

Gulkana National Wild River

Record of Decision
Final Environmental Assessment
Revised River Management Plan



Clennallen Field Office, Alaska



Gulkana National Wild River

Decision Record Final Environmental Assessment Revision of the River Management Plan

BLM/AK/PL-06/025+8351+050

August 2006

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
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United States Department of the Interior



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August 5, 2006

Dear Reviewer:

Enclosed for your review are the following documents:

1. The Decision Record and Finding of No Significant Impact. This decision marks the culmination of a planning process that began in 1998. This document describes the specific decision being made, how it differs from the proposed action presented in the Final Environmental Assessment, and what factors were used to make the decision.
2. Final Environmental Assessment for the revision of the 1983 Gulkana River Management Plan.
3. The revised Gulkana River Management Plan. This document takes the decisions made and incorporates them into a new river management plan. This is the plan that will guide management within the Gulkana River corridor for the next 10-20 years.

Planning Process

In 1998, the BLM initiated a cooperative effort with the State of Alaska and Ahtna Native Corporation to conduct a study of the river corridor, which would culminate in the revision of the 1983 Gulkana River management plan. The main point of the study has been to address Action Item 8 of the 1983 Plan, which states, "Determine the amount and type of use that the Gulkana River Management Corridor can perpetually sustain without impairing its scenic and primitive character or causing an unacceptable change to the experience of the user." The BLM initiated the study in recognition that use levels on the river had increased dramatically and that some impacts from increased use were becoming unacceptable to the public. As part of the study, a 1999 survey was conducted on river and trail users. Objectives of the survey were to characterize river users, identify impacts that they experienced in the river corridor, identify users tolerances for those impacts, and describe users acceptance of possible management strategies to address impacts. Analysis of the survey was conducted by Confluence Research in Anchorage and Colorado State University and provided useful information for planners to consider when developing indicators, standards, and management actions in the river corridor.

Using the survey analysis and information from public meetings identifying issues and concerns on the river corridor, managers developed four alternatives to address user impacts. These alternatives were presented to the public at meetings in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Glennallen, and Gulkana Village. After incorporating public comments, a preferred alternative was selected and developed as the proposed action, which was analyzed in a Draft Environmental Assessment (Draft EA). This Draft EA was made available for public review and comment in January of 2004. Comments were received and considered, and changes were made to the Draft EA. Changes made are indicated in red text in the Final EA that is enclosed.

Scope of this Decision

This decision applies to BLM-managed lands within the Gulkana National Wild River corridor. Under ANILCA, Wild and Scenic River corridors in Alaska include an average of not more than 640 acres per mile on both sides of the river and do not include any lands owned by the state, or private lands, including navigable waterways below ordinary high water mark.

Most portions of the Gulkana River have been determined to be navigable. Therefore, within the Gulkana National Wild River corridor, the BLM acknowledges the State of Alaska's authority to manage between the ordinary high water marks, which includes the water column and most unvegetated beaches and gravel bars. With this in mind, BLM has worked closely with the State of Alaska in development of the proposed indicators, standards, management actions, and monitoring described in the decision. Actions that are designed to occur within the ordinary high water marks are contingent on the State's concurrence in the development of a Special Use Land Designation (SULD) for the Gulkana River. So far, the State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has not developed the SULD for the Gulkana River. After waiting for two years, BLM has decided to proceed with the enclosed decisions and revised management plan. If management actions that occur within the ordinary high water marks (such as powerboat restrictions) are not supported by DNR in their eventual SULD, they will remain in place as BLM recommendations.

For the Lower River portion (Sourdough to Gulkana bridge), BLM worked with Ahtna Native Corporation and the State of Alaska to develop proposed indicators, standards, management actions, and monitoring. These are attached as Appendix A of the Final Environmental Assessment. BLM has no authority within the Lower River portion other than to manage the three 17(b) easements that provide access between public lands and waters across private land within that segment. BLM will continue to cooperate with Ahtna Native Corporation, Gulkana Village, and the State of Alaska to the extent possible on implementation or monitoring of items in Appendix A and will continue to cooperate with Ahtna Native Corporation on management of the easements.

Decision Summary

The decision and revised Gulkana management plan adopt resource values and management objectives described in the Proposed Action, Part 1 of the Final EA; and most of the standards, indicators and management actions described in the Proposed Action, Part 2 of the Final EA. Because standards, indicators, and management actions differ by river segment, Part 2 of the Proposed Action in the Final EA should be read in its entirety for a complete understanding of the decision.

In general, management actions are phased in based on monitoring of standards on the river. The standards were developed utilizing survey data that reflect river users' tolerances for different impacts on the river. If standards are exceeded, the next Phase of management action is implemented. The following summarizes the general management approach that would be taken for the issue described:

- Litter and Human Waste: Increased education, increased emphasis on proper disposal of human waste, require users to pack out human waste.
- Campsite impacts: Rehabilitation or hardening of specific heavy use sites, management of medium or light use sights to avoid deterioration, and adoption of group size limits.

- Camp encounters or camp sharing: Production of campsite map with river information for trip planning, consideration of construction of new sites in heavy use areas, voluntary camp reservation system (Paxson to Sourdough), and permit system (Paxson to Sourdough).
- Powerboats: Recommend powerboat closure on the main stem at one mile above confluence of main stem and West Fork. Recommend prohibition of the use of jetskis on the river and a seasonal prohibition of airboats. If these measures are not supported by DNR in their SULD, they will remain as BLM recommendations.
- Off-Highway Vehicles: Trails will be designated.

Please refer to all of the enclosed documents for more detail.

Conclusion

Because this is the Final EA and Decision Record, no comments will be taken from the public. This decision may be appealed, following procedures described in the Decision Record/Finding of No Significant Impact. Questions regarding the decision may be directed to Bruce Rogers at (907)-822-3217. Questions regarding DNR's participation in the process or the Special Use Land Designation may be directed to Bruce Talbot at (907)-269-8528.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ramone Baccus McCoy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Ramone Baccus McCoy
Field Office Manager