

DRAFT COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Subsistence Activities

This compatibility determination is a reevaluation of an existing public use. The following uses are considered in this compatibility determination:

- Subsistence Fishing – fishing by rural Alaska residents for direct family use, barter, or customary trade
- Subsistence Gathering – collection of plant materials, eggs, feathers, or other natural materials by rural Alaska residents for direct family use, barter, or customary trade
- Subsistence Hunting – hunting by rural Alaska residents for direct family use, barter, or customary trade
- Subsistence Trapping – furbearer trapping by rural Alaska residents for direct family use, barter, or customary trade

Supporting Uses: The following activities are often done in support of or in conjunction with subsistence activities: boating – human-powered, motorized, wind-driven; cabin use; camping; dog sledding; fixed-wing aircraft use; fuel caches; electronics use; snowmobile use; snowshoeing; swimming and beach use.

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 purposes for each refuge in Alaska. The purposes of the Yukon Flats NWR as described in Section 302(9)(B), include:

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

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- 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 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 Use

Subsistence activities addressed in this document include hunting, fishing, trapping, and natural resource gathering (firewood gathering, berry picking, gathering of other plant materials such as Labrador tea, petruski, wild spinach, and grass). Major uses such as motorized and non-motorized transportation and cabins are addressed in separate compatibility determinations.

Residents of villages located near refuge lands have lifestyles and economies that depend on subsistence resources. Subsistence activities are not just a way of obtaining food, but are an important mechanism for maintaining cultural values such as kinship, community, respect for elders, hospitality, sharing resources, and the passing of values to younger generations. In addition, many residents in the area prefer the taste of traditional wild foods to commercially purchased foods.

Subsistence Fishing

The mainstay subsistence food for communities within the refuge is salmon, which is obtained by subsistence harvest as well as retained from commercial harvest. Three species of Pacific salmon are used – chinook, chum (summer and fall) and coho. Freshwater species—including Arctic grayling, burbot, whitefish (broad, humpback, sheefish, cisco), and northern pike—are also used.

Subsistence Gathering

The collection of blueberries, cranberries, and firewood are common activities practiced by subsistence users. Most of these activities are concentrated along the main rivers of the refuge, and are often done in association with other subsistence activities such as moose hunting or trapping.

Subsistence Hunting

Moose, black bear, brown bear, and wolves are used by local residents of the Yukon Flats; however, moose are the most important big game mammal taken for subsistence. Hunting caribou on the refuge is more opportunistic for subsistence

hunters. Data from a recent subsistence waterfowl harvest study indicate that approximately one-third to one-half of the households in most Yukon Flats communities hunt migratory birds. In addition to harvesting birds, two villages (Birch Creek and Fort Yukon) reported harvesting an estimated twenty-five waterfowl eggs (Andersen and Jennings, 2001).

Trapping for subsistence purposes

Subsistence trappers operate within the refuge; however, the trapping harvest is poorly understood and documented; sealing data are the primary information source. Beaver, ermine, lynx, marten, mink, muskrat, red fox, wolves, and wolverines are considered the most important furbearers of the Yukon Flats, but because not all hides are sealed, harvest data are limited. The annual number of trapper-related visits and harvest of furbearers occurring on the refuge is not available.

Availability of Resources

Adequate refuge personnel and base operational funds are available to manage subsistence activities at existing and projected levels. Over 500 staff days and \$250,000 are typically spent managing this activity on an annual basis. Activity-related tasks are primarily conducted by the subsistence coordinator, lead refuge biologist, refuge officer/pilots, refuge information technician, refuge manager, deputy refuge manager, and assistant refuge manager. Management primarily includes conducting wildlife and public use surveys and monitoring, conducting harvest surveys in the local communities, and participating in the regulatory development process with the Federal Subsistence Board and Alaska Boards of Fisheries and Game.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use

Subsistence activities at current levels, in accordance with established federal regulations, do not appear to be resulting in significant long-term adverse impacts to natural resources. State and federal biologists monitor fish and game populations, and state and federal regulatory bodies continually respond to management needs by adopting regulations to ensure the continued health of fish and wildlife populations.

Impacts to habitat caused by subsistence users accessing refuge resources via aircraft, snowmobiles, boats, and foot are generally minimal. Much of the access by subsistence users is by motorboat, thereby causing very little impact to refuge habitat. Snowmobile use occurs in the winter when there is adequate snow cover to prevent impacts to vegetation and soils. Aircraft landings on the refuge by subsistence users are relatively few and occur primarily on existing gravel bars and large water bodies. There is the possibility of the illegal use of off-road vehicles (other than snowmachines), and subsequent damage to habitat as well as the likely increase in subsistence harvest. Another potential impact may be the introduction of invasive plant and animal species.

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Subsistence activities and harvest are monitored. If harvest levels rise significantly in the next ten years, or adverse impacts to fish and wildlife populations or habitats are documented, it may be necessary to review this compatibility determination.

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 subsistence activities on refuge lands, except the use of cabins is regulated by permit and is addressed under a separate compatibility determination. Refuge staff will monitor subsistence activities, and findings from these monitoring efforts will be used to determine what additional management actions, if any, are needed to ensure subsistence activities remain compatible with refuge purposes and in compliance with ANILCA.

Justification

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One of the purposes of the refuge, as established by ANILCA, is to provide the opportunity for continued subsistence uses by local residents, consistent with the other refuge purposes of conserving fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity and fulfilling international treaty obligations with respect to fish and wildlife. ANILCA recognized that the continued opportunity for subsistence uses of public lands is critical to physical, economic, traditional, social and cultural existence of rural Native and non-Native residents of Alaska. ANILCA established a preference for subsistence users, stating that the taking of fish and wildlife on public lands for nonwasteful subsistence use is given priority over other consumptive uses; in times of scarcity, recreational use is limited first. Section 811 of ANILCA ensures that subsistence users can access public lands by snowmobile, motorboat, and other traditionally used means of transportation, subject to reasonable regulation.

In conclusion, current subsistence activities occurring on the refuge contribute to one of the purposes of the refuge while not materially interfering with or detracting from the other purposes of the refuge or the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Mandatory 10-Year Reevaluation Date: May 2017

This compatibility determination is a reevaluation of an existing use that facilitates wildlife-dependent, priority public uses and other refuge uses. The use 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.

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)
- Alaska Region Fuel Storage Policy, US Fish and Wildlife Service, 1997
- Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 (as amended)
- Compatibility Determination, Subsistence Cabins, 23 July 1994
- Compatibility Determination, Uses (includes aircraft landings, boating, camping, natural resource collection, subsistence activities, and trapping) allowed by the 1987 Yukon Flats NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan, 19 July 1994

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- Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement and Wilderness Review, Yukon Flats NWR, 29 December 1987
- 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
- Section 810 (ANILCA) Evaluations (Civilian Aircraft Landings), Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, 23 July 1994
- Section 810 (ANILCA) Evaluations (Subsistence Cabins and Trapping Cabins), Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, 2004
- Subsistence Management for Federal Public Lands in Alaska, Final Environmental Impact Statement, Record of Decision signed 2 April 1992

Refuge Determination

Refuge Manager /
Project Leader Approval: _____
(Signature) (Date)

Regional Chief,
National Wildlife
Refuge System: _____
(Signature) (Date)