM's planning regulations and guidance issued under the authority of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, and under requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508), the BLM's NEPA Handbook 1790-1, and the BLM's Land Use Planning Handbook 1601-1 (March 2005).

B. Purpose and Need

The RMP will provide the Fairbanks District Office with a comprehensive framework for managing lands within the planning area under the jurisdiction of the 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 Northwest Management Framework Plan (MFP) approved in 1982, and to provide a land use plan consistent with evolving law, regulation, and policy. This RMP meets the requirements of FLPMA, which states, "The Secretary shall, with public involvement . . . develop, maintain, and, when appropriate, revise land use plans which provide by tracts or areas for the use of the public lands" (43 U.S.C. 1712).

C. 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 planning area:

- Establish resource goals, objectives, and desired future conditions.
- Describe actions to achieve goals, objectives, and desired future conditions.
- Make land use allocations 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 Draft RMP/EIS allows for some level of support of all resources present in the 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 implementation plans or site-specific proposals, and additional NEPA analysis and documentation would be conducted as needed.

After the comments on the Draft RMP/EIS are reviewed and analyzed, 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 Final RMP/EIS.

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

D. Issues

A planning issue is an area of controversy or concern regarding management of resources or uses on the BLM-managed lands within the planning area. Issues for the Kobuk-Seward Peninsula RMP were identified through scoping, interactions with public land users, and resource management concerns of BLM, the State, and other Federal agencies. These issues drive the formulation of the plan alternatives, and addressing them has resulted in the range of management options across the Draft RMP alternatives. Additional discussion on each issue can be found in the Scoping and Issues section in Chapter I. Issues of primary concern in the development of this Draft RMP/EIS include:

- Manage recreational use of public lands to reduce conflicts between sport and subsistence hunting and to prevent negative impacts on subsistence hunting opportunity, particularly in the Squirrel River.
- Maintain and protect subsistence opportunities. Determine how the management actions, guidelines, and allowable uses prescribed in response to the other issues will affect both subsistence opportunities and resources, and the social and economic environment.

- Determine which areas should be made available for mineral exploration and development.
- Provide access to BLM-managed lands for various purposes, including recreation, subsistence activities, and general enjoyment of public lands, while protecting natural and cultural resources.

E. Alternatives

The basic goal in developing alternatives was to prepare different combinations of management actions to address issues and resolve conflicts among uses. Alternatives must meet the purpose and need; must be reasonable; must provide a mix of resource protection, use, and development; must be responsive to the issues; and must meet the established planning criteria. Each alternative constitutes a complete RMP that provides a framework for multiple use management of the full spectrum of resources, resource uses, and programs present in the planning area. 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 Draft RMP/EIS. Alternative A (the No Action Alternative) represents the continuation of current management practices. Alternatives B, C, and D describe proposed changes to current management, 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.

1. Alternative A

Alternative A would continue present management practices and present levels of resource use based on the existing Northwest Management Framework Plan (MFP) (BLM 1982) and other management decision documents. Valid decisions contained in the Northwest MFP would be implemented if not already completed. Direction contained in existing laws, regulation, and policy would also continue to be implemented, sometimes superseding provisions in the Northwest MFP. The current levels, methods, and mix of multiple use management of public land in the planning area would continue, and resource values would receive attention at present levels. Most activities would be analyzed on a case-by-case basis. Few uses would be limited or excluded as long as they were consistent with State and Federal laws. One exception to this is the ANCSA (d)(1) withdrawals that close large portions of the planning area to mineral entry and location. Fire would be managed consistent with the Alaska Land Use Plan Amendment for Wildland Fire and Fuels Management (BLM 2004b, 2005c).

2. Alternative B

Alternative B highlights actions and management that would facilitate resource development. All ANCSA (d)(1) withdrawals would be revoked on lands retained in long-term Federal ownership, increasing the potential for mineral exploration and development. Seasonal stipulations for oil and gas leasing in caribou habitat would not apply under this alternative

(Appendix A). Travel and trail restrictions would be minimized. One Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) would be identified in the Squirrel River to focus management on recreational use. In other areas, recreation management would focus on dispersed recreation and management of permits.

3. *Alternative C*

Alternative C emphasizes active measures to protect and enhance resource values. Production of minerals and services would be more constrained than in Alternative B or D, and in some areas, uses would be excluded to protect sensitive resources. Five Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) and two SRMAs are identified, and specific measures proposed to protect or enhance values within these areas. Several rivers are recommended suitable for designation under the Wild and Scenic River Act. All areas would be designated as “Limited” to off-highway vehicles (OHVs) to protect habitat, soil and vegetation resources. Most ANCSA (d)(1) withdrawals are revoked but some would be replaced with new withdrawals in order to protect or maintain resource values. Most anadromous streams and all ACECs would be closed to mineral entry and location. Areas suitable for mineral material disposal would be very limited. This alternative treats lands selected by the State and by Native or village corporations as if these lands were to be retained in long-term Federal ownership.

4. *Alternative D*

Alternative D emphasizes a moderate level of protection, use, and enhancement of resources and services. Constraints to protect resources would be implemented, but would be less restrictive than under Alternative C. This alternative would designate one Research Natural Area (RNA), five ACECs, and two SRMAs. No rivers would be recommended as suitable for designation under the Wild and Scenic River Act. This alternative would revoke most ANCSA (d)(1) withdrawals, leaving the majority of the planning area open to mineral entry and location. The RNA and three anadromous rivers would be withdrawn from mineral entry. This alternative describes interim and long-term management strategies for State- and Native-selected lands.

5. *BLM Preferred Alternative*

Alternative D was selected as the preferred alternative based on examination of the following factors:

- Balance of use and protection of resources.
- Extent of the environmental impacts.

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

F. Environmental Consequences

Selection of Alternative A, the No Action Alternative, would maintain the current rate of progress in protecting resource values and in resource development. It would allow for use levels to mostly continue at current levels in the same places in the planning area, with adjustments required in order to mitigate resource concerns in compliance with existing laws and regulations. OHV use would remain unrestricted, resulting in the continued proliferation of trails and resource degradation in certain areas.

Alternative B would allow for maximum resource development with the fewest constraints. This alternative would result in greater impacts on the physical and biological environment than would implementation of Alternative C or D. Uses would generally be least encumbered by management under this alternative, though legal constraints, and Required Operating Procedures and Oil and Gas Leasing Stipulations (Appendix A) would be applied. This alternative would offer the greatest potential for mineral development and could result in economic benefits to local economies from resource extraction. All BLM-managed lands in the planning area would be designated as “limited” to OHV use with a maximum 2,000 pound gross vehicle weight rating. Development of new trails and resource degradation would continue in certain areas. Recreational use in the Squirrel River would be designated as a SRMA and more intensively managed than under Alternative A.

Alternative C would have the least potential to impact physical and biological resources from BLM actions. Uses would be the most restricted by management. More areas of BLM-managed land would be closed to mineral development than under any other alternative. All BLM-managed lands in the planning area would be designated as “limited” to designated roads and trails during the snow-free season, thereby reducing impacts to resources. This more restrictive OHV designation would somewhat reduce access to BLM-managed lands. Qualified subsistence users would be allowed to travel off designated trails to retrieve game. Two SRMAs would be designated. Recreational use in the Squirrel River would be very intensively managed during August-September. Designation and management of five ACECs would provide additional protection to wildlife, vegetation, visual, and other natural resources. Eleven river segments would be determined suitable for designation as wild under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, affording these areas more protection than under other alternatives. Subsistence resources would be maintained or enhanced.

Alternative D would allow for increased levels of resource development while providing for site-specific protection of resources. This alternative would provide almost as much opportunity for mineral development as Alternative B. Closures to mineral entry and location would be limited to small, site-specific areas. This alternative could result in economic benefits to local economies from resource extraction. All unencumbered BLM lands in the planning area would be designated as “limited” to OHVs with a maximum gross vehicle weight rating of 2,000 pounds. On State- and Native-selected lands, OHVs would be managed consistent with the State’s Generally Allowable Uses, resulting in less resource degradation than under Alternatives A or B. Within two SRMAs, additional limitations may be defined through development of activity plans, and may include instituting seasonal closures or limitations to existing or designated trails. Designation and management of five ACECs and one Research Natural Area would provide additional protection to wildlife, vegetation, visual, and other natural resources. Subsistence resources would be maintained.

G. Public Involvement

Public involvement has been an integral part of the BLM's planning effort. During scoping, nine public meetings were held during March and April 2004. Scoping meetings were held in Fairbanks, Anchorage, Kotzebue, Nome, Buckland, Kiana, Kivalina, Koyuk, and Shaktoolik. Newsletters have been mailed to update interested parties on the progress of the Planning Team and stages of the planning process. In addition, numerous briefings were held with various groups and organizations during the preparation of the Draft RMP/EIS. The BLM also invited all Native villages in the area for government-to-government consultation during the course of the process. Public involvement is described in more detail in Chapter V.

The comment period on the Kobuk-Seward Peninsula Draft RMP/EIS will extend for 90 days following publication of the Environmental Protection Agency's Notice of Availability in the Federal Register. After 90 days, comments will be evaluated. Substantive comments could lead to changes in one or more of the alternatives, or changes in the analysis of environmental effects. A proposed RMP and Final EIS will then be completed and released. If protests are received on the Proposed RMP/Final EIS, they will be reviewed and addressed by the Director of the BLM before a Record of Decision and Approved Plan are released.