

RECORD OF DECISION  
YUKON FLATS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE  
Comprehensive Conservation Plan,  
Environmental Impact Statement,  
and Wilderness Review

This Record of Decision is based on the Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, and Wilderness Review (Plan) for the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge dated October 1987. It also considers comments from the public received during the public review period for the draft Plan and comments received on the final Plan. The Plan describes five alternatives for managing Yukon Flats Refuge and the effects of implementing each of these alternatives. An alternative reflecting current management is included as one of the management strategies (Alternative A, the Current Situation). The other alternatives reflect a broad spectrum of management emphasis.

It is my decision to select Alternative D, the Preferred Alternative, as described in the final Yukon Flats Refuge Plan, for implementation. This alternative proposes 650,000 acres (8% of the refuge) in the White-Crazy Mountains for wilderness designation.

The determination of impacts on subsistence is found in the Environmental Consequences chapter of the plan, and is in accordance with Section 810 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. In order to implement some aspects of this Record of Decision, the Service may prepare regulations governing resource protection in Yukon Flats Refuge for public review. If this occurs, the regulations will be published in a proposed form and public hearings will be conducted in the vicinity of the refuge to solicit public comment prior to regulation finalization.

12/29/87

Date

Walter D. Stieglitz

Regional Director

Attachments

ATTACHMENT B  
To the Record of Decision for the  
Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge  
Comprehensive Conservation Plan

To address concerns about the final Yukon Flats Refuge Plan that were discussed at the November 24, 1987, Alaska Land Use Council Meeting, the following letter is hereby made a part of the Yukon Flats Record of Decision. The letter provides clarification of the Regional Director's rationale for signing this Record of Decision.

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Gentlemen:

At its November 24 meeting, the Alaska Land Use Council voted to endorse the preferred alternative of the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan/Environmental Impact Statement/Wilderness Review with a recommendation for inclusion in the Record of Decision.

That recommendation, made by the State, requested that the Fish and Wildlife Service withdraw the portions of the Yukon Flats wilderness recommendation which are adjacent to State land. The State wants assurance that adequate seismic studies to determine oil and gas potential in the area can be done. Because such studies would involve both State and refuge land, the State is concerned that wilderness designation of that portion of the refuge will prevent a comprehensive assessment of oil and gas potential.

While I appreciate the concern of the State and the Council members who supported the recommendation, I do not see this wilderness proposal as presenting a major problem. First of all, it is still a proposal. There would be no prohibition on seismic studies between now and the time Congress designates it as Wilderness if Congress chooses to do so. Second, as stated on pages 122 and 138 of the final plan, Section 1010 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act allows seismic studies in designated wilderness areas when they are conducted by or for Department of Interior agencies. For these reasons, I agree with the preferred alternative, including the wilderness proposal, and will sign the Record of Decision which implements it.

I appreciated, and found helpful the debate related to the plans at the Council meeting. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Original Signed By  
Walter O. Stieglitz

Regional Director

cc: Council Members  
Land Use Advisors Committee

## SUMMARY

This document is the final comprehensive conservation plan, environmental impact statement, and wilderness review (CCP/EIS/WR) for the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. It describes five alternatives for managing the refuge and identifies the possible consequences of implementing these alternatives. Each alternative provides broad policy guidance for managing the refuge. Each alternative also identifies lands suitable for wilderness designation.

The Yukon Flats Refuge encompasses approximately 8,480,000 acres of federal lands and an additional 2,696,000 acres of selected and conveyed lands in east central Alaska. Extending 220 miles east-west along the Arctic Circle, the refuge lies between the Brooks Range (to the north) and the White-Crazy Mountains (to the south). The Trans-Alaska pipeline corridor runs along the refuge's western boundary while the eastern boundary extends to within 30 miles of the Canadian border. The Yukon River bisects the refuge, creating the dominant terrain features of the refuge. The refuge is roughly divided into three physiographic zones: riparian and wetlands (48 percent of the refuge); uplands (29 percent of the refuge); and mountains (23 percent of the refuge). Water, in the form of lakes, ponds, sloughs, and streams, is a dominant feature of the refuge landscape. A total of 147 bird, 39 mammal, and 24 fish species occur or potentially occur on the refuge.

Congress established the Yukon Flats Refuge in 1980 when it enacted the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). Section 302(9)(B) of ANILCA sets forth the following major purposes for which the Yukon Flats Refuge was established and shall be managed:

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

## PLANNING PROCESS

The first step in developing a comprehensive conservation plan for the Yukon Flats Refuge was to collect information. Field inventories, remote sensing, and literature searches produced information about refuge resources

and uses. Public meetings, workshops, and other means were used to learn of what people were concerned and what they felt should be done on the refuge. All available information was then analyzed with the help of resource specialists from several agencies and the private sector, to identify special values, problems, and issues as required by ANILCA.

Special values of the refuge which were identified during the planning Process include: the White Mountains, the Yukon River and its tributaries, the Yukon Flats, the Black River country and its lynx habitat, and the overall size and configuration of the refuge which includes several entire watersheds.

Seven potential problems affecting fish and wildlife resources were identified for the Yukon Flats Refuge: development and use of extensive refuge inholdings; development and use of lands adjacent to the refuge; the lack of data on wildlife populations, habitats, and their uses; fire suppression and its effects on fish and wildlife habitats; water pollution problems on Birch Creek; management of migratory fish populations; and difficulties in managing the refuge with current staffing and funding levels.

Issues of concern to the public included: access and transportation; trapping; hunting and fishing on the refuge; management of refuge habitats; predator control; fire and its impacts on wildlife; the need for cabins; cutting of trees for various uses; wilderness designation of refuge lands; recreational use of the refuge; private inholdings; mining and its effects on the refuge; oil and gas development; and management of the refuge.

#### Public Comments on the Draft CCP/EIS

The Draft Yukon Flats Comprehensive Conservation Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (CCP/EIS) was made available for public review and comment early in September, 1985. A ninety day review was established. Following a restatement of the Service's policy on oil and gas exploration and leasing on National Wildlife Refuges in Alaska, a supplement to the Draft CCP/EIS was prepared and made available for public review in early December, 1985. The comment period was extended for an additional sixty days at this time. During the comment period the Service received 58 written comments from local, state, and federal agencies, industry, local interests, conservation groups, and other interested parties and individuals.

Two rounds of public meetings were held in the seven local communities - Beaver, Birch Creek, Chalkyitsik, Circle City, Fort Yukon, Stevens Village, and Venetie. The first round of meetings was used to present an overview of the Draft CCP/EIS to the local residents. The second round of meetings gathered public comments on the Draft CCP/EIS. An additional meeting was held in Fort Yukon which brought together representatives from all the local communities to discuss the draft plan. In addition to these public meetings, formal public hearings were held in Fairbanks on January 7, 1986 and in Anchorage on January 9, 1986. A total of 57 people attended the second round of village meetings; 19 people (including representatives from all seven local communities) attended the Fort Yukon meeting; and 32 people attended the two public hearings with 11 people presenting oral testimony.

Public comments on the draft plan are important because they provide an indication of the public's wishes regarding overall management of the refuge and its resources. The comments provide valuable guidance to the Service as it determines how to best manage the resources which it holds in public trust. The ultimate decision on how the refuge will be managed remains with the Service, taking into account the refuge purposes, as well as existing laws, regulations, and Service policies.

After a 30-day waiting period following publication of the final CCP/EIS, the Service will issue a Record of Decision and will begin implementing the selected alternative.

### Implementation and Revision of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan

Implementation of the proposed actions in this plan will depend on the availability of funds and personnel and the coordination of many governmental activities and agencies. These factors will determine the extent of development, management, and maintenance the refuge receives in any given year. Following adoption of the plan, the Service will, as necessary, undertake detailed "management planning" to guide implementation of the plan and operation of the refuge. In accordance with Service policy, detailed management plans will be prepared to address specific resource and public use management activities such as wilderness, fire, habitat, wildlife, fisheries, and recreation management.

The Yukon Flats Refuge CCP/EIS provides broad policy guidance for managing the refuge over the next 10 to 15 years. It should be viewed as a dynamic document, requiring periodic review and updating. Every three to five years the Service will review public comments, local and state government recommendations, staff recommendations, and research studies, among other sources, to determine if revisions to the plan are necessary. If major plans are proposed, public meetings may be held, or new environmental assessments/ environmental impact statements may be necessary. Full review and updating of the plan will occur every 10 to 15 years, more often if necessary.

### COMMON MANAGEMENT DIRECTIONS

Management of the refuge under any alternative is governed by federal and state law, Service policy, and principles of sound resource management--all of which restrict the range of potential activities. Accordingly, certain management directions must be implemented in all the management alternatives for the Yukon Flats Refuge. These common management directions include:

- o coordinating management with other resource management agencies and cooperating with owners of refuge inholdings and adjacent lands;
- o studying possible land exchanges and cooperative agreements that would ensure consistent management and protect fish and wildlife habitats;
- o working with the village corporations on the use and development of village lands;
- o cooperating with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and other agencies in collecting data on waterfowl, fish, and big game species, public use, and other topics that are of management concern;
- o cooperating with the ADF&G in ensuring that fish and wildlife populations and habitats necessary to conserve natural diversity are maintained;
- o ensuring that water quality and quantity, air quality, and visual resources are protected in compliance with federal and state laws and regulations;

- o ensuring that all significant historic, archeological, paleontological, and cultural resources on the refuge are protected and managed in accordance with federal and state laws;
- o cooperating with ADF&G and other agencies in ensuring that subsistence opportunities are maintained by assessing potential impacts of proposed uses or activities, conducting research, enforcing regulations, and monitoring fish and wildlife populations and uses;
- o ensuring, in compliance with Title XI of ANILCA, the use of snowmachines (during periods of adequate snow cover), motorboats, airplanes, and non-motorized surface transportation methods for traditional activities on refuge lands and for travel to and from homesites, subject to reasonable regulation;
- o maintaining opportunities for wildlife and wildlands recreational activities on the refuge;
- o providing reasonable access to the refuge so visitors can participate in wildlife and wildlands related activities; and
- o allowing oil and gas exploration, including seismic surveys, throughout the refuge, subject to a determination of compatibility with refuge purposes and consistency with management objectives.

#### ALTERNATIVES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The following section briefly describes the alternatives and the potential environmental impacts that could result from their implementation. Each of the alternatives designates areas within the refuge using management categories described later in this document. All the alternatives comply with existing laws, regulations, and Service policies.

#### ALTERNATIVE A The Current Situation

Alternative A, the "no action" alternative, would maintain the existing range and intensity of management actions and recreational and economic uses which now occur on the Yukon Flats Refuge. It represents what now exists, depicting the current level of refuge management being carried out by the Service on the Yukon Flats Refuge. All refuge lands are (and would continue to be) managed under the minimal management category. It is assumed that existing laws, executive orders, regulations, and policies governing Service administration and operation of the National Wildlife Refuge System would remain in effect.

Maintenance of the natural diversity of fish and wildlife populations and habitats on the refuge is a primary objective of current management. The impacts of management activities and public (subsistence and recreational) and economic uses on these populations and habitats are minimized. Ongoing studies of fish, wildlife, and their habitats would continue. Fish and wildlife populations are managed in cooperation with ADF&G. No habitat is currently

being manipulated, although the Service has prepared a prescribed burning plan for the refuge in order to improve moose habitat, to return a portion of the habitat to an earlier vegetational state, and to reduce hazardous fuel loadings. Public and economic uses of the refuge would continue to be allowed using existing access methods. Opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other recreational use, for subsistence resource harvest, and for scientific research would be maintained. No oil and gas leasing would be allowed on the refuge now, although oil and gas studies, including seismic, would be allowed where site-specific stipulations can be designed to ensure compatibility with refuge purposes and consistency with management objectives set forth in the CCP.

The pristine conditions and fish and wildlife values found on the refuge would be maintained, but no refuge lands would be protected by potential designation as wilderness.

### Management Directions

The following management directions summarize Alternative A:

- o maintain the refuge in a basically undeveloped state;
- o emphasize the maintenance of the refuge's natural diversity and key fish and wildlife populations and habitats;
- o maintain traditional access opportunities;
- o provide opportunities for continued subsistence use of refuge resources;
- o maintain opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities;
- o permit the continuation of current economic activities;
- o maintain current management of the Beaver Creek National Wild River (as per approved management plan); and
- o propose no areas of the refuge for wilderness designation.

### Environmental Consequences of Alternative A

#### Vegetation

- o Successional changes primarily from wild and prescribed fire, flooding, and oil and gas exploration.

#### Fish and Wildlife

- o All species and habitats protected to preserve natural diversity.
- o Changes in populations and habitats would result primarily from natural fluctuations and increasing human population and associated activities.
- o Set back in plant succession from wildfire, flooding, and limited activities currently occurring would benefit some species.

#### Water Quantity and Quality

- o No appreciable change from current conditions.

#### Social Conditions

- o Negligible change in traditional lifestyles anticipated.

#### Economic Conditions

- o No significant change from current conditions.

#### Recreational Use

- o Slight growth in recreational use would occur, primarily the result of regional population growth.

#### Subsistence Management

- o Current opportunities for participation in traditional activities by local residents would be maintained.

#### Environmental Consequences of the Wilderness Proposal (No areas proposed)

#### Wilderness Values

- o Negligible effects on wilderness values expected under this alternative.

#### Prescribed Burning

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on prescribed burning on the refuge. Although not planned under this alternative, prescribed burning would be allowed throughout the refuge, including in designated wilderness.

#### Commercial Timber Harvest

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on the level of commercial timber harvest on the refuge. Commercial timber harvest would not occur under Alternative A as all refuge lands would be managed under the minimal management category. Commercial timber harvest is not allowed under minimal management.

#### Mineral Development

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on mineral development on the refuge. Only limited mining activity with negligible impacts is currently occurring and no new mining claims can be filed on the refuge under Section 304(c) of ANILCA.

#### Oil and Gas Exploration, Leasing, and Development

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on oil and gas exploration, leasing, and development on the refuge. Oil and gas exploration can occur throughout the refuge; oil and gas leasing could occur in the future, if it is determined to be in the national interest and to be compatible with refuge purposes (plan revision required).

### ALTERNATIVE B

Alternative B would permit the highest level of economic development and habitat manipulation of the five alternatives considered. Oil and gas studies would be permitted throughout the refuge and leasing and associated activities may be allowed on 68 percent of the refuge, an area which encompasses most of the refuge identified as having moderate potential for oil and gas, where site-specific stipulations can be designed to ensure compatibility with refuge purposes and consistency with management objectives set forth in the CCP. Habitat manipulation, including mechanical and water level manipulation (intensive and moderate) and timber management (intensive only), could occur. Fish and wildlife populations and habitats could be altered as a result of

increased development and habitat manipulation activities allowed under this alternative, although stipulations and mitigation measures would be employed to minimize impacts. Recreational use of the refuge would also be encouraged, with areas of the refuge open for development of public use facilities if the demand exists. Subsistence opportunities, though generally maintained throughout the refuge, could be altered by the increased economic and recreational use occurring in some areas of the refuge. No proposal for designating areas of the refuge as wilderness would be made.

In this alternative, all refuge lands would be placed in one of three management categories - intensive, moderate, or minimal management. Two areas of the refuge would be designated for intensive management - an area south of the communities of Birch Creek and Fort Yukon and an area encompassing most of the Black River country south and east of Chalkyitsik. About 22 percent of the refuge would be in intensive management.

Moderate management would be the designation for most of the remaining land included in the area identified as having a moderate geologic potential for oil and gas (Banet 1987). This area extends from the Porcupine-Kaltag fault north of the Yukon and Porcupine rivers southward into the uplands adjacent to the White-Crazy Mountains and includes the remainder of the Black River country. This category includes 46 percent of the refuge.

Approximately 32 percent of the refuge, much of it in the Hodzana Highlands, would remain under minimal management in this alternative. These areas would continue to receive a high level of protection in this alternative.

#### Management Directions

Alternative B shares the following management directions with Alternative A (the Current Situation). Alternative B would:

- o maintain much of the refuge in a basically undeveloped state;
- o emphasize the maintenance of the refuge's natural diversity and key fish and wildlife populations and habitats;
- o maintain traditional access opportunities;
- o provide opportunities for continued subsistence use of refuge resources;
- o maintain opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities;
- o permit the continuation of current economic activities;
- o maintain current management of the Beaver Creek National Wild River (as per approved management plan); and
- o propose no areas of the refuge for wilderness designation.

The following management directions indicate the major differences between Alternative B and Alternative A. Alternative B would:

- o provide opportunities for oil and gas leasing and development, if compatible with refuge purposes, on approximately 68 percent of refuge (approximately 1,880,000 acres in intensive management and 3,910,000 acres in moderate management);
- o provide opportunities for habitat manipulation (other than prescribed burning) on approximately 68 percent of the refuge; and
- o provide opportunities for commercial timber harvest on approximately 68 percent of the refuge.

## Environmental Consequences of Alternative B

### Vegetation

- o Set back in plant succession would result from oil and gas exploration and leasing, timber harvest, mining, and prescribed burning.
- o Localized long-term loss of productivity due to development.

### Fish and Wildlife

- o Moderate impacts to species and habitats in areas of development, impacts minimized by regulating use.
- o Over 75% of refuge's wetland habitat could be adversely affected if oil and gas leasing occurs with resulting impacts on waterfowl, fisheries, and other wildlife.
- o Set back in succession from prescribed fire, timber harvest, mining, oil and gas exploration, and other allowed activities would benefit some species.
- o Minor localized loss of habitat from development.
- o Increasing recreational use and potentially improved access could result in higher harvest of resources.
- o Increase in bear/human conflicts.

### Water Quantity and Quality

- o Major long-term impacts to water quality and quantity would occur locally as a result of oil and gas development and other activities on the refuge; only minor long-term impacts refuge-wide.

### Social Conditions

- o Significant impacts to traditional lifestyles could result from increasing economic development on and public use of the refuge and potentially from improved access.

### Economic Conditions

- o Increased employment opportunities.
- o Significant local/regional economic growth could occur.

### Recreational Use

- o Increase in recreational use of the refuge would occur, although this increase would not be significant.

### Subsistence Management

- o Opportunities for participation in traditional activities would be maintained.
- o Year-round conflicts between users would increase.
- o More competition for resources would occur.

## Environmental Consequences of the Wilderness Proposal (no areas proposed)

### Wilderness Values

- o Both short and long-term impacts to wilderness values could result from oil and gas exploration, leasing, and development activities, mining, and other allowed activities, although impacts would be localized.

#### Prescribed Burning

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on prescribed burning on the refuge. Prescribed burning would be allowed throughout the refuge, including in designated wilderness.

#### Commercial Timber Harvest

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on the level of commercial timber harvest on the refuge. Commercial timber harvest could occur on 68% of the refuge under this alternative, although only limited harvest would be anticipated (20 acres annually).

#### Mineral Development

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on mineral development on the refuge. Only a limited number of claims currently exist on the refuge and no new mining claims can be filed on the refuge under Section 304(c) of ANILCA.

#### Oil and Gas Exploration, Leasing, and Development

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on oil and gas exploration, leasing, and development. Exploration activities would be allowed throughout the refuge and 68% of the refuge would be open for leasing and development under this alternative.

### ALTERNATIVE C

Alternative C emphasizes the protection of fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their present state on the refuge, but would provide for a limited amount of development activity to occur on the refuge. Oil and gas studies, including seismic activities, may be allowed throughout the refuge and oil and gas leasing may be allowed on an area of the refuge encompassing the central portion of the Yukon oil and gas basin (26 percent of the refuge) where site-specific stipulations can be designed to ensure compatibility with refuge purposes and consistency with management objectives set forth in the CCP. Mechanical, chemical, and water level manipulation could occur on areas of the refuge under moderate management. A significant portion of the refuge would be managed in the minimal management category, but none of the refuge would be recommended for designation as wilderness. Subsistence harvest opportunities would be maintained throughout the refuge, as would recreational opportunities.

In Alternative C, refuge lands would be placed in either of two management categories - moderate management or minimal management. The moderate management category, which accounts for 26 percent of the refuge, encompasses the central portion of the Yukon oil and gas basin (from the south bank of the Yukon and Porcupine rivers southward into the upland area - to approximately the 1,000 foot elevation line). The remainder of the refuge (74 percent) would be managed under the minimal category. A significant area of the refuge, therefore, would continue to receive a high level of protection in this alternative.

#### Management Directions

Alternative C shares the following management directions with Alternative A (the Current Situation). Alternative C would:

- o maintain much of the refuge in a basically undeveloped state;
- o emphasize the maintenance of the refuge's natural diversity and key fish and wildlife populations and habitats;
- o maintain traditional access opportunities;
- o provide opportunities for continued subsistence use of refuge resources;
- o maintain opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities;
- o permit the continuation of current economic activities;
- o maintain current management of the Beaver Creek National Wild River (as per approved management plan); and
- o propose no areas of the refuge for wilderness designation.

The following management directions indicate the major differences between Alternative C and Alternative A. Alternative C would:

- o provide opportunities for oil and gas leasing and development, if compatible with refuge purposes, on approximately 26 percent of refuge (approximately 2,240,000 acres in moderate management);
- o provide opportunities for habitat manipulation (other than prescribed burning) on approximately 26 percent of the refuge; and
- o provide opportunities for commercial timber harvest on approximately 26 percent of the refuge.

#### Environmental Consequences of Alternative C

##### Vegetation

- o Set back in plant succession would result from oil and gas exploration and leasing, timber harvest, mining, and prescribed burning.
- o Localized long-term loss of productivity due to oil and gas development and timber harvest.

##### Fish and Wildlife

- o Moderate impacts to species and habitats in areas of development, impacts minimized by regulating use.
- o 30 to 40% of the wetland habitats on the refuge could be adversely affected if oil and gas leasing occurs with resulting impacts on waterfowl, fisheries, and other wildlife.
- o Set back in succession from prescribed fire, timber harvest, mining, oil and gas exploration, and other allowed activities would benefit some species.
- o Minor localized loss of habitat from development.
- o Increasing recreational use and potentially improved access could result in higher harvest of resources.
- o Increase in bear/human conflicts.

##### Water Quantity and Quality

- o Major long-term impacts to water quantity and quality would occur locally as a result of oil and gas leasing and development and timber harvest; only minor long-term impacts refuge-wide.

##### Social Conditions

- o Significant impacts to traditional lifestyles could result from increasing economic development on the refuge and some increases in public use.

#### Economic Conditions

- o Increased employment opportunities.
- o Significant local/regional economic growth could occur.

#### Recreational Use

- o Increase in recreational use of the refuge would occur, although this increase would not be significant.

#### Subsistence Management

- o Opportunities for participation in traditional activities would be maintained.
- o Year-round conflicts between users would increase.
- o More competition for resources would occur.

#### Environmental Consequences of the Wilderness Proposal (no areas proposed)

##### Wilderness Values

- o Both short and long-term impacts to wilderness values could result from oil and gas exploration, leasing, and development activities, mining, and other allowed activities, although impacts would be localized.

##### Prescribed Burning

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on prescribed burning on the refuge. Prescribed burning would be allowed throughout the refuge, including in designated wilderness.

##### Commercial Timber Harvest

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on the level of commercial timber harvest on the refuge. Commercial timber harvest could occur on 26% of the refuge under this alternative, although only limited harvest would be anticipated (20 acres annually).

##### Mineral Development

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on mineral development on the refuge. Only a limited number of claims currently exist on the refuge and no new mining claims can be filed on the refuge under Section 304(c) of ANILCA.

##### Oil and Gas Exploration, Leasing, and Development

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on oil and gas exploration, leasing, and development. Exploration activities would be allowed throughout the refuge and 26% of the refuge would be open for leasing and development under this alternative.

#### ALTERNATIVE D The Preferred Alternative

Alternative D would maintain the existing range and intensity of management and recreational and economic uses on the Yukon Flats Refuge. As in Alternative A, it is assumed that existing laws, executive orders, regulations, and policies governing Service administration and operation of the National Wildlife Refuge System would remain in effect.

Under this alternative, all refuge lands would be placed in the minimal management category. This category would provide for maximum protection of the natural diversity of fish and wildlife populations and habitats that occur on the refuge. Disturbance of fish and wildlife habitats and populations would be minimized. Public and economic uses of the refuge would continue to be allowed using existing access methods. Opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other recreational use, for subsistence resource harvest, and for scientific research would be maintained. No oil and gas leasing would be allowed on the refuge now, although oil and gas studies, including seismic, would be allowed where site-specific stipulations can be designed to ensure compatibility with refuge purposes and consistency with management objectives set forth in the CCP.

The pristine conditions and fish and wildlife values found on the refuge would be maintained. The minimal management category provides the basis for the Service's recommendation for future designation as wilderness. Under Alternative D, eight percent of the refuge (in the White-Crazy mountains) would be recommended for wilderness designation and could receive the added protection of management under the Wilderness Act.

#### Management Directions

Alternative D shares the following management directions with Alternative A (the Current Situation). Alternative D would:

- o maintain the refuge in a basically undeveloped state;
- o emphasize the maintenance of the refuge's natural diversity and key fish and wildlife populations and habitats;
- o maintain traditional access opportunities;
- o provide opportunities for continued subsistence use of refuge resources;
- o maintain opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities;
- o permit the continuation of current economic activities; and
- o maintain current management of the Beaver Creek National Wild River (as per approved management plan).

The following management directions indicate the major differences between Alternative D and Alternative A. Alternative D would:

- o propose the White-Crazy Mountains along the refuges southern boundary for designation as wilderness (8 percent of the refuge, some 650,000 acres).

#### Environmental Consequences of Alternative D

##### Vegetation

- o Successional changes primarily from wild and prescribed fire, flooding, oil and gas exploration, and mining.

##### Fish and Wildlife

- o All species and habitats protected to preserve natural diversity.
- o Changes in populations and habitats would result primarily from natural events (wildfire and flooding), prescribed fire, oil and gas exploration, mining, and limited growth in public use.
- o Set back in plant succession from natural events, prescribed fire, oil and gas exploration, and mining would benefit moose.

#### Water Quantity and Quality

- o No appreciable change from current conditions refuge-wide or over the long term.

#### Social Conditions

- o Negligible impacts to traditional lifestyles.

#### Economic Conditions

- o Negligible increase in local economy if wilderness designation occurs.

#### Recreational Use

- o Slight increase in use levels if wilderness designation occurs.

#### Subsistence Management

- o Current opportunities for participation in traditional activities would be maintained.

#### Environmental Consequences of the Wilderness Proposal (8% of refuge proposed)

##### Wilderness Values

- o Proposal would help maintain wilderness values on 600,000 acres.
- o Both short and long-term impacts to wilderness values could result from oil and gas exploration and placer mining, although impacts would be localized.

##### Prescribed Burning

- o The wilderness proposal (8% of the refuge) would have no effect on prescribed burning on the refuge. Prescribed burning would be allowed throughout the refuge, including in designated wilderness.

##### Commercial Timber Harvest

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on the level of commercial timber harvest on the refuge. Commercial timber harvest could not occur under Alternative D as all refuge lands would be managed under the minimal management category (commercial timber harvest not allowed). The area proposed for wilderness designation is not an area where timber harvest would occur, so no opportunities for future harvest would be lost.

##### Mineral Development

- o The wilderness proposal would have no effect on mineral development on the refuge. Only a limited number of claims currently exist on the refuge (none in the area proposed for designation) and no new mining claims can be filed on the refuge under Section 304(c) of ANILCA.

##### Oil and Gas Exploration, Leasing, and Development

- o The wilderness proposal would preclude leasing on 8% of the refuge; leasing would not be allowed at this time on other areas of the refuge, but could occur in the future if in the national interest and compatible with refuge purposes.
- o Exploration activities could occur throughout the refuge, but would be limited in wilderness areas.

## ALTERNATIVE E

Alternative E would maintain the existing range and intensity of management and recreational and economic uses on the Yukon Flats Refuge. As in Alternative A, it is assumed that existing laws, executive orders, regulations, and policies governing Service administration and operation of the National Wildlife Refuge System would remain in effect.

Under this alternative, all refuge lands would be placed in the minimal management category. This alternative would provide for maximum protection of the natural diversity of fish and wildlife populations and habitats that occur on the refuge. Disturbance of fish and wildlife habitats and populations would be minimized. Public and economic uses of the refuge would continue to be allowed using existing access methods. Opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other recreational use, for subsistence harvest, and for scientific research would be maintained. If designated as wilderness, the refuge would be closed to oil and gas leasing. Oil and gas studies that require motorized equipment would not be allowed in designated wilderness except as provided for in Section 1010 of ANILCA.

The pristine conditions and fish and wildlife values found on the refuge would be maintained. The minimal management category provides the basis for the Service's recommendation for future designation as wilderness. Under Alternative E, all of the refuge (8.48 million acres) would be recommended for wilderness designation and could receive the added protection of management under the Wilderness Act.

### Management Directions

Alternative E shares the following management directions with Alternative A (the Current Situation). Alternative E would:

- o maintain the refuge in a basically undeveloped state;
- o emphasize the maintenance of the refuge's natural diversity and key fish and wildlife populations and habitats;
- o maintain traditional access opportunities;
- o provide opportunities for continued subsistence use of refuge resources;
- o maintain opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities;
- o permit the continuation of current economic activities; and
- o maintain current management of the Beaver Creek National Wild River (as per approved management plan).

The following management directions indicate the major differences between Alternative E and Alternative A. Alternative D would:

- o propose all refuge lands for designation as wilderness (approximately 8.48 million acres).

### Environmental Consequences

#### Vegetation

- o Successional changes primarily from wild and prescribed fire, flooding, and oil and gas exploration.

#### Fish and Wildlife

- o Maximum protection of all species and habitats to preserve natural diversity with wilderness designation.
- o Changes in populations and habitats would result primarily from natural events (wildfire and flooding), prescribed fire, oil and gas exploration, mining, and limited growth in public use.
- o Set back in plant succession from natural events, prescribed fire, oil and gas exploration, and mining would benefit moose.

#### Water Quantity and Quality

- o No appreciable change from current conditions refuge-wide and over the long term.

#### Social Conditions

- o Negligible impacts to traditional lifestyles.

#### Economic Conditions

- o Negligible increase in local economy if wilderness designations occur.

#### Recreational Use

- o Slight increase in use over current levels if any wilderness designation occurs.

#### Subsistence Management

- o Current opportunities for participation in traditional activities would be maintained.
- o Negligible increase in competition if wilderness designations occur.

#### Environmental Consequences of the Wilderness Proposal (100% of refuge proposed)

##### Wilderness Values

- o Proposal would help maintain wilderness values throughout refuge.
- o Both short and long-term impacts to wilderness values could result from oil and gas exploration and placer mining, although impacts would be localized.

##### Prescribed Burning

- o The wilderness proposal (100% of the refuge) would have no effect on prescribed burning on the refuge. Prescribed burning would be allowed throughout the refuge, including in designated wilderness.

##### Commercial Timber Harvest

- o Although commercial timber harvest would not be allowed under this alternative, designation of the entire refuge as wilderness would preclude all potential for future commercial timber harvest on the refuge.

##### Mineral Development

- o The wilderness proposal would have negligible effect on mineral development on the refuge. Only a limited number of claims currently exist on the refuge and no new mining claims can be filed on the refuge under Section 304(c) of ANILCA.

#### Oil and Gas Exploration, Leasing, and Development

- o The wilderness proposal would preclude leasing on all of the refuge as leasing is not permitted in designated wilderness without Congressional approval.
- o Exploration activities could occur throughout the refuge, but would be limited in wilderness areas.

#### SECTION 810 EVALUATION

Implementation of Alternative D, the Service's preferred alternative, would not result in a significant restriction of subsistence uses. Implementation of Alternative A (the current situation) and Alternative E would also not result in a significant restriction of subsistence uses. Implementation of Alternative B and Alternative C would result in significant impacts to refuge resources and increasing numbers of users, thus potentially resulting in significant restriction of subsistence activities on the refuge.

#### SELECTION OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The Service has selected Alternative D as its preferred alternative for managing the Yukon Flats Refuge, believing that it would satisfy the purposes of the refuge and that it provides a balanced approach to meeting the needs and concerns of the public. The Service would carefully monitor and regulate all uses and activities which would occur on the refuge to minimize potential adverse impacts to refuge resources in this alternative.

The selection of Alternative D as the preferred alternative is tentative. The Service will not finalize its recommendation until affected local, state, and federal government agencies, industry, local interests, conservation groups, and other interested parties and individuals have had a chance to review and comment on the proposed plan. Depending on the comments received, the Service's preferred alternative could change in varying degrees.