



**Draft Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)
The East Alaska Resource Management Plan Amendment
Glennallen Field Office, Alaska
DOI-BLM-A020-2020-0037-RMP-EA**

Introduction

In 2019 the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (Dingell Act) became law. Section 1113 of the Dingell Act requires the BLM to identify “accessible and economically viable Federal land” within the Chugach Region that can be offered in a potential exchange with Chugach Alaska Corporation (CAC). For the BLM to identify lands within the Chugach Region, an amendment of the 2007 East Alaska Resource Management Plan (RMP) is necessary because the BLM did not identify these lands as currently available for exchange in the RMP. The Federal Lands Policy Management Act (FLPMA) and the National Environmental Policy Act require the BLM to amend the RMP and analyze the environmental impacts of making additional lands available for a potential exchange. Therefore, the BLM prepared the draft East Alaska RMP Amendment/EA (DOI-BLM-A020-2020-0037-RMP-EA), which analyzes the environmental impacts of the BLM of potentially making additional BLM-managed public lands available for exchange within the RMP decision area.

The draft EA documents the environmental analysis of three alternatives, two of which would make BLM-managed public lands available for exchange: Alternatives 2 and 3. Alternative 1 was the No Action alternative. At this time, the BLM has not selected an alternative that is considered the “proposed action” or preferred alternative. The analysis in this EA supplements the analyses found in the Proposed Resource Management Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement for East Alaska Resource Management Plan (RMP/FEIS 2007) which is incorporated by reference.

The BLM will coordinate and consult with the public, interested parties, and other Federal, State, and local agencies following the release of the draft EA and unsigned, draft FONSI to further evaluate the effects of implementing the alternatives considered in the RMP amendment. The draft EA is attached and incorporated by reference in this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) determination. The draft EA and unsigned, draft FONSI are available for public review and comment from March xx, 2021 to April xx, 2021.

Finding of No Significant Impact

The FONSI is defined in 40 CFR 1508.1(l) as a document briefly presenting the reasons why an action will not have a significant effect on the human environment and for which an environmental impact statement therefore will not be prepared.

On the basis of the information contained in the draft EA, and all other information available to me, it is my determination that: (1) the implementation of the RMP Amendment would not have significant environmental impacts beyond those already addressed in the 2007 East Alaska Resource Management Plan PRMP/FEIS; and (2) the RMP Amendment does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not necessary and will not be prepared. This finding is based on my consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 CFR 1501.3(b)), with regard to the potentially affected area and to the degree of the impacts described in the Draft RMP Amendment/EA. The following documents the BLM's evaluation of the potential impacts of the East Alaska RMP Amendment.

Degree of effects of the action

The geographic scope of the RMP Amendment/EA comprises approximately 1,280 acres of public land managed by the BLM's Glennallen Field Office in Glennallen Alaska. The planning area is located approximately twenty miles north-east of the City of Valdez, along the Richardson Highway, in Thompson Pass. The planning area is approximately 600 feet from the highway. The area is heavily used year-round for recreational pursuits including hiking, hunting, berry picking, skiing and snow machining. Additional information about the planning area is provided in Chapter 3 of the draft EA, *Affected Environment*. Using the draft EA, I evaluated the following factors when considering the degree of effects from this RMP amendment:

1) Short and long term effects

No short-term impacts were identified as the proposed action is administrative in nature. If the BLM approved the amendment, there could potentially be long-term effects if the BLM chose to exchange land in the future.

Recreational Opportunities and Public Access:

The action alternatives would make available for exchange either 640 or 1,280 acres of public lands currently available for high quality recreation opportunities and public access from BLM management. These lands are easily accessed from the Richardson Highway and support a wide array of year-round users. If the BLM amended the RMP by choosing one of the alternatives, it would be possible for the BLM to select those lands for a future exchange. Recreational users could be displaced under a future land exchange and it is possible that those acres currently utilized for recreational pursuits would no longer be available for public recreational use under a future land exchange. There are an additional 12,800 acres of State lands which are comparable in accessibility and recreational opportunity located along the Richardson Highway from milepost 19-37. The potential future loss of BLM-managed public lands currently used for recreational pursuits equates to 5 to 10 percent of the acres within the immediate area; recreationalists would still have access over 10,000 acres of BLM and State managed-lands for recreational pursuits.

Establishment of an ANCSA 17(b) public access easement or other public easements within sections of land under consideration for exchange would allow for continued access to the Lowe River and/or through the planning area to Marshall Pass, including during summer months.

While not possible to analyze at this stage, if an exchange occurs, BLM should attempt to acquire lands which provide equal access rights opportunities to hunt and fish, and ability to enjoy land and waters managed by the DOI as the lands to be conveyed. Such access should also take into account differing modes of travel dependent upon the season (Draft EA, pp 15).

Cultural Resources:

Alternative 2 would identify both sections 5 and 6 as available for exchange and could lead to the conveyance from public ownership to State or private ownership of approximately two un-surveyed and uninvestigated linear miles of the historic “Marshall Pass Trail” or “Keystone Canyon Thompson Pass Trail.” The transfer, lease, or sale of property out of Federal ownership or control without adequate and legally enforceable restrictions or conditions to ensure long-term preservation of a property’s historic significance is considered an “adverse effect” (36 CFR 800.5). This alternative has the most potential to adversely impact approximately two miles of historic trail as well as any other undiscovered historic properties, including artifacts and camp sites from the Gold Rush or early 1900’s (Draft EA, pp 17). Alternative 3 would identify only section 5 as available for exchange and could lead to the conveyance from public ownership to private ownership approximately one un-surveyed and uninvestigated linear mile of the historic “Marshall Pass Trail” or “Keystone Canyon Thompson Pass Trail.” Approximately one mile of this trail near the Richardson Highway would be retained in public ownership and would not be affected. This alternative has the potential to adversely impact approximately one mile of historic trail as well as any other undiscovered historic properties, including artifacts and camp sites from the Gold Rush or early 1900’s (Draft EA, pp 15-16).

For both Alternative 2 and 3, prior to any land exchange, and in consultation with the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the BLM is responsible for: identifying eligible cultural resources on the affected lands (36 CFR 800.4), determining whether there are any adverse effects to identified eligible cultural resources (36 CFR 800.5), and resolving those adverse effects (36 CFR 800.6). This process would include cultural resource surveys of the affected lands with the potential for eligible cultural resources or historic properties as well as the documentation of those resources.

Mitigation for any adverse effects to eligible properties arising from the exchange of lands with a private owner would require specific consultation about those eligible properties with the Alaska SHPO and any other affected tribes or interested parties, such as the City of Valdez or a local historical society. (Draft EA, pp 17).

Social and Economic Condition:

As described in the Recreation section of the draft EA, Alternative 2 would make available for exchange 1,280 acres of BLM-managed public lands currently available for high quality recreation opportunities, public access, and hunting opportunities. These lands are easily accessed from the Richardson Highway and support a wide array of year-round users. It is expected that some users would become displaced and seek other areas for recreational and

hunting opportunities, including adjacent State lands. Scoping comments suggested that many current users highly value recreational opportunities in the Thompson Pass area, for example, winter recreation opportunities for skiing, snowboarding, and snow machining. The social and economic impacts of Alternative 3 would be similar to those described under Alternative 2, but present to a lesser degree since half of the acreage would be retained. Given the lack of user data, it is not possible to say how much less the impacts would be or whether activities would be affected differentially (Draft EA, pp 19). The mitigation measures described in the Recreation section (Draft EA, pp 15) would decrease the likelihood of changes in use patterns that could result in social and economic impacts, but the magnitude of the change is unknown.

Land Ownership and Uses:

Alternative 2 identifies two parcels of land in Thompson Pass area, sections 5 and 6, Township 9 South, Range 2 West, Copper River Meridian, Alaska, to make available for a potential land exchange in a plan amendment. These two sections are currently selected by the State. If the State selections are relinquished or rejected, these lands would be available for exchange. Each section is 640 acres, for a total of approximately 1,280 acres. The BLM would negotiate and reserve, at the time of exchange, public access easement(s) within sections 5 and 6, to ensure continued public access through private property to reach public lands and resources (Draft EA, pp 20)

Alternative 3 would make section 5, Township 9 South, Range 2 West, Copper River Meridian, Alaska available for exchange. If the State selections are relinquished or rejected, these lands would be available for exchange. The BLM would negotiate and reserve, at the time of exchange, a public access easement(s) through section 5 to reach other public lands and resources.

2) Both beneficial and adverse effects.

Both beneficial and adverse effects may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effects will be beneficial. Preliminary effects determinations are discussed in the supporting analysis of the Draft RMP Amendment/EA. At this time, the BLM considers the effects determination to be preliminary. The BLM will coordinate and consult with the public, interested parties, and other Federal, State, and local agencies following the release of the Draft RMP Amendment/EA to further evaluate the effects of implementing the alternatives considered in the Draft RMP Amendment/EA.

3) Effects on public health or safety.

Amending the RMP to make lands available for exchange within the RMP planning area would not adversely affect public health or safety. The amendment would not authorize a land exchange; rather it would identify lands that would be available for exchange (Draft EA, Section 1.3 *Decision to be Made*, (Draft EA, pp 3). The proposed action is administrative in nature and could not adversely affect public health and safety.

4) Effects that would violate Federal, State, Tribal or local law protecting the environment.

The alternatives analyzed in the Draft RMP Amendment/EA would not violate laws protecting the environment. The BLM will conduct coordination and complete consultation with the public, interested parties, and other Federal, State, and local agencies following the release of the Draft RMP Amendment/EA to further evaluate effects of implementing the alternatives.

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