

Finding of No Significant Impact
Environmental Assessment
Fire Management Plan
Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates potential impacts to cultural and natural resources associated with implementation of the fire management plan (plan) for Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. The preferred alternative continues the fire management strategies applied in the park and preserve the previous 15 years and is the no action alternative. It is consistent with the NPS fire management policy and combines all three management actions described in Director's Order 18—prescribed fire use, wildland fire use, and wildland fire suppression. On-the-ground application of fire management will remain status quo. The plan will formalize the existing fire management decision-making, redefine fire management strategies, establish the park's fire management organization and responsibilities, and relate resource management goals to fire management strategies.

The plan will provide guidance for wildland fire management operations at the park and preserve. While fire represents threats to life, property, and cultural resources, it also is an integral component of natural ecosystem function and maintains natural conditions. Consequently, the preferred alternative will equip the NPS with a valuable management tool for planning and implementing fire policies and practices, with the necessary flexibility to achieve protection and resource management goals concurrently.

Public Involvement

The public review period commenced on March 15, 2002, with official release of the plan/EA notice of availability that also provided notification for agency and public open houses in Copper Center on April 10, and McCarthy on April 11. The notice of availability and scheduled open houses were announced on local radio stations KCAM and KCHU on March 15 through March 17. The public review period spanned 60 days and closed on May 15, 2002.

Four officials representing Ahtna Incorporated, Chitina Native Corporation, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry attended the agency open house in Copper Center. One individual attended the public open house in Copper Center. Eight individuals attended the public open house in McCarthy. One written comment on the plan was received from Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge; no written comments on the EA were received during the 60-day public review period.

Alternatives

In addition to the preferred/no action alternative, the EA evaluated an alternative that combined the management actions of wildland fire use and wildland fire suppression without prescribed fire use. Under this alternative, natural ignitions occurring in certain areas and under predetermined conditions would be managed to allow fire in its natural role to reduce burnable vegetation and maintain a naturally functioning ecosystem. The

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exclusion of prescribed fire may result in an unacceptable increase in vegetation thereby increasing the threat to the park and preserve resources.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The NPS preferred alternative incorporates prescribed fire use, wildland fire use, and wildland fire suppression to have a management strategy that most allows for a naturally occurring fire dependent ecosystem. This alternative would maintain wildlife habitat, subsistence use and provide for the long-term protection of cultural resources.

Mitigation

Certain fire suppression activities could threaten fragile soil layers and other ecosystem components. This risk will be mitigated by the use of minimum impact suppression tactics as allowed by NPS fire management policy. Potential impacts will also be mitigated by actions of the Multi-Agency Coordinating (MAC) group. The MAC group will convene as necessary to implement temporary changes of selected fire management options. Such changes will be implemented for specific geographic areas during periods of unusual fire conditions such as numerous fires, predicted drying trends, smoke problems, excessively wet conditions, or shortages of suppression resources.

Environmental Consequences of Preferred Alternative

As documented in the EA, the NPS has determined that the preferred alternative can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to vegetation, biodiversity, cultural resources, aesthetics, recreation, wetlands, floodplains, subsistence use, wildlife habitat, air quality, water quality, and fisheries. The environmental effects of the preferred alternative are summarized below.

Vegetation and Biodiversity. Maintenance of a balanced and naturally functioning ecosystem and cost-effective preservation of fire ecology with a reduction of potentially dangerous fuel loads will occur.

Cultural Resources. An improvement in long-term protection of registered and unregistered cultural resources is expected.

Aesthetics and Recreation. Occasionally, for visitor safety, specific areas affected by fire activity will be closed potentially affecting visitor use. Decreased aesthetics will result from burned vegetation.

Wetlands and Floodplains. Fire suppression operations will have a minimal risk of disrupting wetlands and floodplains. Increased erosion will occur after fire has burned

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through wetlands or floodplains with associated loss of vegetation cover. Erosion will diminish with re-establishment of vegetative growth.

Subsistence Use and Wildlife Habitat. There will be a short-term habitat loss in areas affected by fire and a displacement of wildlife. A significant restriction of subsistence use will not occur. Fire will play its natural role in the ecosystem and facilitate the long-term preservation of the area's natural process and subsistence activities.

Air Quality. There will be short-term effects associated with smoke from natural and prescribed fire as would occur in a naturally functioning ecosystem.

Water Quality and Fisheries. With the NPS preferred alternative there will be low-intensity wildland fires that will cause less erosion along rivers and streams than intense wildland fire. Following fire and before re-establishment of vegetative growth, stream sedimentation will temporarily increase. The long-term natural ecosystem function will continue.

Decision

The NPS decision is to select the preferred alternative. The decision included the mitigation measures identified in this finding of no significant impact.

Rationale for the Decision

The preferred alternative will enable the NPS to plan for and effectively manage the complex natural phenomena of wildland fire at Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve and will enable the NPS to conform with NPS Directors Order 18. The levels of impacts to park resources anticipated from the preferred alternative will not result in an impairment of resources that fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or that are key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park and preserve.

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

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I find that the preferred 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 of Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared for the project.

Recommended: *Hunter Steeg* 5/28/02
ocr Superintendent, Wrangell-St. Elias NP/P Date

Approved: *Marcia Blazyn* 5/31/02
Acty. Regional Director, Alaska Date

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Errata
May 15, 2002

NPS RESPONSE TO COMMENTS ON DRAFT FIRE MANAGEMENT PLAN

A 60-day public comment period was provided for the EA. The comment period began March 15, 2002 and ended May 15, 2002. Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve conducted agency and public open houses for the park Fire Management Plan (plan) and Environmental Assessment (EA) on April 10, 2002 in Copper Center, Alaska; and on April 11, 2002 in McCarthy, Alaska.

No agency or public comments on the EA were provided during the comment period or the open houses. While several public comments on the plan were made at the open house in McCarthy, these comments did not change the EA conclusions regarding the context and intensity of the effects of the proposed action and alternative; or suggested new alternatives for consideration. Plan comments (paraphrased) and the NPS responses follow.

Four officials representing Ahtna Incorporated, Chitina Native Corporation, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry attended the agency open house in Copper Center. None of these officials provided any comments on the EA. These officials asked questions and sought clarification regarding the scope of the plan, and interagency agency responsibilities. Specifically, the State of Alaska is the suppression agency. National Park Service policy is to have a fire plan for every burnable acre. The scope of the plan is limited to National Park Service properties and structures only.

Written comments on the plan were received from Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge; the refuge did not provide any comments on the EA. It was requested that Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge be listed as an interagency contact in the plan. Appendix D.1 of the plan, Interagency Contacts, will be revised to include contact information for the fire management officer of Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge also suggests that Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve coordinate with the refuge in pre-planning and management of fire incidents along the joint park—refuge boundary. The National Park Service intends to fully coordinate with Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge, as suggested, to assure that appropriate suppression responses are taken.

One individual attended the public open house in Copper Center. This individual did not provide any comments on the EA. This individual asked questions and sought clarification regarding the scope of the plan, and interagency agency responsibilities. Specifically, the State of Alaska is the suppression agency. National Park Service policy is to have a fire plan for every burnable acre. The scope of the plan is limited to National Park Service properties and structures only.

Eight individuals attended the public open house in McCarthy. None of these individuals provided any comments on the EA. Several individuals provided comments on the plan; these comments and responses are itemized below.

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Will there be a prescribed burn at May Creek? Response: Currently, no prescribed burn is planned for this area. The fire management plan does allow for prescribed fire use involving federal lands and properties in any of the park's fire management units (FMU) where appropriate. Need a color map of the park fire management units (FMU). Response: Color FMU maps will be sent directly to the McCarthy community.

Why is Kennecott in the critical FMU boundary and McCarthy in the full FMU boundary? Response: According to the rationale for FMU determination, the critical protection category includes National Historic Landmarks whereas the full protection category may include structures listed on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Landmarks.

Prescribed Fire Planning section (page 38) should include subsection on public notification. Response: The plan will be amended to include this information.

The plan does not contain information on fire suppression training for local residents. Response: The scope of the plan is limited to federal lands and properties. Fire suppression training for local residents will be the responsibility of local fire protection districts or organizations.

What can McCarthy do to get some assistance with fire protection? Response: Information of this nature will be provided to the community.

Kennecott should be in the plan. Response: The scope of the plan includes federal lands and structures within the Kennecott National Historic Landmark District. Kennecott will be added to the park FMU map.

Does the plan foresee a situation involving extremely dry conditions that would require implementation of access restrictions? Response: Access restrictions are not an element of the plan.

How can the National Park Service prevent people from bringing and using fireworks in the park? Can fireworks be banned in the park? Response: Use or possession of fireworks or firecrackers in the park and preserve is already prohibited by regulation, except as provided by permit or in designated areas under conditions established by the superintendent (36 CFR 2.38). Increased vigilance and awareness of the issue by park visitors, local citizens, air taxi operators, and park staff will be of benefit to all involved parties.