

*National Park Service*  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska



---

**Finding of No Significant Impact**

**McCarthy Communications Sites Environmental Assessment**

**March 2011**

Recommended:

Margaret Green March 15, 2011  
Superintendent, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve Date

Approved:

*Acting*

[Signature]  
Regional Director, Alaska

3/22/11  
Date

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

### McCarthy Communications Sites Environmental Assessment

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska

March 2011

The National Park Service (NPS) prepared an environmental assessment (EA) in 2010 to evaluate a proposal to issue Copper Valley Wireless (CVW) two new right-of-way permits and amend one existing right-of-way (ROW) permit for the purpose of improving broadband communication and to enhance cellular telephone service for the community of McCarthy and the rest of the Chitina Valley. CVW is presently authorized to use the Sourdough Ridge Communications Site under NPS ROW Permit No. RW 9865-8-001. The CVW proposal includes an upgrade to their facilities on that site. In addition, the NPS would issue CVW ROW permits to construct two new microwave/wireless facilities at sites situated on Gilahina Butte and Lakina Terrace in order to extend the microwave path. The Gilahina Butte and Sourdough Ridge sites would also have cellular antennas installed thereby providing enhanced wireless service.

In accordance with NPS Management Policies 8.6.4.3, co-location of communications facilities would be achieved because the proposed Sourdough Ridge site already contains some communications equipment and the Gilahina Butte site already contains a seismic station operated and maintained by the Alaska Earthquake Information Center (AEIC). This project would connect the McCarthy, Alaska, area to an existing fiber optic cable in Chitina, Alaska, providing local residents, businesses and visitors access to state-of-the art broadband and telecommunications services.

The NPS has selected Alternative 2, the NPS and Environmentally Preferred Alternative, to issue ROW permits necessary to authorize construction, maintenance and operation of three McCarthy communications sites.

### ALTERNATIVES

This environmental assessment (EA) provides an overview of the proposed project and analyzes two alternatives and their impacts on the environment: Alternative 1, the No Action Alternative, and Alternative 2, the Proposed Action Alternative to construct, operate, and maintain the McCarthy Communications Sites. The EA has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 and regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500 *et seq.*).

#### No Action Alternative

This alternative represents a continuation of the existing situation and provides a baseline for evaluating the changes and impacts of the proposed action alternative.

Under the No Action Alternative, the NPS would not issue CVW the ROW permits necessary to improve its communications network in the Chitina Valley. The community of McCarthy would continue to receive wireless telephone and internet communications through satellite connectivity provided by CVW and AT&T. No facilities or utilities would be removed, modified, or constructed. Existing needs for broadband would not be addressed and would likely worsen over time as demand for the limited broadband increases.

**Proposed Action Alternative: Issue ROW permits necessary to authorize construction, maintenance and operation of three McCarthy communications sites (the NPS and Environmentally Preferred Alternative)**

Under Alternative 2, CVW would upgrade its facilities on Sourdough Ridge, which are presently authorized under NPS ROW Permit No. RW 9865-8-001. In addition, the NPS would issue CVW two new ROW permits to construct microwave/wireless facilities at sites on Gilahina Butte and Lakina Terrace. The Gilahina Butte and Sourdough Ridge sites would have cellular antennas installed thereby providing wireless service. CVW would install a microwave antenna and support facilities at Lakina Terrace in order to extend the microwave path.

The NPS would attach specific mitigating measures to the ROW permits to address unique resource protection needs. Those protection measures may change over time to reflect changing resource conditions or access needs.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

The McCarthy Communications Sites Environmental Assessment was placed on the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website on December 3, 2010, where it was available for public review and comment through January 5, 2011. A press release announcing the availability of the EA and the public comment period was issued on December 7, 2010. The notice of availability was published in the *Valdez Star*, *Cordova Times*, *Mukluk News*, *Copper River Record*, *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*, and the *Anchorage Daily News*. The project was also covered as a news story by a television station in Anchorage and the press release was aired on radio stations in Anchorage, Fairbanks, the Matanuska Valley, Tok, Valdez, and Glennallen during the public comment period. Additionally, the notice of availability was mailed or emailed to 246 interested individuals, organizations, and governmental agencies. Park staff also conducted informal discussions with several local landowners to brief them on the EA's contents and status.

Written comments were received from the State of Alaska, ANILCA Implementation Program; the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA); the Copper River Watershed Project; United States Senators Lisa Murkowski and Mark Begich; United States Representative Don Young; and twenty-six (26) local residents. All but three of the comments (all from local residents) either supported the proposed action as described or expressed no significant objections to it.

The public comments received did not change the conclusions in the EA about the environmental effects of the action. The NPS responses to substantive public comments, including errata for the EA, are attached in Appendix A.

## **DECISION**

The NPS decision is to select the Proposed Action Alternative: Issue ROW permits to authorize construction, maintenance and operation of three communications sites (the NPS and Environmentally Preferred Alternative), along with the mitigating measures.

## **Mitigating Measures**

The mitigation measures described in section 2.4 of the EA are adopted as part of the selected alternative: Issue ROW permits to authorize construction, maintenance and operation of three communications sites (the NPS and Environmentally Preferred Alternative). These measures describe actions to avoid or reduce

impacts to visitor experience; soils and vegetation; hazardous materials/spill prevention; wildlife; visual; and wilderness characters and values.

Several mitigating measures listed in EA were modified in response to public comments. The EA required that helicopter maintain a 1,500 foot vertical or horizontal clearance from traditional summer and calving or other habitats supporting reproduction as well as adult animals whenever feasible. The EA also required that where feasible, flight paths would avoid known Dall's sheep breeding areas from May 15 to June 15. The EA is amended by this FONSI to replace "1,000 feet above ground level" with "2,000 feet above ground level" and replace "May 15" with "April 15".

Several mitigating measures have also been added in response to public comments. The NPS will ensure that CVW consult with USFWS regarding compliance with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The NPS will ensure that provisions for bonds, revocation and facility removal are included in the ROW permits. The NPS will establish a regular monitoring schedule for all three sites, and CVW will be required to supplement the NPS program by facilitating annual site surveys as part of its regularly scheduled maintenance or refueling visits. The NPS will ensure that CVW employs best management practices for controlling erosion on their construction sites and prevent sedimentation from leaving the sites. CVW will utilize erosion blankets on steep slopes and postpone construction activities after rain events when local soils are saturated.

### **Rationale for the Decision**

The selected action will improve broadband communication and enhance cellular telephone service for the community of McCarthy and the rest of the Chitina Valley. The action will connect the McCarthy, Alaska, area to an existing fiber optic cable in Chitina, Alaska, providing local residents, businesses and visitors access to state-of-the art broadband and telecommunications services.

The action will have a direct impact on park operations and communications by increasing data transfer speed from the headquarters office in Copper Center to the Kennecott Mines NHL Visitor Center. This would increase efficiency of the missions of interpretation, patrol base operations, search and rescue missions, law enforcement and cooperative resource management.

Area safety will be improved by an increase in communication ability between communities and with nearby emergency medical services, and potential reduction in response times during emergency situations.

The action will have an indirect impact on economic resources due to the expansion of internet broadband and cellular service to McCarthy businesses. These services will improve a visitor's ability to book travel accommodations and communicate while they are in McCarthy. Phone and internet connections are currently unreliable and slow.

No significant impacts will result from the decision. This decision will result in localized long-term minor negative effects on visual resources, vegetation, soils, wildlife, wilderness character and values, and visitor experience.

### **Significance Criteria**

The preferred alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. This conclusion is based on the following examination the significance criteria defined in 40 CFR Section 1508.27.

*(1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.*

This EA evaluated the effects of the preferred alternative on visual resources; vegetation; soils; wildlife; visitor services; visitor experience; wilderness character and values; economic resources; safety; and park operations and communications. The selected action will not have significant adverse impacts on the environment and there would be no significant restriction of subsistence users or uses.

The action will have minor long-term beneficial effects on visitor services, economic resources, safety, and park operations and communications.

*(2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

Implementation of the selected alternative would result in minor long-term beneficial effects on public safety.

*(3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetland, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

Implementing this action would increase the number of microwave facilities within 13.2-million acre, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve from one to three, directly impacting approximately one-half acre of preserve lands.

*(4) The degree to which effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The proposed action would result in no significant negative effects on the human environment, and neither the content nor the number of comments received during the 30-day comment period indicate a high level of controversy exists.

*(5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

No impacts associated with this action are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

*(6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent of future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

This action only addresses three specific communications sites. Construction of other communications facilities or major modifications to existing communications facilities would require new NEPA analysis. The NPS concludes that issuing new ROW permits for these two communications facilities and modifying the ROW permit for this one existing communications facility would set no precedent for future actions.

*(7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.*

This EA considers cumulative impacts, and WRST concludes that the action is not related to other actions of individual insignificance that would amount to cumulatively significant impacts on the environment.

*(8) Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

The ROW permits issued as a result of this action would include specific protection measures to address unique resources. The degree or possibility that implementation of the selected alternative would cause loss or destruction of known scientific, cultural, or historic resources is extremely remote.

*(9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

Implementation of the selected alternative would not affect any known endangered or threatened species or its habitat adversely.

*(10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

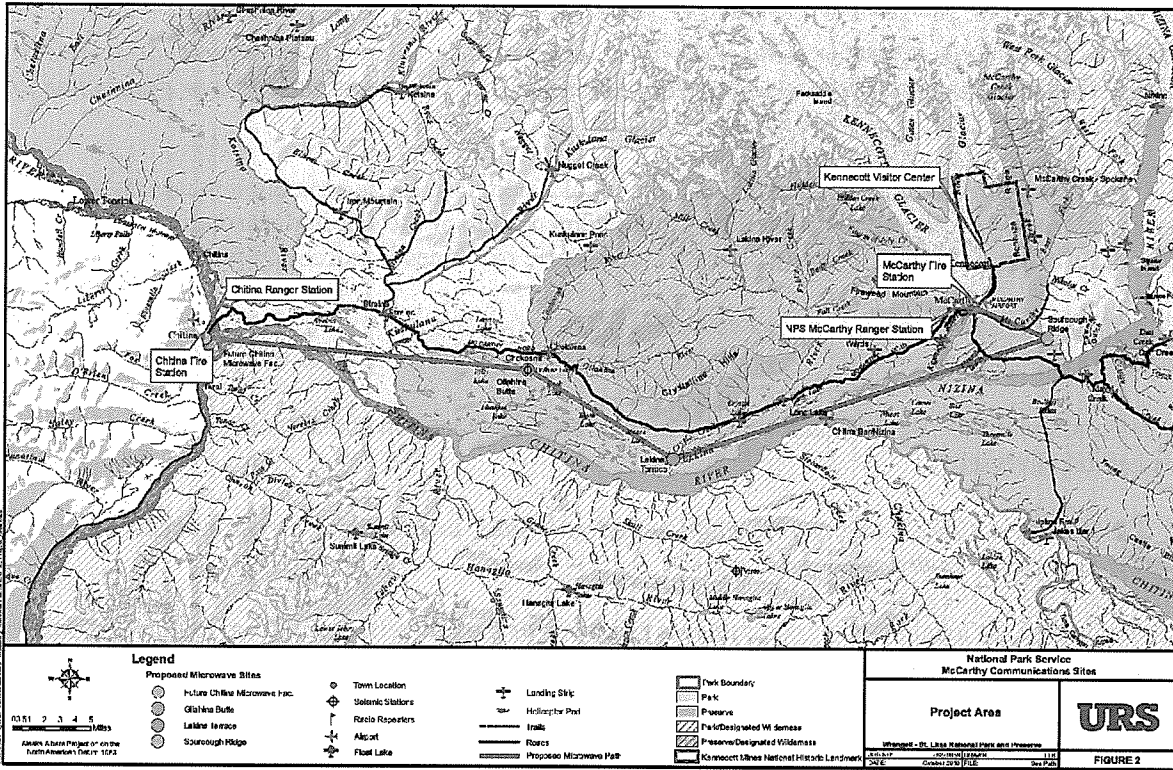
No federal, state, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment would be violated by implementing this action.

## **FINDINGS**

The levels of adverse impacts to park resources anticipated from the selected alternative would not result in an impairment of park resources that fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or that are key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park.

The selected alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and Executive Orders 11988 and 11990 for floodplains and wetlands. There will be no restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810(a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

The National Park Service has determined that the selected alternative does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement is not needed and will not be prepared for this project.



## ATTACHMENT A

### NPS Responses to Public Comments For the McCarthy Communications Sites Environmental Assessment

This attachment amends the subject environmental assessment (EA) and provides NPS responses to public comments.

#### NPS RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

Comments were received from the State of Alaska, ANILCA Implementation Program; the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA); the Copper River Watershed Project; United States Senator Lisa Murkowski, United States Senator Mark Begich; United States Congressman Don Young; and twenty-six (26) local residents.

The NPS has read and considered all comments received. Responses to substantive comments are provided below. A substantive comment is defined as one which leads the NPS to: (1) modify an alternative, including the proposed action; (2) develop and evaluate an alternative not previously given serious consideration; (3) supplement, improve, or modify the environmental analysis; or (4) make factual corrections (CEQ NEPA Regulations 1503.4).

**State of Alaska, ANILCA Implementation Program, Comment #1:** Page 27, 2.4.4, Mitigating Measures, Wildlife. The State recommended that helicopter flights maintain a minimum altitude of 1,000 feet above ground level whenever feasible and safe and avoid Dall's sheep lambing areas on the south facing aspects in the general vicinity of the Crystalline Hills between April 15 and May 15. This recommendation also extends to the south side of the unnamed peaks between the Chokosna River and the Gilahina River, and Fireweed Mountain.

***Response:** The EA requires that helicopter maintain a 1,500 foot vertical or horizontal clearance from traditional summer and calving or other habitats supporting reproduction as well as adult animals whenever feasible. This included brown and black bear, moose, caribou, Dall's sheep, and wolves. The EA also requires that where feasible, flight paths would avoid known Dall's sheep breeding areas from May 15 to June 15. The EA is amended to replace "1,000 feet above ground level" with "2,000 feet above ground level" and replace "May 15" with "April 15".*

**National Parks and Conservation Association (NPCA), Comment #2:** The NPCA requested that ROW permits issued for this action contain provisions for revocation and recommended that permits be limited to a five-year period and require bonding in an amount sufficient to ensure facility removal. The NPCA also suggested increasing the minimum altitude for helicopter flights from 1,000 to 2,000 above ground level in keeping with national FAA guidelines for flights over national parks. In addition, the NPCA recommended that the NPS devote more emphasis on preventing the spread of invasive weeds by requiring that the contractor clean all equipment, footwear, and clothing coming into the park. It is standard NPS operating procedure to require pressure washing on heavy equipment prior to it entering the park.



**Response:** *The NPS will ensure that provisions for bonds, revocation and facility removal are included in the ROW permits. The EA is amended to replace “1,000 feet above ground level” with “2,000 feet above ground level. The NPS has an established program to monitor and remove exotic weeds. CVW will be required to supplement this effort by conducting annual site surveys as part of its regularly scheduled maintenance or refueling visits. The NPS will also establish a regular monitoring schedule for all three sites.*

**Copper River Watershed Comment:** The Copper River Watershed Project requested that the NPS ensure that CVW and its contractors follow best management practices for controlling erosion on their construction sites and prevent sedimentation from leaving the sites.

**Response:** *The EA is amended to require best management practices for controlling erosion on their construction sites and prevent sedimentation from leaving the sites. CVW will utilize erosion blankets on steep slopes and postpone construction activities after rain events when local soils are saturated. The NPS will monitor construction activities to ensure compliance.*

**Public Comment No. 1:** An option should include a fiber optic cable from Chitina to McCarthy to eliminate the need for microwave towers and reduce the communications footprint. This option would also eliminate the need for helicopter access.

**Response:** *This option was considered but eliminated from the detailed study. Burial and maintenance of a cable along the long and challenging roadway would be too costly and would be prone to damage in some areas due to shallow burial depths, unstable soils, and extreme environmental conditions. Burial along the road corridor would also likely result in adverse effects to known cultural resources within the historic CR&NW railroad alignment.*

**Public Comment No. 2:** Concerns were raised by one individual regarding the level of impacts, essential services, alternatives to the site development, and park management.

**Response:** *Implementation of the selected alternative would have long-term beneficial effects on public safety, visitor services, park operations and local residents. Public safety, visitor services, park operations and the welfare of local resident are critical factors influencing our decision. The ROW permits issued as a result of this action will include specific protection measures to address unique resources. The degree or possibility that implementation of the selected alternative will cause loss or destruction of known scientific, cultural, or historic resources is extremely remote.*