

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

**Lake Clark National Park and
Preserve**
Alaska



Finding of No Significant Impact

**Proposed Installation and Operation of Weather Camera Systems at Merrill
Pass and Lake Clark Pass Remote Communication Outlet**

May 2006

Recommended: _____

Superintendent, Lake Clark National Park and Preserve

Date

Approved: _____

Regional Director, Alaska

Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Proposed Installation and Operation of Weather Camera Systems at Merrill Pass and Lake Clark Pass Remote Communication Outlet

**Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, Alaska
May 2006**

The National Park Service (NPS) prepared an environmental assessment (EA) to evaluate a proposal from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to install two automated Weather Camera System (WCAM) at Merrill Pass, and the continued operation of the Remote Communications Outlet (RCO) and WCAM at Lake Clark Pass in Lake Clark National Park and Preserve (LACL). The NPS would issue a right-of-way to the FAA for the installation and operation of the WCAMs. The FAA proposes to install the WCAM sites during the summer of 2007.

The NPS has selected Alternative B (NPS and FAA Preferred Alternative) which would install two WCAMs at Merrill Pass and continue operations of the Lake Clark RCO/WCAM with mitigating measures. The alternative was not modified as a result of public comment.

No changes were made in the EA. Two comment letters were received during the public comment period.

ALTERNATIVES

Two alternatives were evaluated in the EA.

Alternative A, No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, two new WCAM sites would not be constructed at Merrill Pass, but the operation and maintenance of the RCO/WCAM at Lake Clark Pass would continue.

Under this alternative, the FAA personnel or consultants under contract to the FAA would continue performing routine maintenance and repair of the facility. These activities would require at least one helicopter round trip per year, however, additional trips may be necessary to repair equipment on an as needed basis. Based on the most recent maintenance records for existing WCAMs in Alaska, the FAA anticipates the RCO/WCAM site at Lake Clark Pass would require a total of three helicopter round trips annually for maintenance and repairs.

Alternative B, Install Two WCAMs at Merrill Pass and Continue Operations of Lake Clark RCO/WCAM (FAA and NPS Preferred Alternative)(Environmentally Preferred Alternative)

The NPS would issue a right-of-way permit to the FAA to install, operate, and maintain two WCAMs at Merrill Pass (Low Site and High Site), and continue the operation and maintenance of the existing RCO/WCAM at Lake Clark Pass.

Merrill Pass: The WCAM at both sites in Merrill Pass would consist of two or three 30-foot galvanized towers (tower array) and one equipment shed. The tower array is supported on a steel frame, anchored to a 12- to 18-inch-diameter concrete foundation and several steel piers. There are six guy wires leading to three ground anchors for each of the three towers. Towers support several solar panels, cameras, one wind generator and one 3-foot-diameter V satellite dish. The station would be powered with solar panels and wind-driven generators. The stations' electronics and sealed glass mat battery would be housed within a prefabricated fiberglass equipment shelter. The equipment shelter would be elevated approximately three feet off of the ground on the steel frame.

Approximately 40 helicopter round trips would be required to install the WCAMs in Merrill Pass.

Lake Clark Pass: Alternative B would continue the operation and maintenance of the existing RCO/WCAM at Lake Clark Pass. The existing RCO/WCAMs at Lake Clark consists of one 20-foot and three 30-foot galvanized towers (tower array) and one equipment shed. The tower array is supported on a steel frame anchored to a 12- to 18-inch diameter concrete foundation and several steel piers. There are six guy wires leading to three ground anchors for each of the four towers. Towers support several solar panels, cameras, one wind generator, and one three foot-diameter V satellite dish. The station is powered with solar panels and a wind-driven generator. The system's electronics and sealed glass mat battery are housed within a prefabricated fiberglass equipment shelter. The equipment shelter is elevated approximately three feet off of the ground on the steel frame.

Maintenance activities require at least one helicopter round trip per year to each site, however, additional trips may be necessary to repair equipment on an as needed basis. Based on the most recent maintenance records for existing WCAM in Alaska, the FAA estimates the WCAM sites at Merrill Pass and the RCO/WCAM Lake Clark Pass will require a total of three helicopter round trips annually for maintenance and repairs for each site.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The EA was released for a 30-day public review from April 5, 2006 through May 5, 2006. The EA was sent to 45 agencies, organizations, and individuals and was posted on the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment website.

Comment letters were received from the State of Alaska, ANILCA Implementation Program and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The State of Alaska supported installation of WCAMs in Merrill Pass and the continued operation of the WCAM in Lake Clark Pass. The BLM expressed interest in the project but provided no comments on the EA. The comments did not change the conclusions in the EA concerning the environmental effects of the proposed action.

DECISION

The NPS decision is to select Alternative B (Install Two WCAMs at Merrill Pass and Continue Operations of Lake Clark RCO/WCAM), along with mitigating measures.

Mitigating Measures

The following mitigating measures apply to the selected Alternative B (Install Two WCAMs at Merrill Pass and Continue Operations of Lake Clark RCO/WCAM).

Wilderness Values: Guidelines in the 2005 LACL Aviation Policy will be followed for construction of the Merrill Pass WCAMs and maintenance of these facilities and the Lake Clark RCO/WCAM. In planning flight paths, the most direct flight path practicable, given weather conditions and safety considerations, will be taken through wilderness areas to reach the WCAMs at Merrill Pass and Lake Clark Pass. When feasible, flight paths will avoid areas where users are known to concentrate or visit frequently. Helicopter altitude and horizontal distances will be maintained according to the park helicopter policy.

Visitor Experience: The FAA will provide the NPS with a schedule for equipment installation and maintenance activities, and will notify the park superintendent prior to commencing helicopter operations. Use of helicopters during hunting season in known hunting areas would be avoided. Signs could be posted at the WCAMs explaining the purpose of the site, and a list of contacts for more information.

Soundscape: The installation of the WCAMs at Merrill Pass, and continued operation of the Lake Clark Pass RCO/WCAM, will temporarily and periodically increase man-made sounds in the park. Human-caused sounds could be mitigated by limiting construction and maintenance activities to early spring or late fall when visitor use is at a reduced level.

Wildlife: Installation and maintenance activities would be timed to avoid sensitive periods, such as nesting, or calving season, for both WCAMs. Helicopters would not fly over these areas. If wildlife, such as brown bear, is observed at the WCAMs, flights would be rerouted or rescheduled to avoid or minimize disturbance. Maintenance visits may also be scheduled during the winter when wildlife would be less likely to be encountered.

In addition to meeting all FAA and NPS helicopter policy and aircraft requirements, mitigation for helicopter flight paths will include:

- Maintenance of a 1,500-foot vertical or horizontal clearance from traditional summer and calving areas, or other habitats supporting reproduction or adult animals. This includes brown bear, moose, caribou, and wolves;
- Pilots shall not hover, circle, harass, or pursue wildlife in any way;
- A minimum of a quarter-mile distance will be maintained from all active bald eagle nests. All nests are considered active from March 1 through May 31, and nests with eagles present are considered active through August 31;
- Pilots will avoid known areas supporting brown bear and Dall sheep;
- Pilots will not compromise safety.

Visual Resources: The equipment shed and steel-framed structures will be colored as to blend with the environment. The FAA will submit equipment coloration patterns to the superintendent for approval prior to installation.

Invasive Plants: Mud, dirt, and plant material will be removed from project equipment, footwear, and clothing prior to traveling to the project area, to minimize the possibility of invasive plants from gaining access to the park.

Cultural Resources: Should historic properties be discovered during project implementation, work in the discovery area will be stopped and the Superintendent will be notified. Procedures would be followed, as per DO-28 and as found in the guiding regulations in 36 CFR 800.13.

Solid Waste: A small quantity of roofing material, wire, tin cans, and styrofoam litter the site. All existing solid waste will be removed from the Lake Clark Pass RCO/WCAM site and disposed at an approved landfill. All solid waste generated from maintenance activities at Lake Clark RCO/WCAM and from construction and maintenance at the two sites at Merrill Pass will be handled and disposed of in accordance with the solid waste management guidelines of the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation.

Rationale for the Decision

Alternative B (FAA & NPS Preferred Alternative and environmentally preferred alternative) was selected because the WeatherCam Systems in Lake Clark and Merrill Passes would decrease the risk of aviation accidents in the passes and have minor impacts on the environment. Additionally, navigational aides are specifically authorized by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA).

Lake Clark and Merrill Passes are major air transportation routes. The FAA selected the Merrill Pass and Lake Clark RCO #2 sites for the WeatherCams because of the unique geography and the established civilian aircraft flight paths through both passes. Numerous aviation accidents have occurred in the passes because of poor weather conditions. The installation of the two WCAMs at Merrill Pass, and continued operation of the Lake Clark Pass RCO/WCAM, would enhance aircraft safety in the park, and for aircraft transporting hunters, fisherman, and sightseers from Southcentral Alaska to the Stony and Kuskokwim river watersheds. The selected alternative would increase aircraft safety in the passes by allowing private, military, and commercial pilots, access to current weather conditions prior to aircraft departure.

The impacts on park resources from the installation, operation, and maintenance of WeatherCam sites on Merrill and Lake Clark Passes would be minor or less. No options exist for installation of the WeatherCams outside of designated wilderness.

Section 1310 of ANILCA (Navigation Aids and Other Facilities) applies to the WeatherCam sites in Lake Clark and Merrill Passes. Section 1310 (a) allows reasonable access to, and operation and maintenance of existing air navigation aids and related facilities. The Lake Clark Pass site contains an existing facility that was established prior to ANILCA. Section 1310 (b) allows for the establishment, operation, and maintenance within any conservation system unit of new air and navigation aids and related facilities. The WeatherCam System at Merrill Pass would improve air navigation in this area.

Alternative 1 (No-action) was not selected because it would only decrease aviation risks in Lake Clark Pass. Aviation risks in Merrill Pass would continue.

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.

The impacts on park resources from the installation, operation, and maintenance of WeatherCam sites on Merrill and Lake Clark Passes would be minor or less. The level of effects would not be significant.

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

Lake Clark and Merrill Passes are major air transportation routes. The installation of the two WCAMs at Merrill Pass, and continued operation of the Lake Clark Pass RCO/WCAM, would enhance aircraft safety in the park. Aircraft safety would be increased because private, military, and commercial pilots would have access to current weather conditions in the passes prior to departure.

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

Both WeatherCam sites are located in designated wilderness of Lake Clark National Park and Preserve. Installation and operation of the WeatherCam System in two locations of Lake Clark National Park and Preserve would have minor adverse impacts on wilderness values. No options exist for installation of the WeatherCams outside of designated wilderness.

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

The effects presented in the EA are not highly controversial. Only two comment letters were received during the public comment period for the environmental assessment. The State of Alaska supported the installation and operation of the WeatherCam Systems.

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

The effects of the selected alternative do not involve unique or unknown risks. Effects are primarily associated with the placement of the facilities and helicopter traffic. The effects of these activities are well documented and pose no 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.

The establishment of a WeatherCam System in Merrill Pass and continued operation of the system in Lake Clark Pass would not set a precedent for future actions. Lake Clark and Merrill

Passes are major air transportation routes. The expansion of the WeatherCam system to other areas of the park would be unlikely.

(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.

The action is not related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulative significant impacts.

(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 selected alternative would not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Preliminary site surveys have indicated that no artifacts or other archaeological, historic, or cultural resources are present on, or near, the Lake Clark Pass or Merrill Pass sites.

(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.

The selected alternative would not adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there are no federally listed or proposed species in the project area.

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

The selected alternative would not violate any Federal, State, or local law.

FINDINGS

The levels of adverse impacts to park resources anticipated from the selected alternative will 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, and Executive Orders 11988 and 11990]. 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.