

DRAFT COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Motorized Transportation

This compatibility determination is a reevaluation of an existing public use, and the following refuge uses are considered in this compatibility determination:

- Boating (motorized) – travel by a mechanically powered boat (excluding air-thrust boats)
- Fixed-wing aircraft use – the landing or take-off of non-military, fixed-wing aircraft
- Helicopter use – the landing or take-off of non-military helicopters which are authorized under a refuge special use permit, and emergency landings of helicopters associated with search and rescue or law enforcement
- Snowmobile use – the use of snowmobiles designed for use over snow-covered terrain

Supporting Uses: The following activities are often done in conjunction with motorized access: audio recording; boating - motorized; cabin use; camping; concession use; cross-country skiing; disease management; electronics use; environmental education and interpretation; fishing; fixed-wing aircraft use; fuel caches; helicopter use (case-by-case determination); hiking and backpacking; hunting; photography and videography; scientific capture/release or collection – plants, fish, birds, mammals, insects, rocks, etc.; snowshoeing; subsistence activities; surveys – scientific inventory and monitoring; swimming and beach use; trapping; tree harvest – firewood; and wildlife observation.

Refuge Name: Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Fairbanks, Alaska

Establishing and Acquisition Authority

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter established the 10.6 million-acre Yukon Flats National Wildlife Monument with Presidential Proclamation 4627. The monument was established from lands in the public domain. In 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) (Section 302) adjusted the boundary to 8.6 million acres, and established the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge (Yukon Flats NWR) as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System).

Refuge Purposes

ANILCA sets out the primary purposes for each refuge in Alaska. The purposes of the Yukon Flats NWR are described in Section 302(9) (B), and are as follows:

- to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including, but not limited to, canvasbacks and other migratory

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birds, Dall sheep, bears, moose, wolves, wolverines and other furbearers, caribou (including participation in coordinated ecological studies and management of the Porcupine and Fortymile caribou herds) and salmon

- to fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats
- to provide, in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth above, the opportunity for continued subsistence uses by local residents
- to ensure, to the maximum extent practicable and in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth above, water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is “to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans” (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended [16 USC 668dd-668ee]).

Description of Uses

Motorized transportation has been and would continue to be a common activity. These activities would occur at all times of the year, but mostly in the spring, summer and fall. This use is frequently done in small groups of 2- 3 people, in watercraft, snowmachines, and aircraft on or near areas of convenient access such as rivers and lakes. These activities typically involve subsistence, wildlife-dependent recreation, and the supporting uses listed above. We believe the present frequency and duration of this use on the refuge is moderate considering it facilitates virtually all access to refuge lands.

Boating

Motorized boating is a common activity that facilitates many public uses. The most common type is the use of 16’ – 24’ aluminum or fiberglass boats propelled by outboard or inboard motors on major waterways during the months of June through September. This use is currently allowed without a special use permit. For the purposes of this compatibility determination, the use of motorized watercraft for legal, public uses is under consideration. This compatibility determination does not cover air-thrust boats, which the Service considers to be off-road vehicles (50 CFR 36.2).

Fixed-wing aircraft use

Fixed-wing aircraft use is a common activity that facilitates many public uses. The most common type is single engine aircraft equipped with floats during the summer, and wheels or skis during the other seasons. The landing of fixed-wing aircraft typically occurs on long (.25 - .50 mile) stretches of flat terrain or water. Non-

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commercial use is currently allowed without a special use permit. Commercial landings (e.g., air taxis) require a separate special use permit. For the purposes of this compatibility determination, the use of fixed-wing aircraft for legal, public uses is under consideration.

Helicopter use

Helicopter landings can facilitate scientific research, emergency search and rescue operations, and law enforcement. Helicopter use is currently allowed only under a refuge special use permit (not required for emergency or law enforcement operations).

Snowmobile use

Snowmobile use is a common activity that facilitates many public uses. The most common type of snowmobile use is village-to-village travel between the months of October and May. This use is currently allowed without a special use permit. For the purposes of this compatibility determination, the use of snowmobiles when there is adequate snow cover [43 CFR 36.11(a)(2)] is under consideration.

Access using airboats, all-terrain vehicles and other off-road vehicles is not allowed on national wildlife refuges in Alaska (43 CFR 36.11(g)), with limited exceptions. Helicopter landings on refuge lands and waters are regulated by special use permit issued by the refuge manager. Restrictions may apply to the use of snowmachines, aircraft and motorboats if the refuge manager determines that such use is causing or is likely to cause an adverse impact on public health and safety, resource protection, protection of historic or scientific values, subsistence uses, conservation of endangered or threatened species, or other purposes and values for which the refuge was established.

This compatibility determination addresses the predominant uses associated with motorized transportation on the refuge. Motorized transportation that substantially differs in scope or purpose from the activities covered by this compatibility determination will require a separate determination for compatibility. The scope of this determination includes motorized transportation by all agencies or entities other than the Service. Motorized access that is part of a collaborative or cooperative effort with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is not subject to a formal compatibility determination.¹

Availability of Resources

Adequate refuge personnel and base operational funds are available to manage this activity at current levels. Staff time (as many as five staff days per year) primarily

¹ Any action taken by the Service or Service-authorized agents including contractors, cooperating agencies, cooperating associations, refuge support groups, and volunteers is a refuge management activity, and thus is exempt from the compatibility determination process. 50 CFR 25.12 defines refuge management activities as any activity conducted by the Service or a Service-authorized agent to fulfill one or more purposes of the national wildlife refuge, or the National Wildlife Refuge System Mission.

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involves phone conversations, written correspondence, proposal reviews, permit issuance, and entering activity information into a database.

Anticipated Impacts of the Uses

Motorized access at current levels, in accordance with established federal regulations, does not appear to be resulting in significant long-term adverse impacts to refuge resources. Factors such as focal area(s), fuel storage, garbage and human waste management, snow cover, frequency of site-specific uses, and location of access points will determine the extent of impacts on the refuge. Frequency of this activity may rise in the next ten years if visitation on the refuge increases. This could lead to more concentrated activity and result in damage to vegetation or user conflicts at popular access sites. If information indicates impacts are increasing, this use may be reevaluated for compatibility. In our opinion, impacts to natural resources from this activity at present levels are minimal.

Public Review and Comment

Public involvement for this document includes: a public notice in the *Fairbanks Daily News Miner*; posting the draft on the Service's Alaska Region compatibility determination Web site, <http://alaska.fws.gov/nwr/planning/index.htm>; posting a notice of availability at the Refuge headquarters in Fairbanks; and a 30-day public comment period.

Copies will be mailed or e-mailed upon request. Comments must be received by the refuge headquarters within the 30-day comment period to receive timely consideration. The period of public review and comment will commence on 16 April 2007, and end 16 May 2007.

Please send comments to:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge
Attn: Compatibility Determination Comments
101 12th Avenue, Room 264, Box 14
Fairbanks, Alaska 99701
(907)456-0440
(907)456-0447 (fax)
yukonflats@fws.gov

If you e-mail comments, please place the words, "Compatibility Comments," in the subject line and your comments in the body of the text. Please do not include attachments because they will not be opened due to the potential of computer viruses.

Determination

_____ Use is Not Compatible

Use is Compatible

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

A special use permit with stipulations is not required for legal motorized transportation on refuge lands, except helicopter landings which are authorized on a case-by-case basis and are regulated by permit. Refuge staff will monitor motorized access, and findings from these monitoring efforts will be used to determine what additional management actions, if any, are needed to ensure this use remains compatible with refuge purposes and in compliance with federal regulations. (Note, the stipulations for special use permits may be updated to comply with new regional policy or the Record of Decision for the Comprehensive Conservation Plan when it is revised.)

Justification

This compatibility determination is a reevaluation of an existing use (motorized transportation) that can facilitate subsistence activities and wildlife-dependent recreation. ANILCA section 1110(a) provides that the Secretary shall permit, subject to reasonable regulations to protect the natural and other values of the conservation system units, “. . . *the use of snowmachines (during periods of adequate snow cover, or frozen river conditions in the case of wild and scenic rivers), motorboats, airplanes, and non-motorized surface transportation methods for traditional activities (where such activities are permitted by this Act or other law). . .*”

After fully considering the impacts of this activity, as described in the anticipated impacts section, it is my judgment that motorized transportation, as described above, does not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes for which the refuge was established or the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Motorized access is not recognized as a priority public use of the Refuge System, and after an opportunity for public comment, must be reevaluated if conditions under which the use is permitted change significantly or if there is significant new information regarding the effects of the use, but not less frequently than every ten years.

Mandatory 10-Year Reevaluation Date: May 2017

NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Decision

- Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Memorandum
- Categorical Exclusions and Environmental Action Memorandum
- Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact
- Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision

Supporting Documents

- Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (as amended)
- Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (as amended)

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- Alaska Region Fuel Storage Policy, US Fish and Wildlife Service, 1997
- Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 (as amended)
- Compatibility Determination, Uses (includes aircraft landings, boating, camping, hiking and backpacking, research and snowmachine use) allowed by the 1987 Yukon Flats NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan, 19 July 1994
- Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement and Wilderness Review, Yukon Flats NWR, 29 December 1987
- Environmental Assessment for the Policy on Commercial Big-Game Guide-Outfitters and Transporters on National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska, 22 May 1992
- Finding of No Significant Impact, Environmental Assessment for the Policy on Commercial Big Game Guide-Outfitters and Transporters on National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska, 9 June 1992
- National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (as amended)
- Refuge Manual, US Fish and Wildlife Service, 12 March 1982
- River Management Plan – Beaver Creek Wild River, December 1983
- Subsistence Management for Federal Public Lands in Alaska, Final Environmental Impact Statement, Record of Decision signed 2 April 1992
- Title 50, Part 36, US Code of Federal Regulations 2004

Refuge Determination

Refuge Manager /

Project Leader Approval: _____
(Signature) (Date)

Regional Chief
National Wildlife
Refuge System: _____

(Signature) (Date)