

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

**Glacier Bay National Park and
Preserve
Alaska**



Finding of No Significant Impact

**U.S. Coast Guard Rescue 21 Communication Site in Glacier Bay National
Park and Preserve, Alaska**

May, 2011

Recommended:

Susan R. Brundage

Superintendent, Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve

May 20, 2011

Date

Approved:

Alice G. Vassili

Regional Director, Alaska

6/7/2011

Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

U.S. Coast Guard Rescue 21 Communication Site Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, Alaska May 2011

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and National Park Service (NPS) prepared an environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate a proposal to construct a Rescue 21 Search and Rescue (SAR) communication site at Deception Hills in Glacier Bay National Preserve (Preserve), Alaska. The USCG mission calls for it to evaluate and improve the safety of navigation and vessels. Response to distress signals is a key component in this USCG mission to improve safety. Congress has approved funding in the USCG budget for facilities that would enhance very high frequency (VHF) communications throughout the nation and improve coverage wherever there are gaps in the communication coverage. The USCG has identified the need for improved maritime distress and response communication coverage in the Fairweather Banks area of the Gulf of Alaska. Communication would be improved by establishing a new facility in this area. This area is used by commercial and private vessels (e.g., fishing, tour operators, cruise ships, cargo transport, and ferries).

The USCG and NPS have selected Alternative B (Proposed Action) under which the NPS will issue a Right of Way (ROW) permit to the USCG for the construction, operation, and maintenance of a communications facility at Deception Hills.

ALTERNATIVES

Two alternatives were evaluated in the EA.

Alternative A: No Action

The Rescue 21 communication facility would not be built in the park or preserve. Communications would continue to be based on the existing network of transceivers located at existing USCG and NPS communication sites.

Alternative A is the Environmentally Preferable Alternative.

Alternative B: The Proposed Action (NPS and USCG Preferred Alternative)

The NPS will issue a ROW permit to the USCG authorizing placement and operation of a Rescue 21 communications facility in the Preserve. The facility will be constructed in the Deception Hills area about ½ mile from designated wilderness and about 2/3 mile southwest of an existing NPS radio repeater. The NPS repeater equipment will be incorporated into the USCG facility and its previous site will be restored.

The USCG communication facility will consist of a 60 foot self-supporting communication tower with one 8 foot microwave dish, 8 x 10 foot equipment shelter, 10 x 16 foot generator shelter, ten 500 gallon (potentially five 1,000 gallon) propane tanks, 384 square feet of solar panels, a wind generator on a 20 foot self-supported tower, and all necessary electronic equipment capable of receiving and transmitting radio signals within the relevant service area. The facility will occupy about 0.25 acre. A seismic monitoring station operated by the University of Alaska Fairbanks Geophysical Institute exists at the proposed installation site. Some of this equipment may be incorporated into the equipment shelter and some may need to be relocated to minimize vibration interference from the propane powered generator.

During the 2 week construction period a mobilization area will be located at an existing air strip in the Dry Bay area of the Preserve. Equipment, supplies, and construction personnel will be transferred by helicopter to the Deception Hills site.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A public scoping notice was issued for public review and comment on the proposal and the preliminary alternatives from October 22, 2009 to November 20, 2009. Approximately 1,000 scoping letters were distributed. A public meeting was held on November 20, 2009 in Gustavus, Alaska and was attended by about 10 people. Twenty comment letters were received during the public scoping period which ended on November 20, 2009.

The EA was issued for public review and comment from December 25, 2010 to January 24, 2011. The EA was sent to 89 agencies, organizations, and individuals and was posted on the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website. Over 800 other individuals, agencies, and organizations were notified of the availability of the EA.

Thirteen letters were received on the EA during the 30-day public comment period. Substantive comments on the EA were received from the State of Alaska, National Parks and Conservation Association, and four individuals. Four substantive comments requiring responses are included in Attachment A. The public comments received did not change the conclusions in the EA about the environmental effects of the action.

DECISION

The NPS decision is to select Alternative B (Proposed Action), along with the mitigating measures, to issue a ROW for the construction and operation of a USCG Rescue 21 communications facility in the Deception Hills area of the Preserve.

Mitigating Measures

The following mitigation measures apply to the selected alternative:

- ◆ To address potential impacts related to unexpected encounters of cultural resources during construction, USCG contract specifications will provide for stopping work until

appropriate surveys and characterization of resources are performed by qualified specialists. Alternatives will be evaluated and in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer and affected stakeholders, including Alaska Natives, the project will either be modified to avoid such resources, or a program of conservation and preservation will be implemented.

- ◆ Helicopter trips will not occur during the peak visitor season (June and July).
- ◆ Helicopter approaches during construction, maintenance, and refueling will avoid goat-occupied areas.
- ◆ Generator noise will be reduced by installing mufflers.
- ◆ Environmental effects of the construction, operation, and maintenance of the facility will be examined in the field. Monitoring will be scheduled during construction (for spills, noise measurements, cleanup/area policing effectiveness), during operation (for propane generator run time, wind generator output), and during scheduled maintenance (for animal damage, weather damage, general condition of the facility, and general condition of the surrounding vegetation and environment). Vigor of re-established plant species in areas of disturbed soil will be checked, and the surrounding area will be monitored for invasive species.
- ◆ The layout of the Rescue 21 facility is conceptual. If Geophysical Institute seismic instrumentation remains in the existing location, the layout could be changed to position the generator shelter farther from the sensor to avoid propane generator vibration interference. The power generator design could also be required to incorporate vibration dampening material.
- ◆ To avoid introduction of invasive species, workers will inspect clothing, boots, building materials, and equipment to ensure that no plants or seeds are transported to the communication site. Material and equipment will be washed, as needed, to prevent the introduction of non-native vegetation.
- ◆ No outdoor lighting or signal lighting will be installed, thereby preserving the park's night sky viewsheds.

Rationale for the Decision

Alternative B (NPS issues a Right of Way permit to USCG) will satisfy the purpose and need for the project better than the No Action alternative.

A USCG Rescue 21 SAR communication facility at Deception Hills will improve maritime distress and response communication coverage in the Fairweather Banks area of the Gulf of Alaska. The Fairweather Banks area is used by commercial and private vessels (e.g., commercial and sport fishing, tour operators, cruise ships, cargo transport, and Alaska Marine Highway System ferries). Public safety will be enhanced by the elimination of the existing communications dead zone. The Rescue 21 communication facility will greatly improve SAR operations in the Fairweather Banks area by allowing the maritime community the ability to contact the USCG for help when in distress and shortening SAR response times.

Alternative A (No Action) was not selected because it would not improve marine distress and response communications in the Fairweather Banks area. As indicated in the EA, the overall impact of the Rescue 21 communication facility on natural resources in the Preserve was determined to be minor.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

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

Impacts that may be beneficial or adverse.

The EA evaluated the effects of Alternative B on visual resources, soundscape, wildlife, vegetation, wilderness, visitor use, and public health and safety. As documented in the EA the effects of the proposed action will range from negligible to minor depending on the resource.

The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.

Public safety will be enhanced with the capabilities of a USCG Rescue 21 SAR communication facility at Deception Hills. The elimination of the communications dead zone in the Fairweather Banks area of the Gulf of Alaska will allow vessels in distress to communicate with the USCG. The Rescue 21 system will reduce response times and an increased channel capacity will allow for simultaneous communications. The Digital Selective Calling capability will quickly provide the vessel's name, exact location and nature of distress. Digital recording of calls will provide instant playback. The interoperability among the USCG, NPS and other federal, state, and local communication systems will be enhanced. The existing NPS radio repeater will be incorporated into the USCG array increasing range and reliability of communications. The above features of the Rescue 21 communication facility will greatly improve SAR operations in the Fairweather Banks area.

Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to cultural or historic resources, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The Rescue 21 communication facility will be located in the Preserve near designated wilderness in Glacier Bay National Park. The EA evaluated the effects of facility construction, operation, and maintenance on the wilderness and concluded that the impacts would be minor.

There are no wetlands, floodplains, or wild and scenic rivers near the site. No historic or cultural resources are expected to be affected.

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

Consultation with Federal, State, local agencies, and the public did not identify any highly controversial issues or effects associated with the site.

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

This proposal does not present any highly uncertain or involve any unique or unknown risks.

The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about future considerations.

There are existing Rescue 21 facilities in southwest, south central and southeast Alaska, including a similar facility in Katmai National Park and Preserve. As part of the nationwide National Distress Response System (Rescue 21) modernization project, these facilities will also be upgraded. Any other proposals to construct, operate and maintain similar facilities in National Parks will require an appropriate level of NEPA documentation at the time of the proposal.

Whether the action is related to other actions with individually but cumulatively significant impacts.

It is the policy of the USCG to collocate antennas and share infrastructure with other federal and state agencies for their operational or emergency communication equipment. The proposed USCG facility site will be adjacent to other existing facilities that would have a cumulative effect (but not significant).

The UAF Geophysical Institute will connect to the USCG facility as a power source. Their current power source (a wind generator) will be removed because the USCG facility power source will be more reliable. There is room in the USCG communication shelter to locate the seismic recording instrumentation. Transmission of seismic data will be routed through the USCG link; a faster and more reliable communication path to the Geophysical Institute. The seismic sensor and its housing may need to be relocated farther from the generator building, however the USCG and the Geophysical Institute agreed to work together to make this succeed.

The NPS will collocate the existing NPS radio in the USCG facility. This will allow the NPS to remove the existing radio facility. Space, power, and tower will be provided by the USCG at no charge. There will be more reliability because of the redundant power sources providing battery recharge. No NPS radio upgrades will be needed. Simultaneous maintenance schedules will reduce the need for multiple helicopter trips for annual maintenance activities.

The 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 of destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic resources.

There are no known historic or cultural resources listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places in the project's area of potential effect.

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.

The selected alternative will not adversely affect any endangered, threatened or proposed species or its habitat. No endangered or threatened species are located at the Deception Hills site or at the link site in Yakutat.

Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or Local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Implementation of the selected alternative will not violate any Federal, State or local laws.

FINDINGS

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

The selected alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, Executive Orders 11988 and 11990, and other environmental laws and mandates. There will be no restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the ANILCA, Title VIII, Section 810(a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

The NPS 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 the 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. A ROW permit may be issued.

ATTACHMENT A

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

Environmental Assessment for U.S. Coast Guard Rescue 21 Communication Site Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve

The public comment period for the USCG Rescue 21 Communication Site Environmental Assessment (EA) in Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve ended January 24, 2011 after a 30-day comment period. A total of thirteen letters were received from members of the public or from State organizations. Described below are the substantive comments and agency responses.

Comment: Three commenters indicated that a site visible from inside designated wilderness would degrade the feeling of remoteness or isolation (or diminish the character) of that wilderness. They all suggested seeking an alternate site. However, if the site in Deception Hills is chosen, then they suggested that it be constructed so that won't be visible from within the wilderness.

Response: Five alternate sites were examined during the initial evaluations for a site. None of these fully met the requirements to provide adequate communication coverage. Several of these sites are also in view of the wilderness so would not meet the suggestion of the commenters.

Comment: One commenter supported the necessity for a new USCG communication facility but was not in favor of the NPS collocating its radio facilities or the Geophysical Institute facilities at the USCG site.

Response: The pros and cons of collocation are enumerated in an appendix in the EA. There will be an overall saving of funds if maintenance activities are coordinated by the responsible agencies.

Comment: The State of Alaska ANILCA Implementation Program Office of Project Management and Planning stated it was supportive of the project. They stated that Congress envisioned that facilities of this type would need to be located within conservation system units [such as Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve] established by ANILCA and Title XI and Section 1310. They asked that the USCG consider whether any activities could potentially impact mineral exploration, development, or production associated with Yakutat beach mining claims. They suggested safety protocols to help reduce negative bear/ human encounters and impacts to wildlife.

Response: The USCG does not expect there would be any project activities that would impact mineral exploration, development, or production by its facilities. There may be a minor benefit to mineral resource companies from the ability to access a search and rescue communication facility even though the facility is primarily targeted for marine users. Suggested safety protocols to reduce negative bear/human encounters will be adopted.

Comment: The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) felt that the facility is exceptionally large to be placed inside a national park unit.

Response: All measures to limit the size of the facility have been considered in order to provide adequate power, reliability and service to the collocated organizations. Eliminating any of the larger structures (such as propane fuel tanks, the solar panel array, or using a shorter tower) to reduce the facility's footprint would also reduce or eliminate the capability of communications needed to meet the purpose and need of this project. Eliminating propane fuel would require enlarging the solar panel array or vice versa.