



BULLETIN: Delta River Management Plan Planning Process and Management Issues

Overview:

The Bureau of Land Management intends to prepare a Delta River Management Plan. The Delta River Management Plan will contain three parts: (1) a revision of the 1983 Delta National Wild and Scenic River Management Plan (NWSR Plan), (2) a Delta River Special Recreation Management Area Plan (SRMA Plan), and (3) an associated Land Use Plan (LUP) Amendment to the East Alaska Resource Management Plan (EARMP).

As part of developing the Delta River Management Plan, the East Alaska Resource Management Plan (EARMP) must be amended for recreation management decisions made for the Delta River Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) as required by BLM policy (BLM Handbook H-1601-1, Land Use Planning Handbook). Therefore, the BLM will be developing a Land Use Plan (LUP) Amendment for the EARMP associated with the Delta River SRMA Plan. The Delta River Management Plan will also contain a revision of the 1983 Delta River Management Plan.

The purpose of this bulletin is to update and inform the public on the planning process and to outline what will occur in the future. The BLM is also requesting your input on issues and concerns, LUP Amendment planning criteria, and potential management responses that may help determine future land use decisions for the Delta National Wild and Scenic River.

Background:

The Delta National Wild and Scenic River is located approximately 175 miles south of Fairbanks and 22 miles west of Paxson, AK on the Denali Highway. The Delta National Wild and Scenic River corridor and the Delta River SRMA comprise exactly the same boundaries, and include both the river corridor and nearby Tangle Lakes.

The Delta River and Tangle Lakes area provide outstanding resource values and a diversity of recreational experiences, scenic landscapes, and cultural resources that evidence more than 10,000 years of use and occupation by Alaska Natives. The Delta River and Tangle Lakes are popular areas for the recreational and subsistence harvest of fish and wildlife resources. The waters of the Delta River and Tangle Lakes provide spawning and rearing habitat for Arctic grayling and lake trout. Surrounding uplands provide exceptional habitat for wildlife, including bear, moose and caribou. Lands within the planning area provide a unique opportunity to view many of the glacial and geological processes that have shaped the area.

The entire river and lake system is used for fishing, boating, camping, hiking, and hunting, as well as other recreational activities. There are numerous opportunities for both primitive and developed camping experiences. Motorized boat use occurs primarily in the area of the developed facilities, and to a lesser extent on the lower Delta River. Non-motorized boating use occurs on all rivers and lakes in the area. Use levels for the lakes and rivers peak during the fishing and boating season from mid-to-late June to mid-August. Use levels increase again during the fall caribou and moose hunting seasons.

Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use is present on the lower river area on two designated trails that are used primarily during hunting season, as described in the EARMP: the Top of the World Trail and the Rainy Creek Trail.

Over the course of the last twenty years, a gradual increase in the number of users and competing types of use within the river corridor has made it necessary to update management decisions for the Delta River area. The new Delta River Management Plan will identify and address current and future

issues, and will provide a new management approach for the next 15 to 20 years within the river corridor and SRMA. The Land Use Plan (LUP) Amendment is necessary because additional recreation management planning guidelines were developed after the completion of the EARMP, and these guidelines must be included in the new Delta River Management Plan.

What has occurred so far in the planning process?

- **1980 Delta National Wild and Scenic River Designated** – Congress added the Delta River to the National Wild and Scenic River System through the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VI, Sec. 603.
- **1983 Delta River Management Plan** – BLM developed the original river management plan to provide management direction for the Delta National Wild and Scenic River.
- **2005 Delta River Recreation User Survey** – To prepare for development of the revised river management plan, the Glennallen Field Office completed the Delta River Recreation User Survey during the summer of 2005.
- **2007 Benefits Based Planning Process** – In early 2007, the BLM conducted a series of Benefits Based Management (BBM) focus group meetings with a variety of stakeholder groups (hunting groups, local users, motorized use organizations, conservation organizations, Native tribes and corporations, and state and federal agencies) who use the Delta River corridor. These meetings helped to identify the primary activities, experiences, and benefits that are attained by various user groups within the resource area. The meetings also helped to propose 5 distinct Recreation Management Zones (RMZ), each offering unique recreation experiences within the river corridor, as required by the new BLM planning policy (see BLM Handbook H-1601-1). Associated maps of the RMZ's will be provided by request and are also available on the BLM website at http://www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/fo/gdo/delta_wild_and_scenic.html. Information from these meetings was used to help identify several planning issues for the Delta River SRMA plan and the EARMP LUP Amendment.
- **2007 East Alaska Resource Management Plan (EARMP)** – The Record of Decision (ROD) for the EARMP was signed on September 7, 2007. Among other decisions, the ROD designated the Delta National Wild and Scenic River corridor as a Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA) with the following recreation management objectives:
 - BLM will seek to maintain the existing recreation opportunities with an emphasis on managing for a primitive experience in the portion of the Wild and Scenic River Corridor classified as Wild;
 - BLM will seek to protect the Visual Resource Management Class I viewshed within the river corridor;
 - BLM will restrict the recreational use of OHV's to designated trails (Top of the World Trail, Rainy Creek Trail) from May 15 to October 16, or when there is less than an average of 12 inches of snow or 6 inches of ground frost;
 - BLM will not consider the development of any public use cabins within the river corridor;
 - the BLM Tangle Lakes Campground will be renovated;
 - the river take-out at mile 212 on the Richardson Highway will have increased signage;
 - and if possible, acquisition of one of the area lodges by the BLM for a visitor center will be considered.

These recreation management decisions listed above have already been made in the EARMP and will be incorporated into the Delta River Management Plan. However, the the EARMP Record of Decision, directed that, as part of the Delta River Management Plan, the BLM will also:

- recommend limitations to the State of Alaska on motorized powerboat use within the SRMA;
- propose visitor and commercial use limits within the SRMA.

Delta River Management Plan – Planning Issues and Concerns:

In addition to the LUP Decisions described in the next section below, the Delta River Management Plan will make decisions related to the following issues and concerns:

- ***National Wild and Scenic River “Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORV)”:***
The Delta River Management Plan will define the ORV’s for the Delta National Wild and Scenic River, which will link management objectives. ORV’s are described in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act as those characteristics that made the river eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System. These unique characteristics can include outstandingly remarkable scenery, recreation, fish and wildlife, geology, history, culture, or other similar values.
- ***Visitor Use Management: How will public use of the wild river corridor be managed?***
The Delta River Management Plan will address a broad range of visitor use issues including human waste management, remote campsite impacts, crowding, opportunities for a primitive experience, boating and OHV use, campgrounds, and other facility developments. The Delta River Management Plan will also consider visitor and commercial use limits within the SRMA, and will propose ways to manage these use levels within the SRMA. The BLM is concerned that increased use levels within the river corridor in the future may result in undesirable impacts such as the improper disposal of human wastes, cutting of live trees, excessive number of fire rings, crowding in high use areas, and litter.
- ***Recreational Facilities: Will management facilities be permitted within the designated river corridor?***
The Delta River Management Plan will describe the renovation of the Tangle Lakes Campground and Delta Wayside improvements, and will address additional criteria for future facilities for the protection of resource values within the river corridor.
- ***Historic and Archeological Resources: How will the historic and archeological values within the wild river corridor be identified and protected?***
The Delta River Management Plan will address the protection, inventory, and monitoring of cultural and archeological resources within the SRMA. Portions of the SRMA are located within the Tangle Lakes Archeological District (TLAD).
- ***Scenic Quality: How will the scenic quality of the landscape be protected?***
The Delta River Management Plan will address ways to maintain or enhance scenic quality within the river corridor. The EARMP determined the entire SRMA will be managed as a Class I Visual Resource Management Class. The objective of this class is to preserve the existing character of the landscape. This class provides for natural ecological changes; however, it does not preclude limited management activity.
- ***Subsistence: How will management of the wild river corridor affect traditional subsistence activities?***
The Delta River Management Plan will address access related to subsistence activities. Consistent with ANILCA Title VIII, the Delta River Management Plan will clarify that the river corridor is open to all subsistence activities (including hunting, fishing, trapping, and the gathering of plant materials such as berries and firewood) under applicable state and federal regulations.

- **Surface Transportation:** *What access routes and types of vehicle use are allowed within the river corridor?*

The BLM will work cooperatively with the State of Alaska on management issues related to motorized and non-motorized boating within the river corridor. Trail designations for off-highway vehicle and snowmachine use that were made in the EARMP will not be changed. Additional trail designations will be considered within the SRMA, consistent with the EARMP, and applicable Federal and state law.

- **Aircraft Use:** *How should aircraft use be managed within the designated river corridor?*

The Delta River Management Plan will address airstrip construction and maintenance and aircraft landings within the SRMA.

The Delta River Management Plan will propose a reasonable range of management alternatives and associated impacts on the following activities and resources:

- **General Hunting, Fishing and Trapping:** Regulation of harvest is outside BLM's jurisdiction; however, the Delta River Management Plan will consider the impacts of the management alternatives on hunting, fishing, and trapping.
- **Biotic Resources:** The Delta River Management Plan will consider the impacts of the management alternatives on fish, wildlife and associated habitats within the SRMA.
- **Water Quality:** In cooperation with the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, the BLM will monitor water quality and will address possible water quality resource protection measures.
- **Water Rights:** The Delta River Management Plan will include a description of BLM's application to the State of Alaska for reserved water rights and the status of that application process. The Plan will also describe the basis for flow recommendations in the application, and will consider possible impacts on this process from the management alternatives.
- **State and Private Land:** During the planning process, the BLM will consult with the State of Alaska regarding the management of state lands and waters within or adjacent to the river corridor. During the planning process, the BLM and the State of Alaska will consider a formalized agreement regarding management of state lands and waters within or adjacent to the river corridor. The Plan will also update the description and locations of private land parcels within the river corridor.

LUP Amendment - Planning Decisions and Criteria to be Addressed:

Subsequent to the development of the EARMP, the BLM developed new recreation land use planning requirements for SRMAs (BLM Handbook H-1601-1) that were not included in the EARMP. The new guidance, referred to as Benefits Based Planning, requires specific recreation-related land use allocations and the development of recreation management zones (RMZ) within each SRMA. RMZs are distinct areas within a SRMA that offer varied opportunities for recreational activities and experiences. Within each RMZ, specific setting prescriptions and management actions will be developed that seek to preserve the primary activities, experiences, and benefits within each RMZ.

Although the EARMP did identify four RMZs within the Delta River SRMA, further review has shown that an additional RMZ and associated RMZ boundary changes may be necessary to reflect current recreational use patterns. The 2007 Benefits Based Planning Process proposed 5 RMZs as shown on the maps that are available by request and on the BLM website at http://www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/fo/gdo/delta_wild_and_scenic.html.

For BLM lands within the Delta River SRMA, the proposed LUP amendment will:

- Identify the RMZs and corresponding recreation niche within each RMZ to be served,
- develop explicit recreation management objectives for the specific recreation opportunities to be produced and the outcomes to be attained (activities, experiences and benefits),
- prescribe recreation-setting character conditions required to produce recreation opportunities and facilitate the attainment of both recreation experiences and beneficial outcomes, as targeted above, and
- briefly describe an activity planning framework that addresses recreation management, marketing, monitoring, and administrative support actions (e.g., visitor services, permits and fees, recreation concessions, and appropriate use restrictions) necessary to achieve explicitly stated recreation management objectives and setting prescriptions.

Furthermore, the BLM has identified the following preliminary planning criteria to guide the LUP Amendment (comments on these and additional planning criteria may be identified during this scoping period):

1. The plan amendment will be consistent with the standards and guidance set forth in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Council on Environmental Quality, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), and other Federal laws, regulations, and policies as required;
2. the plan amendment will conform to Section 810 of ANILCA, as well as other Subsistence and Land Use Decisions;
3. the plan amendment will recognize valid existing rights;
4. the plan amendment will only affect the public lands managed by the BLM in the Delta River Special Recreation Management Area (as defined in the EARMP);
5. the BLM will work cooperatively with the State and other Federal agencies, Native corporations, Tribes, and Municipal governments. Collectively, these entities have additional jurisdiction by law or special expertise;
6. public participation by interested groups and individuals will be encouraged throughout the planning process;
7. wildlife habitat management will be consistent with Federal and Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) objectives and mandates;
8. any off-highway vehicle trail designations within the planning area will be completed in accordance with ANILCA Sections 810, 811, and 1110, Department of Interior regulations at 43 CFR 36.11 and 43 CFR 8342, and applicable state law;

9. the BLM will make all possible attempts to ensure that its management prescriptions and planning actions complement other plans and planning efforts in the area;
10. the BLM will, to the extent possible, use current scientific information, research, new technologies and the results of resource assessments, monitoring and coordination to determine appropriate management strategies that will enhance resource values;
11. the plan amendment and associated implementation plans prepared by the BLM will conform to the Bureau of Land Management H-1601-1 Land Use Planning Handbook: “Appendix C, Program-Specific and Resource-Specific Decision Guidance and Supplemental Program Guidance Manual for Recreation and Visitor Services”; and
12. the plan amendment will only address recreation management and will supersede only those sections of the existing EARMP that relate to management of the Delta River SRMA. The plan will conform to all other decisions made in the EARMP.

What happens next?

Following the scoping process, your input on additional resource issues and concerns, possible management options, LUP Amendment planning criteria, or any other comments you have regarding land uses for the Delta River Management Plan area will be considered in this planning process. We will use your comments to further identify issues and develop a reasonable range of alternatives, which will be analyzed in an Environmental Assessment. There will be additional opportunities for review and comment during the preparation of the Environmental Assessment. If you would like to comment during the scoping phase, please refer to the following instructions. All comments must be postmarked by or received on September 15, 2008:

- **E-mail** – Electronic comments may be submitted through the link that has been provided on the BLM Glennallen website:
http://www.blm.gov/ak/st/en/fo/gdo/delta_wild_and_scenic.html
- **Traditional Mail** - Written comments may be submitted directly to the BLM at:
Bureau of Land Management, Delta River Planning Process, ATTN: Heath Emmons
P.O. Box 147, Glennallen, AK 99588

If you have any questions regarding the Delta River planning process, please contact Heath Emmons at (907)-822-3217, or hemmons@blm.gov.