



**Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)
The Proposed 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 Proposed East Alaska RMP Amendment/EA (DOI-BLM-A020-2020-0037-RMP-EA), which analyzes the environmental impacts of the BLM potentially making additional BLM-managed public lands available for exchange within the RMP decision area.

The 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. Alternative 2 would make available two parcels of land in Thompson Pass area, sections 5 and 6, Township 9 South, Range 2 West, Copper River Meridian, Alaska (Map 2, Appendix E) and Alternative 3 would amend the East Alaska RMP so that only section 5, Township 9 South, Range 2 West, Copper River Meridian, Alaska (Map 3, Appendix E) is available for exchange. Each parcel of land is approximately 640 acres. 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 has identified Alternative 2 as the proposed RMP amendment alternative.

The BLM coordinated and consulted with the public, interested parties, and other Federal, State, and local agencies during the scoping period and comment period on the draft EA and unsigned, draft FONSI. All substantive comments from the public have been considered and either incorporated into the Proposed RMP Amendment/EA or this Finding of No Significant Impact. The Proposed RMP Amendment/EA is attached and incorporated by reference in this FONSI determination. Release of the Proposed RMP Amendment and EA triggers a 30-day public protest period and 60-day Governor’s Consistency Review. The RMP Amendment/EA will not be approved by a Decision Record (DR) until all protests and any consistency issues identified by the Governor’s office have been resolved.

Finding of No Significant Impact

The FONSI is defined in 40 CFR 1508.1(i) 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 EA, and all other information available to me, it is my determination that selection of Alternative 2 or Alternative 3 is not a major federal action and would not have 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 Proposed 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 out of the out of 15,135 acres of public land managed by the BLM's Glennallen Field Office in Glennallen Alaska. The project area is located approximately twenty miles north-east of the City of Valdez, along the Richardson Highway, in Thompson Pass. The project area is approximately 600 feet from the highway. The area is used year-round for recreational pursuits including hiking, hunting, berry picking, skiing, and snow machining. Additional information about the project area is provided in Chapter 3 of the EA, *Affected Environment*. Using the 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:

Alternative 2 would make available for exchange 1,280 acres of public lands currently available for recreation opportunities and public access from BLM management and Alternative 3 would make available approximately 640 acres. These lands can be accessed from the Richardson Highway and support a wide array of year-round users. The RMP amendment would allow the BLM to select those lands for a future exchange. Current users could be displaced, and acres currently available for recreational pursuits under consideration in Alternatives 2 or 3 may no longer be available for public use unless a public easement is retained as a condition of any 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 (EA, p. 16-17). The potential future loss of BLM-managed public lands currently used for recreational pursuits equates to 9 percent of the acres within the immediate area; recreationalists would still have access to over 10,000 acres of BLM and State managed-lands for recreational

pursuits (EA, p. 18). Due to nearby State lands, the BLM expects no change in recreational impacts, other than some users changing physical locations to conduct similar activities.

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 project area to Marshall Pass, including during summer months.

Before any future exchange, the Federal government will determine whether the land it receives in exchange meets the statutory requirements of the authority for the exchange and whether the exchange is in the best interest of the United States (43 CFR 2200.0-6). The EA helps to inform any future decision on an exchange as it analyzes what resources values are lost if the land is conveyed out of Federal ownership.

There would be no significant effects to recreational use or access because of the proximity of comparable State lands.

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 (EA, p. 20). 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 (EA, p. 20-21).

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 (EA, p. 21).

Social and Economic Condition:

As described in the Recreation section of the EA, Alternative 2 would make available for exchange 1,280 acres of BLM-managed public lands currently available for recreation opportunities, public access, and hunting opportunities. These lands are easily 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 which includes both the project area and State lands. Commenters identified a variety of winter recreation opportunities to include 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. Establishment of public access easement(s) within sections of land under consideration for exchange would allow for continued access to the Lowe River, through the project area to Marshall Pass, and/or for other uses (EA, p. 19) and therefore would decrease the likelihood of changes in use patterns that could result in social and economic impacts. Considering that future use would be limited by the terrain, winter snow loads and conditions, and cost of development as well as the mitigation to establish public access easements for continued access to the Lowe River, social and economic effects would not be significant.

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 (EA, p. 24)

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. For these reasons, there would be no significant effects to land ownership and uses.

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. Final effects determinations are discussed in the supporting analysis of the Proposed RMP Amendment/EA. The BLM coordinated and consulted with the public, interested parties, and other Federal, State, and local agencies during the scoping period and following the release of the draft RMP Amendment/EA.

3) Effects on public health or safety.

Amending the RMP to make lands available for exchange within the RMP project 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 (EA, p. 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 Proposed RMP Amendment/EA would not violate laws protecting the environment, (EA, p. 14), This action is consistent with applicable land management plans, policies, and programs.

Marnie Graham

Marnie Graham
Authorized Official
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09/27/2021

Date