



*Your Land.  
Your Voice.*

July 2, 2021

BLM Alaska  
East Alaska RMP Amendment/EA  
222 W. 7th Ave. Stop 13  
Anchorage, AK 99513

Re: Draft East Alaska RMP Amendment/Environmental Assessment/FONSI

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Draft East Alaska Resource Management Plan Amendment. The proposed action would amend the 2007 East Alaska Resource Management Plan (RMP), in order to allow the agency to conduct a potential land exchange in the Thompson Pass region of Eastern Alaska.

Alaska Wilderness League reviewed and commented on legislation that later passed into law as Section 1113 of the 2019 Dingell Act, and we submitted comments in January of this year on the Notice of Intent to conduct this EA. The way your agency is reading its obligations under the Dingell Act remains inconsistent with law. Our particular concerns include:

**The proposed amendment and this EA both point to a serious misreading of the Dingell Act.** Section 1113 of the act requires DOI to conduct a Chugach Region Land Study to identify sufficient acres of land and provide recommendations for land exchange options that fit certain criteria. The agency was not asked to perform or prepare a land exchange or to amend the RMP. Considering how the Dingell Act, in another section, created a land program which clearly specifies the conveyance of lands to individuals in Alaska, the absence of such language in this section makes it clear that the intent of the Dingell Act should be taken at face value, and that Congress – not the administration – should be the one to act on any findings of the Chugach land study. Contrary to this, the EA and the proposed amendment both seem to indicate the lands identified are being made available for exchange, which is a clear misreading of the act.

**The only rationale for the administration to amend the RMP is to expedite a land exchange.** Not only was the agency not charged with carrying out a land exchange, but the act itself included no timing restrictions for when an exchange should occur, which in our reading leaves that decision up to a future Congress. If the agency insists that it must execute a land exchange to comply with this section of the Dingell Act – which we find



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undefendable – it can do so by informing Congress of the timing limitations that it faces under the existing East Alaska RMP, and not seek to amend the East Alaska RMP.

**This EA analyzes parcels selected based on the conclusions of the *Chugach Region Land Study*, but the public has yet to see this study.** To our knowledge the study in question has not been submitted to Congress as required, and we have not been able to view it. Assuming the study fulfills the criteria of the Dingell Act, it likely includes an analysis that would help the public comment on this EA. While we maintain that it is misguided for the administration to pursue any land exchange under the guise of complying with the Dingell Act, asking the public to comment on a specific land exchange without the full picture that the agency is relying on to craft such a recommendation is also inappropriate.

**This EA contains no discussion of how or why these particular parcels were chosen, or why other parcels are not appropriate to consider.** While sections 5 and 6 are obviously accessible due to their proximity to the highway, this EA assumes that the sections are also economically viable while offering no explanation or analysis as to how or why this would be true. Section 1.4 of the EA, *Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions*, states that any development that would occur would be challenged by limits of the steep terrain, winter snow loads and conditions, and cost of development, so it seems unlikely that these lands are economically viable for many types of development.

**If exchanged, these lands would likely be developed in some way, and the EA fails to explore the impacts of potential development.** The language of the Dingell Act assumes that offered lands will be economically viable, or else there would be no reason to make such an exchange. The agency cannot find that impacts will be limited without an analysis of activities that might take place on lands after they are exchanged. The “Mineral Resources” section on page 29 states “it is assumed that if future development were to occur it would be low intensity and in line with the limited infrastructure and development in the Thompson Pass region.” The agency failed to back up this assertion in the Draft EA.

**The EA fails to discuss how this RMP amendment affects management of the larger planning area and affects other interests.** Those also affected include state and Native Corporation entities that have selected lands in the region but await conveyance, and the unique value of these parcels in relation to the BLM’s goals for the East Alaska planning area. Additionally, it seems highly unusual to make an amendment to an entire RMP to facilitate one land exchange, particularly when the rationale for why that initial hold on land exchanges was included in the current East Alaska RMP is not considered holistically for the region.

**The EA fails to recognize impacts to non-recreational users of the region, and other potential environmental impacts.** While the EA reviews winter recreation impacts for the proposed land exchange, it does not provide a review of impacts to other user groups, along with environmental impacts that could affect BLM resources in the region. This EA does not sufficiently review the potential scope of impacts to social and economic impacts, rural and traditional lifestyles, subsistence use and access, biological resources,

cultural resources, and other reasonably foreseeable future activities. In fact, the EA states that the planning area “has not been archaeologically investigated and could contain cultural resources”.

Alaska Wilderness League is broadly concerned with the lack of clarity of the development interests in the proposed parcels, valuation considerations, and how public interest in this highly important area for Alaska outdoor recreation, tourism, and subsistence uses alike would be protected should an exchange move forward. At its core, this process remains flawed because it relies on a misreading of the Dingell Act. In fact, by calling for a study and not specific land trades, the Dingell Act relays Congress’s desire to take deliberate analytical steps before specific action, which BLM upends with its current approach. We urge the agency to suspend this expedited and flawed process and instead focus on what the Dingell Act requires the agency to do and when: study use patterns in the region now and offer land exchange recommendations to Congress in the future for their potential action. At this time, we urge the BLM to take the No Action alternative outlined in this EA.

Thank you for your consideration,

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