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Kenai Winter Access

Record of Decision



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Kenai Winter Access

Record of Decision

USDA Forest Service, Region 10 Chugach National Forest Seward Ranger District

This Record of Decision (ROD) documents my decision concerning winter access on the Seward Ranger District. I have selected the Modified Preferred Alternative described in the Kenai Winter Access Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). Through this decision I am also approving a non-significant amendment to the Chugach National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan of 2002 (Forest Plan). This decision is based upon: the FEIS, the Forest Plan, the Forest Plan Record of Decision (ROD), and the FEIS for the Forest Plan. In addition, this decision is shaped through extensive public participation in the planning process. A map depicting this is included as an appendix to this decision.

Background

On May 31, 2002, the Record of Decision for the Chugach National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan was signed. The closure of the Carter Crescent Lakes area to winter motorized activities was an issue in many of the Chugach National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan appeals. Upon review of the appeals, the Regional Forester withdrew that portion of his decision closing the area to winter motorized access and asked the Forest to take another look at this closure and possible alternatives to ensure fair consideration and disclosure with all potentially affected parties. It is with this direction that the Kenai Winter Access analysis was initiated.

Winter activities and recreation are both traditional lifestyle and valued uses of National Forest System lands on the Kenai Peninsula because of its accessibility, proximity to communities, topography, and recreation infrastructure. In particular, the Seward Ranger District provides outstanding opportunities for winter recreation activities, including: snowmachining, cross-country skiing, ice skating, backcountry skiing, and snowshoeing. In addition, the Seward Ranger District has many opportunities for natural quiet and winter rural lifestyle activities such as firewood gathering, ice fishing, and hunting.

Although the Seward Ranger District offers valuable winter recreation opportunities across a large landscape, motorized and non-motorized winter activities are not always compatible. Often this is because of different experiences sought and, in cases, different values held by motorized and non-motorized users. On the Kenai Peninsula, this is further compounded because mountainous topography often confines a mix of activities into valley bottoms and non-forested areas with abundant snow. This decision is necessary in order to address both motorized and non-motorized activities, address user safety, and create opportunities for a range of interests on the Seward Ranger District.

This decision has been shaped by extensive public collaboration. In February 2004 community meetings were held across the Kenai Peninsula and in Anchorage to discuss winter access in the Carter Crescent Lakes area. At these meetings strong views were expressed “that the agency needed to take a Kenai-wide look at the issue and not just a focused solution to the Carter Crescent area” to allow for more flexibility in a decision to manage winter motorized and non-motorized access. Based on this public interest, the Chugach National Forest began an effort to establish a framework for a community based problem solving approach, through a series of workshops hosted in many rural communities and Anchorage. Through these workshops, more than 18 citizen designed scenarios were developed as approaches to address the diversity of views and interests on winter access and recreation. With these ideas and a volume of written input, open interdisciplinary team meetings were held throughout Kenai Peninsula communities.

From these combined efforts, alternatives were established and analyzed in a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), distributed in March of 2006. After the distribution of the DEIS, another round of collaborative workshops were held to seek insights as to how effective the DEIS alternatives were in striking the correct balance of interests, views, and perspectives brought together through the previous workshops and written input. Again, excellent feedback was received and used to further refine alternatives. Based on this feedback the agency produced a Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement (SDEIS) incorporating, into a preferred alternative, citizen input on the DEIS. The SDEIS was distributed in the late fall of 2006 with the public comment period closing December 12, 2006.

My decision is significantly shaped from the extensive information given by the many citizens who contributed their time, knowledge of the area, and collaborative spirit to find creative solutions to management of their National Forest. My decision strikes a delicate but important balance of desire, interest, and opportunity. In each planning unit, significant review of citizen interests has been incorporated striving to address a blend of non-motorized, motorized, lifestyle, and natural quiet opportunities across the Seward Ranger District.

Decision

The decision I am making is to select the Modified Preferred Alternative as described in the FEIS. My decision establishes a mix of winter activities on the Seward Ranger District that respond to public demand for these activities. In addition, this decision will also assure that rural communities retain connections to traditional lifestyle activities.

This decision will continue to provide for winter motorized activities across 61% of the Seward Ranger District. This decision will also set aside 21% of the Seward Ranger District for non-motorized winter recreation. The remaining 18% of the Seward Ranger District will be managed under a Season A/Season B scenario.

The following describes the key elements of my decision:

Key Features

Non-motorized Areas – My decision will increase non-motorized areas primarily in the Summit, Russian, Snow River, and Tiehack/Mt Alice units from current conditions. There will be 41 miles of trail in designated non-motorized areas.

Motorized Areas – My decision will designate the entirety of the Carter/Crescent, Hope, and Ptarmigan/Grant and the majority of the Lost Lake, Johnson Pass, and Tern Lake units for motorized use. There will be 120 miles of trail in designated motorized areas.

Season A/Season B Scenario – This management scenario only applies to the Resurrection and West Resurrection units. This scenario alternates motorized and non-motorized use in the Resurrection and West Resurrection units annually, generally from December 1 through April 30. That is, one year, Resurrection and West Resurrection would be motorized from December 1 through April 30; the following year, both units would be non-motorized. Fifty-five miles of trail are located in the Resurrection and West Resurrection units.

In the season that Resurrection and West Resurrection are motorized, there will be a total of 175 miles of trail designated for motorized use and a total 41 miles of trail designated for non-motorized use. In the next season, there will be a total of 120 miles of trail designated for motorized and a total of 96 miles of trail designated for non-motorized use. The Resurrection and West Resurrection units will be motorized for the 2007/2008 season and non-motorized for the 2008/2009 season, continuing to alternate each year.

Access Corridors – My decision will allow, and the FEIS discloses, the environmental consequences of the development of two new non-motorized access corridors, one in the Carter/Crescent unit and one in the Lost Lake unit. The access corridor in the Carter/Crescent unit would begin at the Trail River Campground Access Road and continue west along Kenai Lake and then north through Crescent Saddle. The access corridor in the Lost Lake unit would run

along the east side of Lost Creek from the southern tip of the non-motorized area to the Grouse Lake area. An easement from the State would be required for the Lost Lake corridor.

This decision will designate a motorized access corridor in the Snow River unit along the South Fork of the Snow River to the Nellie Juan area. The Snow River route would be generally along the river bottom. Where the river braids, the boundary would be the outside edge of the river.

Trail River Campground – Trail River Campground will be designated non-motorized; however, motorized grooming will be allowed.

Motorized Community Access

My decision will provide for motorized use on portions of National Forest System lands in the Tern Lake, Russian, and Summit units in order to allow for motorized access between the communities of Cooper Landing and Moose Pass. This will provide opportunities for motorized access between these two communities and will also allow for motorized access to the Sterling "Y" and Summit Lake from these communities.

Helicopter Skiing – The exploratory area in the Snow River unit will not be available for commercial helicopter guided skiing permits. The exploratory area in Ptarmigan/Grant unit will be available for commercial helicopter guided skiing.

Unit Descriptions

Hope

This unit will be motorized.

Resurrection

This would be part of the Season A/Season B scenario, with the West Resurrection unit, described above.

West Resurrection

This would be part of the Season A/Season B scenario, with the Resurrection unit, described above.

Summit

The entire west side would be designated non-motorized, except for narrow strips of land along the highway corridor.

On the east side, the non-motorized area includes all drainages from and including the Tenderfoot Creek drainage north to the Hope Y. This includes all of the Mills Creek drainage and the upper portion of the Silver Tip Creek drainage. Motorized use areas include all drainages south of the Tenderfoot Creek drainage to the southern unit boundary.

Johnson Pass

The majority of this unit is designated open for winter motorized use. The Johnson Pass Trail is designated for motorized use and Trail Creek could provide an alternate winter motorized route to access the Nellie Juan area. The southeastern portion of the Center Creek drainage is designated non-motorized; however, helicopter skiing will be allowed. The Center Creek drainage is 10% of the Johnson Pass unit.

Tern Lake

The following areas will be designated motorized:

- The slope north of Upper Trail Lake from the Seward Highway to where Trail Creek joins Upper Trail Lake.
- A corridor along the Seward Highway from the northwest end of Upper Trail Lake to the Sterling "Y."
- Both sides of the Sterling Highway from Tern Lake to the Crescent Creek Campground, which includes the Old Sterling Highway.
- The narrow strip between the power line and the Seward Highway from Devil's Creek Trail to Slate Creek.
- The entire east side of the Seward Highway from Tern Lake to Summit Lake.

The following areas will be designated non-motorized:

- The area west of the Seward Highway and the power line from Devils Creek Trail through and including the Summit Creek drainage.

Russian

The designated non-motorized area will include the Russian River drainage from the Upper Russian cabin north to the Sterling Highway and all the land between the Russian River and Cooper Creek/Cooper Lake. Motorized use will be allowed between Cooper Creek/Cooper Lake and the State land along Kenai Lake and south of the Russian Lakes Trail from Upper Russian Lake to Cooper Lake. The Russian Lakes trail will be designated winter motorized. The Russian Lakes trail will be the boundary of the non-motorized portion.

Carter/Crescent

This entire unit will be designated open for winter motorized use. It includes the lands north of Kenai Lake to the southern boundary of the Tern Lake unit. The eastern boundary is the Seward Highway.

Ptarmigan/Grant

This entire unit will be designated open for winter motorized use. The unit boundaries are the railroad on the north, the north boundary of the Snow River unit to the south, the Seward Ranger District boundary on the east, and the Seward Highway and State lands to the west. Helicopter guided skiing can be permitted in the deferred exploratory area of the Ptarmigan/Grant unit.

Lost Lake

The majority of this unit will remain designated motorized. There are two designated non-motorized areas: the Black Mountain Research Natural Area and all National Forest System lands within the Grayling, Meridian, and Long Lake drainages west of the Seward Highway. The non-motorized southern boundary starts at the northern quarter corner of Section 24, T 2N, R 1W and traverses westerly to the steep side slopes at approximately the 1,500 foot elevation. The western boundary then traverses along the steep side slopes, northerly at the 1,500 foot location to Primrose Creek. Primrose Creek is the northern boundary. The Primrose Trail, Primrose Road, Primrose Campground, and the Seward powerline adjacent to the Seward Highway will be designated motorized.

Snow River

The entire North Fork will be designated non-motorized except immediately around Upper Paradise Lake. Helicopter guided skiing will not be permitted in this unit. For the South Fork, the existing non-motorized area will be expanded to include the southwest and west slopes of Paradise Peak, as well as the entire lower half of the South Fork of the Snow River drainage. A motorized access corridor will be designated along the south side of the South Fork of Snow River to provide winter motorized access to Godwin Glacier and the Nellie Juan area.

Tiehack/Mt Alice

The existing non-motorized area (the western slopes of Tiehack Mountain) will be expanded south to include the northwest part of Mt Alice. The Godwin Glacier and icefields to the north of the South Fork of Snow River will be designated motorized.

Cabins

Motorized users will have access to 15 cabins in Season A and 5 cabins in Season B. Non-motorized users may access all of the cabins at any time. However, there will be non-motorized access to 3 cabins in Season A and 12 cabins in Season B. The table below displays the cabins that will be available for motorized and non-motorized access in each geographic unit as a result of this decision.

Area Name	Cabin	Season A		Season B	
		Motorized	Non-Motorized	Motorized	Non-Motorized
Resurrection	Caribou Creek	✓			✓
	Fox Creek	✓			✓
	East Creek	✓			✓
	Devils Pass	✓			✓
	Swan Lake	✓			✓
	West Swan Lake	✓			✓
	Juneau Lake	✓			✓
	Romig	✓			✓
	Trout Lake	✓			✓
Russian	Barber		✓		✓
	Aspen Flats		✓		✓
	Upper Russian	✓		✓	
C-C	Crescent	✓		✓	
	Crescent Saddle	✓		✓	
Lost Lk.	Dale Clemens	✓		✓	
Snow	Lower Paradise		✓		✓
	Upper Paradise	✓		✓	

Rationale for the Decision

In making this decision, I considered many factors, including extensive public input, the effects analysis in the FEIS, and the goals, objectives, and desired conditions for the Kenai Peninsula described in the Forest Plan. I felt that community engagement and citizen involvement were particularly important in reaching this decision because winter recreation opportunities and experiences are largely dependant upon the desires and values of the user. Additionally, winter access plays an important role in the rural lifestyles of those whose homes are surrounded by National Forest System lands.

I feel that a successful winter access management plan must respond to those values and make use of the knowledge of those who use the Seward Ranger District for winter activities and recreation. The public involvement in this planning process also improves our knowledge and understanding of current and traditional winter activities on the Seward Ranger District by helping identify where recreation use is occurring, what areas are valued for motorized and non-motorized uses, and whether there are opportunities for better winter recreation access management. I feel that the public involvement for this project was critical and has allowed me to reach the best decision possible.

Through collaborative learning workshops and formal public comment, the Forest Service and the public developed alternatives that reflect different winter recreation values and opportunities. This process helped refine our alternatives to arrive at the best possible mix of these values and opportunities. The DEIS Proposed Action incorporated public input to provide separate high quality areas for motorized and non-motorized recreation, restrict motorized uses in the majority of the Summit unit, provide a Season A/B scenario for the Resurrection and West Resurrection units, and expand the existing motorized closure in the Grayling and Meridian Lakes portion of the Lost Lake unit.

Public comment and input from the May 2006 public meetings on the DEIS indicated that further improvements could be made, particularly with respect to management of the Snow River unit. The SDEIS Preferred Alternative closed the majority of the Snow River unit to motorized use, in favor of a motorized access corridor to Nellie Juan area. In addition, the SDEIS Preferred Alternative closed the Snow River unit to helicopter skiing. The FEIS Modified Preferred Alternative built on public comment on the SDEIS, particularly in the Summit unit. In this unit, the Modified Preferred Alternative expands the non-motorized area and eliminates the motorized corridor to improve the backcountry skiing experience in this unit.

I have selected the Modified Preferred Alternative. Although this decision will not completely satisfy all users, I feel it provides for a diversity of values and preferences, expressed through the collaboration of many, and will meet the need for winter access and recreation on the Seward Ranger District. Through this decision, I feel I have provided the best mix of recreation opportunities and experiences on the Seward Ranger District. The following sections describe how this decision meets Forest Plan direction and responds to issues.

How the Decision meets the Kenai Winter Access Project Purpose and Need

This decision best meets the purpose and need of the Kenai Winter Access project and responds to the following Forest Plan goals, objectives, desired conditions, and issues identified through interdisciplinary team analysis and public collaboration and comment:

1. Emphasize motorized opportunities on the Kenai Peninsula, while establishing areas for non-motorized winter opportunities.

The Forest Plan provides the overall direction for winter recreation management on the Chugach National Forest. On the Kenai Peninsula, including the Seward Ranger District, the Forest Plan emphasizes non-motorized opportunities in the summer and motorized opportunities in the winter. Although motorized uses are emphasized in the winter, the Forest Plan ROD recognizes that separate winter non-motorized areas are also important and necessary on the Kenai Peninsula.

My decision designates 61% of the Seward Ranger District for motorized recreation, 21% for non-motorized recreation, and 18%, the Resurrection and West Resurrection units, for motorized recreation in alternating seasons. Several high value and historically motorized units will remain motorized, including the Lost Lake unit, the Snow River access corridor, and the Carter/Crescent unit. In addition, this decision devotes the majority of the Summit and Russian units to non-motorized use. The Summit and Russian units provide high value non-motorized recreation opportunities, including large basins, frozen lakes, and opportunities for natural quiet recreation.

This decision will provide 120 miles of trail for unrestricted motorized recreation and 41 miles of trail for non-motorized recreation, including two new non-motorized access corridors. Fifty-five miles of trail in the Resurrection unit will alternate seasonally between motorized and non-motorized recreation. In addition, this decision allows for five cabins to always be available for motorized access, three cabins to be available for non-motorized access, and nine cabins, in the Resurrection and West Resurrection units, to be available on an alternating season basis.

This decision best meets the Forest Plan desired conditions on the Kenai Peninsula to emphasize motorized recreation, while still providing areas for non-motorized recreation where motorized sounds are not present. The Lost Lake, Snow River, and Carter/Crescent units have been historically open to motorized use and many motorized users have commented on the importance of keeping these areas open to motorized use. The Summit and Russian units provide large contiguous areas where non-motorized use can occur largely without motorized sounds, especially in the portions of these units that are further away from the highway. The Resurrection and West Resurrection units will be part of an annual swap between motorized and non-motorized users and will allow for non-motorized use every other season, including nine cabins and 55 miles of trail. Given the desired conditions for the Kenai Peninsula, I feel that this decision keeps large key units open to motorized use while also providing many quality areas and opportunities for non-motorized recreation.

2. Maintain quality settings for motorized recreation opportunities

The Seward Ranger District is recognized as possessing some of the most outstanding motorized recreation opportunities on the Kenai Peninsula. This

decision ensures that quality motorized recreation opportunities will continue to be available on the Seward Ranger District.

This decision will allow for unrestricted motorized use on important trails that allow for motorized access into high value motorized recreation areas, including scenic alpine areas, valleys, and basins. Under this decision, the Lost Lake trail, Carter Lake trail, Snow River winter access route to the Nellie Juan area, and the Johnson Pass Trail will be open for motorized use. The Resurrection Pass trail would be open to motorized use for the entire winter season every other year, instead of being closed to motorized use after February 15 each year, allowing motorized users to take advantage of increased daylight and spring snow conditions.

This decision will allocate 61% of the Seward Ranger District to unrestricted motorized use, including the Carter/Crescent unit, Lost Lake unit, Johnson Pass unit, and the Snow River winter access route. I felt that it was particularly important to allow unrestricted motorized access in the Carter/Crescent unit, Lost Lake unit, Johnson Pass unit, and the Snow River winter access corridor because these units have been historically motorized and public input indicates that communities have grown to rely and particularly value motorized access in these areas. Further, the motorized access corridor along the South Fork of the Snow River unit will remain motorized in order to provide traditional access into the Nellie Juan area.

In addition, this decision will allow unrestricted motorized access in the Hope and Ptarmigan/Grant units and will increase the amount of terrain available for winter motorized use in the Tern Lake unit from existing conditions. Although public comment did not indicate that these units were particularly valuable or were destination points for motorized recreation, allowing motorized access to these units is consistent with desired conditions to emphasize winter motorized opportunities on the Seward Ranger District.

3. Maintain quality settings for non-motorized recreation opportunities

It is also important that my decision ensure that high quality areas are also available for non-motorized use. Public comment indicates that there is a strong desire for separate high quality non-motorized winter recreation areas where motorized sounds and snowmachines are not present. In addition, analysis and public comment indicated that there were opportunities to improve non-motorized opportunities on the Seward Ranger District.

My decision will prohibit motorized use in the majority of the Russian unit and on all National Forest System lands north of Tenderfoot Creek in the Summit unit. Public comment indicated that the Summit unit is highly valued as a backcountry skiing unit and the Russian unit provides excellent opportunities for cross-country skiing and quiet recreation. Setting aside these units for non-motorized use is important because they provide large contiguous areas for cross-country and

backcountry skiing and also provide areas where motorized sounds and snowmachines are not present.

In addition, this decision will largely prohibit motorized use in the Snow River and Tiehack/Mt. Alice units. Setting aside these units for non-motorized uses will provide a non-motorized area near the community of Seward. I recognize that these areas will not consistently provide the solitude or quiet recreation to the extent that the Russian and Summit units can provide. However, the Snow River motorized access corridor will not always be usable by motorized users because ice bridges are only stable for a portion of the season. During the times when ice bridges do not allow access, the Snow River unit receives little motorized use and largely provides a quiet high quality non-motorized experience.

Opportunity for Quiet Recreation

Through public comment and collaboration, I recognize the importance of natural quiet to achieving a quality non-motorized recreation experience. I recognize that the opportunity for natural quiet is affected by the presence of motorized uses, including snowmachines, helicopters, and vehicle traffic on the Seward and Sterling Highways. I feel this decision will provide several opportunities for natural quiet.

The Russian and Summit units are large contiguous non-motorized areas that extend far enough away from the highway to provide quiet recreation experiences. In addition, portions of the Tiehack/Mt. Alice unit can also provide for a quiet recreation experience. Further, during the years when the Resurrection and West Resurrection units are closed to motorize use, the Resurrection Pass Trail can provide for a quiet recreation experience.

In order to enhance quiet opportunities, I have also decided not to allow helicopter skiing in the Snow River unit. I recognize that when snow conditions allow for snowmachine use of the Snow River motorized corridor, that a quiet recreation experience may not always be attainable in the Snow River unit. However, conditions do not always allow for motorized use of the Snow River motorized corridor, particularly later in the season when ice bridges are not present and daylight is more prevalent. During these times, this unit can also provide a large area for quiet recreation.

Cabins

I recognize that Forest Service public use cabins are an important component of winter recreation for both motorized and non-motorized users because they provide opportunities for an overnight experience. Although non-motorized users can access any cabin they wish at any time, public comment indicates that many non-motorized users do not use Forest Service cabins in motorized areas due to concerns with noise and/or safety. In addition, some non-motorized users indicate that trail conditions in motorized areas, particularly on Resurrection Pass Trail, do not lend themselves to non-motorized use because of moguls and ice.

My decision will allow for a more equitable use of Forest Service public use cabins by devoting three cabins, Barber, Aspen Flats, and Lower Paradise, to non-motorized access. My decision will also allow for unrestricted motorized access to five cabins: Dale Clemens, Crescent, Crescent Saddle, Upper Russian, and Upper Paradise.

In addition, this decision will use a Season A/Season B management scenario for the Resurrection and West Resurrection units, which contain the majority of the Forest Service public use cabins and overnight recreation opportunities. During Season A, nine cabins will be available for both motorized and non-motorized recreation in the Resurrection and West Resurrection units. During Season B, nine cabins will be available for non-motorized uses. The Season A/Season B management scenario will also eliminate undesired trail conditions that occur under split season management.

Shared Use

This decision recognizes that separating motorized and non-motorized use within units and on trails will reduce safety concerns and potential recreation conflicts. This decision will provide two non-motorized corridors, one in the Lost Lake unit and one in the Carter/Crescent unit, to separate trail use in these areas. This will allow both motorized and non-motorized users an access corridor into each unit. Separating motorized and non-motorized uses in these units will reduce the number of encounters between motorized and non-motorized users and reduce safety concerns.

In addition, the Summit unit is closed on National Forest System lands on the west side of the Seward Highway to all motorized uses north of the southern ridge above Tenderfoot Creek. This will reduce the potential for encounters between motorized and non-motorized users because motorized uses would only be permitted on State lands adjacent to the Seward Highway and along the road right-of-way. In the Snow River unit, there is potential for encounters between motorized and non-motorized users when snow conditions allow for snowmachine use of the South Fork of the Snow River. However, conditions do not always allow for motorized use of the Snow River motorized corridor, particularly in the later season when ice bridges are not present. During these times, snow conditions will largely separate users.

Wildlife

My decision recognizes that winter recreation has the potential to affect wildlife. I also recognize that motorized recreation can have greater effects on individual animals than non-motorized uses. However, population effects on wildlife are similar across all alternatives, despite differences in the percent of the project area allocated to motorized uses.

In addition, in the Forest Plan ROD the Regional Forester prescribed forestwide standards and guidelines and management area prescription standards and guidelines specific to Brown Bear, Mountain Goat, Dall sheep, and Raptors. The Forest Plan ROD states that adhering to these standards and guidelines will maintain viable populations of existing native and desired non-native vertebrate species in the project area. My decision is consistent with these Forest Plan standards and guidelines and reduces winter motorized access in the project area by 11% compared to existing conditions. In addition, the analysis in the FEIS does not indicate that any alternative will have population effects. Therefore, I am comfortable that this decision will not impair wildlife population viability.

Other Issues and Resources

In addition to the above, the FEIS for the Kenai Winter Access project analyzes the effects of the alternatives on economics, cultural resources, soils, water, riparian and wetland resources, air quality, ecology, and fisheries resources. Although considered in the FEIS analysis, the FEIS indicates that the alternatives will have a minimal or negligible effect on these resources. For example, effects to vegetation across all alternatives are negligible because of snow cover and effects to air quality and fisheries resources are negligible across all alternatives because winter recreation is generally dispersed. In addition, the effects across all alternatives on economic activity are relatively small as the majority of economic activity occurs during the spring and summer. Although considered, my decision is not expected to have any meaningful effects on these resources.

Public Involvement

Public involvement was critical to this decision. Winter access for rural communities and winter recreation opportunities and experiences are largely dependant upon the desires and values of the user. A successful winter access and recreation management plan should respond to the values of those who use the Seward Ranger District for traditional winter activities and winter recreation. In this project we adopted a collaborative learning approach to:

- help identify where recreation use is occurring;
- understand community winter access issues;
- improve our knowledge and understanding of winter recreation activities;
- determine what areas are valued for motorized and non-motorized uses;
- identify winter recreation issues;
- develop alternatives; and,
- determine whether there are opportunities for better winter recreation and access management.

The Kenai Winter Access project was first published on the Chugach National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) in the third and fourth quarters of 2004 and the first quarter of 2005 as the Carter/Crescent EA (Environmental Assessment) and in all subsequent issues as the Kenai Winter Access EIS. The

SOPA is updated quarterly and distributed to approximately 300 interested parties.

In February 2004, several hundred scoping letters were mailed to individuals, government agencies, and groups, and five listening sessions, specific to the Carter/Crescent Lakes unit, were held in Anchorage, Seward, Cooper Landing, Moose Pass, and Soldotna. Over 130 letters were received in response to these efforts. Many of the letters received during this scoping period, as well as comments offered at the open house meetings, suggested that winter recreation could be more effectively managed if the Forest Service increased the size of the project area to include the entire Seward Ranger District. I agreed, and felt that increasing the size of the project area would allow for more creative management options such as timing, shared-use, or alternating seasons and would provide opportunities to improve winter recreation management beyond the Carter/Crescent unit.

On February 23, 24, and 26, 2005, a series of 3-hour collaborative learning workshops were held in Moose Pass, Seward, Soldotna, and Anchorage. On March 30 and 31, and April 2, 2005, a second round of 6-hour collaborative workshops was held in Soldotna, Anchorage, and Seward. To announce these workshops, the Forest used public service announcements, news releases, news advertisements, and flyers. In addition, about 82 letters were mailed to attendees of the first workshops. More than 150 citizens participated in one or more of the three workshops, developing 18 citizen-based scenarios with maps for addressing winter recreation access across the Seward Ranger District.

After these workshops, a Notice of Intent (NOI) was published in the Federal Register on April 23, 2005. The NOI asked for public comment through May 25, 2005, although comments were accepted well beyond that date. In addition, six open houses were held May 23 through 25, 2005 in Anchorage, Seward, Girdwood, Moose Pass, Cooper Landing, and Soldotna to provide an update on the progress of the project.

On April 21, 2006, the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Kenai Winter Access project was made available for comment. Over 170 comments and 1,000 form letters were received from individuals and organizations during the comment period. In May, four additional collaborative learning workshops were held in Anchorage, Moose Pass, Soldotna, and Cooper Landing to discuss the DEIS. After hearing public comment from these workshops, the comment period on the DEIS was ultimately extended until June 12, 2006.

After considering the discussion during the collaborative workshops and public comment on the DEIS an additional alternative was developed. A SDEIS disclosing the effects of that alternative was made available for comment on October 21, 2006. Over 100 comments were received on the SDEIS.

In addition to public scoping, comment periods, and collaborative meetings, the Forest Service also conducted three ANILCA 1110 hearings in Soldotna, Cooper Landing, and Hope in April 2007. The purpose of these hearings was to elicit testimony on the effects of an alternating season (Season A/Season B) management scenario of the Resurrection Pass Trail. In addition to these hearings, written comments were also accepted until April 30, 2007.

The FEIS has been filed with the Environmental Protection Agency and is available for public review.

Alternatives Selected for Detailed Evaluation

Five alternatives are analyzed in the FEIS, including a No-Action Alternative and the Modified Preferred Alternative. The five alternatives differ in the number and size of units and miles of trail available for winter motorized recreation use, the number of Forest Service public use cabins available to each group, and whether helicopter skiing would be allowed in the Ptarmigan/Grant and Snow River units. Listed below is a description of the alternatives that were not selected and the reasons they were not selected.

- **No Action.** The No Action Alternative is the existing direction in the Revised Forest Plan, except for the Carter/Crescent unit. Due to withdrawal of the portion of the decision related to the Carter/Crescent unit in the Revised Forest Plan, current management direction for that unit reverted to the 1984 Forest Plan, which left that unit open for motorized use.

The majority of the Resurrection and West Resurrection units are a part of the seasonal changeover from motorized use to non-motorized use on February 16 of each year. The Seward Ranger District land base would be designated 71% motorized, 11% non-motorized, and 17% in the Resurrection and West Resurrection seasonal changeover.

I did not choose the No Action alternative because it does not best meet the need for winter access and recreation on the Seward Ranger District. In addition, public comment indicated that there were opportunities for better management of winter recreation. The No Action alternative did not adequately provide for quality non-motorized opportunities. Important areas to non-motorized users in the Summit, Russian, Snow River, and Tiehack/Mt. Alice units were open to motorized use. The majority of these units were not particularly valued or used by motorized users. The No Action Alternative also did not provide for annual sharing of the Resurrection and West Resurrection units which was considered to benefit both motorized and non-motorized users and did not provide for designated trail access corridors to reduce conflicts and safety concerns in the Lost Lake and Carter/Crescent units.

- **Alternative 1.** Alternative 1 creates a Season A/Season B management scenario between the Resurrection and Carter/Crescent units, alternating closing the Carter/Crescent and Resurrection units to motorized use every other year. All other units would be either permanently motorized or non-motorized during the winter season. The entire Russian and West Resurrection units would be non-motorized along with considerable increases in non-motorized areas in several other units. Lost Lake would be mostly motorized, similar to the No-Action Alternative.

I did not choose Alternative 1 because it does not fully respond to the purpose and need of the project and desired conditions, which in large part is to emphasize motorized opportunities and maintain key winter motorized access where it is currently occurring on the Kenai Peninsula. Alternative 1, which alternates the Resurrection and West Resurrection units with the Carter/Crescent unit, restricts motorized uses in the Carter/Crescent unit which is historically important and commonly used for winter motorized recreation. In addition, Alternative 1 does not provide a motorized access corridor in the Snow River unit which has been historically used for motorized access into the Nellie Juan area.

Further, Alternative 1 does not provide a non-motorized access corridor within the Carter/Crescent and Lost Lake units. Alternative 1 would also allow for helicopter skiing in the Snow River unit, which is contrary to public comment indicating a strong preference to preserve the natural character of the Snow River unit.

- **Alternative 2.** Under Alternative 2, the Resurrection and West Resurrection units would alternate (Season A/Season B) with the Russian, Carter/Crescent, and the northern portion of the Snow River units. The majority of the Summit unit would be non-motorized, while the Tern Lake unit would have more motorized area than in other alternatives.

I did not choose Alternative 2 because it does not fully respond to the purpose and need, desired conditions, or the majority of public comment. Alternative 2 would alternate winter motorized access between the Resurrection units and the Russian, Carter/Crescent, and northern portion of the Snow River units and restrict motorized use in the majority of the Summit unit. This alternative would restrict motorized access in the Carter/Crescent unit, which is a key winter motorized recreation area. In addition, Alternative 2 alternates Resurrection with the northern portion of the Snow River unit, which is not particularly valuable to motorized or non-motorized users because of difficult terrain and topography. Further, Alternative 2 does not provide a designated access corridor in the Carter/Crescent or Lost Lake units, which I feel is important to reduce conflicts and safety concerns.

- **Proposed Action.** Under the DEIS Proposed Action, the Resurrection and West Resurrection units would alternate between motorized and non-motorized use on an annual basis. The Carter/Crescent unit would remain motorized while non-motorized areas in Summit, Russian and Tiehack/Mt. Alice units would all increase. The Snow River unit would be motorized, except for the southern slopes along the South Fork of the Snow River.

I did not choose the DEIS Proposed Action because it is not fully responsive to public comment, particularly in the Snow River unit. Public comment indicates that the majority of the motorized use occurs along the South Fork of the Snow River, instead of on the northern and southern slopes. In addition, public comment also indicates that the Snow River unit is highly valued for non-motorized recreation opportunities and its natural character.

Under the DEIS Proposed Action, motorized use would be allowed in the majority of the Snow River unit. While I feel it is important to allow historical motorized access in the Snow River unit, I do not feel that allowing motorized uses in the majority of the Snow River unit is appropriate when only a small portion of this unit is valued for motorized use. In addition, the DEIS Proposed Action proposes a motorized access corridor through the Summit unit between the powerline and the Seward Highway. Public comment indicates that this motorized access corridor is too large and would have a serious adverse affect on non-motorized recreation occurring on the west side of the Seward Highway.

The Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations for implementing NEPA require that the ROD identify “the alternative or alternatives which were considered to be environmentally preferable” (40 CFR §1505.2(b)). This is generally considered to be the alternative that causes the least potential damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative that best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources (CEQ’s “Forty Most-Asked Questions,” 46 Federal Register, 18036, March 23, 1981). All alternatives under consideration have similar effects on the physical and biological environment; including wildlife, economics, heritage, soils, water quality, air, ecology, and fish. Given the similarity in effects on the physical and biological environment, the Modified Preferred Alternative is the environmentally preferable alternative because it best accommodates recreation demand and provides quality winter motorized and non-motorized opportunities on the Seward Ranger District.

Planning Record

The Planning Record for this project includes the DEIS, SDEIS, FEIS, Revised Forest Plan, materials incorporated by reference, and material produced during the environmental analysis. The project record is available for review at the

Chugach National Forest Supervisor's Office in Anchorage, Alaska during regular business hours.

Finding of Non-Significance for Amendment of Forest Plans

Under NFMA, Land and Resource Management Plans (also known as Forest Plans) may be amended after final adoption and public notice. NFMA implementing regulations state: "Based on an analysis of the objectives, guidelines, and other contents of the Forest Plan, the Forest Supervisor shall determine whether a proposed amendment would result in a significant change in the plan." Neither NFMA nor its implementing regulations define the term "significant." Instead, the regulations place full discretion to determine whether a proposed amendment will be significant in the hands of the Forest Service.

Under NFMA and its regulations, an amendment that does not result in a significant change in a Forest Plan must be undertaken with public notice and appropriate NEPA compliance. If a change to a Forest Plan is determined to be significant, the Regional Forester must follow the same procedure required for the development of the Forest Plan, including preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement.

The Land and Resource Management Planning Handbook (Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.12 provides more detailed guidance for exercising this discretion. This guidance offers a framework for consideration but does not demand mechanical application. No one factor is determinative and the guidelines make it clear that other factors may be considered. Section 5.32 of FSH 1909.12 lists four factors to be used when determining whether a proposed change to a Forest Plan is significant or not: 1) timing; 2) location and size; 3) goals, objectives and outputs; and 4) management prescriptions. It also states that "[o]ther factors may also be considered, depending on the circumstances."

The determination of whether a proposed change to a Forest plan is significant depends on analysis of all of these factors. The decision-maker must consider the extent of the change in the context of the entire Plan affected, and make use of the factors in the exercise of his or her professional judgment. The Forest Service has carefully evaluated the proposed management direction and concluded that it does not constitute a significant amendment of the 2002 Revised Forest Plan. Additional information on significance determination can be found in the project record.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Authorities

The Forest Service manages the Chugach National Forest in conformance with many federal laws. In this section I consider each of the major laws involved in this decision.

National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA)

The NEPA requires that federal agencies prepare detailed statements on proposed actions that significantly affect the quality of the human environment. NEPA's requirement is designed to serve two major functions:

1. To provide decision makers with a detailed accounting of the likely environmental effects of a proposed action prior to its adoptions; and
2. To inform the public of, and allow comment on, such efforts.

The Forest has compiled and generated an enormous amount of information relevant to the effects of each of the alternatives considered in the FEIS. Such information builds on the data, analysis, science assessments, and public involvement set forth in the documents prior to this FEIS, including the Forest Plan EIS.

I find that the environmental analysis and public involvement process complies with each of the major elements of the requirements set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality for implementing NEPA (40 C.F.R. §§1500-1508).

First, the FEIS considered a broad range of reasonable alternatives. The five alternatives considered in detail in the FEIS represent only part of the total number of alternatives considered over the course of analysis. Additionally, many options within alternatives were considered. Alternatives presented in the FEIS encompass a broad range of responses to issues and existing Forest Plan direction. Over the course of this analysis, public involvement was a collaborative effort where people had the opportunity to fully participate and develop alternatives, as well as give formal comments on the DEIS and SDEIS.

Second, the FEIS discloses cumulative effects of the alternatives by evaluating relevant past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions in the planning area. Moreover, although non-federal lands are outside the scope of this decision, effects from their use have been considered in the FEIS to a degree appropriate for a NEPA document at this scale.

Third, the FEIS makes use of the best available scientific information. Information on recreation use patterns, preferences of motorized and non-motorized users, and where winter access and recreation use is occurring is the result of public collaboration and Forest Service professional opinion. In addition, the effects of the alternatives on other resources makes use of natural history, habitat requirements, GIS, habitat models and consultation with State and Federal experts. All of these tools, taken together, constitute use of the best available information.

National Forest Management Act (NFMA)

This Forest Plan amendment is consistent with the 1982 NFMA implementing regulations. The authority for using the 1982 regulations is included in the transition provisions of the 2000 regulations, as amended. The 1982 regulations specify a number of requirements that guide Forest Service planning. The Forest Plan Amendment resulting from this decision complies with each of these management requirements, as explained in this ROD.

The implementing regulation calls for fish and wildlife habitat to be managed to maintain viable populations of existing native and desired non-native vertebrate species in the planning area (36 CFR §219.19). Based on the analysis in the FEIS, this decision is not expected to adversely impact the population viability of any wildlife species.

Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA)

ANILCA, Section 810, Subsistence Uses

Section 810(a) of the ANILCA requires that an evaluation of subsistence uses and needs be completed for any federal determination to “withdraw, reserve, lease, or otherwise permit the use, occupancy or disposition of public lands.” On Chugach National Forest System lands, the Forest Plan ROD requires that the use of snowmobiles, motorboats, and other means of surface transportation traditionally employed for subsistence purposes by local residents continue pursuant to ANILCA; and this decision will not limit, in any way, the access of subsistence users to their resources. In accordance with ANILCA 810, I find that this decision will not affect access for subsistence activities on Chugach National Forest System lands or result in a significant possibility of a significant restriction on subsistence use of National Forest System lands.

ANILCA, Section 1110, Special Access and Access to In-holdings

Section 1110(a) states that:

“the Secretary shall permit, on conservation system units, national recreation areas, and national conservation areas, and those public lands designated as wilderness study, 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) and for travel to and from villages and homesites. Such use shall be subject to reasonable regulations by the Secretary to protect the natural and other values of the conservation system units, national recreation areas, and national conservation areas, and shall not be prohibited unless, after notice and hearing in the vicinity of the affected unit or area, the Secretary finds that such use would be detrimental to the resource values of the unit or area.”

Relevant to this decision, the Resurrection Pass National Recreation Trail, the Iditarod National Historic Trail, and the Nellie Juan-College Fiord Wilderness

Study Area are managed under the Forest Plan as conservation system units (CSUs) as defined by ANILCA.

My decision recognizes the direction in the Forest Plan and ANILCA Section 1110 by maintaining shared use of the Resurrection Pass Trail. Since the late 1970s, the Resurrection Pass Trail has been shared between motorized and non-motorized users to reduce conflicts between users in this popular area; with snowmachine use being prohibited after February 15th of each season. My decision will change this prohibition to allow for snowmachine use on the Resurrection Pass Trail for the entire winter season every other year, instead of prohibiting snowmachine use every year after February 15th.

In making this decision, I considered public input from scoping and comment on the DEIS and SDEIS and testimony from the hearings held in Soldotna, Hope, and Cooper Landing. I feel that this decision will allow for more effective shared use of the Resurrection Pass Trail than the previous prohibition because it will allow for snowmachine use of the trail when more daylight is present and will allow non-motorized users more favorable trail conditions than the previous prohibition.

My decision also recognizes Forest Plan direction related to ANILCA Section 1110 by providing a motorized access corridor along the South Fork of the Snow River. This corridor has been traditionally used for unrestricted motorized access into the accessible portions of the Nellie Juan-College Fiord Wilderness Study Area and resource conditions do not indicate that motorized use is detrimental to the resource values of this area.

Endangered Species Act (ESA)

The FEIS indicates that none of the alternatives, including this decision, will have any affect to threatened, endangered, or proposed species.

Clean Water Act

Implementation of this decision is expected to maintain water quality and satisfy all State water quality requirements. This finding is based on information presented in the FEIS.

Clean Air Act

The level of activities proposed under this decision is not anticipated to degrade air quality or violate state implementation plans. This finding is based on information presented in the FEIS.

Flood Plains and Wetlands (Executive Orders 11988 and 11990)

These Executive Orders require federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, short-term and long-term effects resulting from the occupancy and modification of flood plains and the modification or destruction of wetlands. Forestwide standards and guidelines for soil and water, wetlands, and riparian areas are

designed to minimize effects to flood plains and wetlands. They incorporate the Best Management Practices of the Soil and Water Conservation Handbook.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)

This decision will determine winter recreation access on the Seward Ranger District and is not anticipated to cause disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effects to minority or low-income populations.

Civil Rights Laws The Forest Service is committed to equal treatment of all individuals and social groups in its management programs in providing services, opportunities and jobs. Because no actual or projected violation of legal rights to equal protection under the law is foreseen under this decision for any individual or category of people, no civil rights impacts are reported in the FEIS.

Accessibility The Forest Service and its cooperators are required to incorporate access standards into all of the agency's "Federally Conducted" or "Federally Assisted" facilities, programs, services, or activities. This direction is mandated in the following laws and regulations: Architectural Barriers Act of 1968; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 1978; Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title V, section 507) and 7 CFR §15(e). The Chugach National Forest is following the Alaska Region's Regional Accessibility Strategy for recreational programs and administrative sites/facilities.

Implementation

Implementation may occur on, but not before, 7 calendar days from the publication of the legal notice of this decision in the newspaper of record for the Chugach National Forest.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This amendment decision is subject to administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR §217. A written notice of appeal must be filed within 90 days, with the appeal period beginning the day after the day of publication of the Legal Notice in the Anchorage Daily News. The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Reviewing Officer. Written appeals must be submitted to:

Reviewing Officer, Regional Forester
Alaska Region
US Department of Agriculture
709 W. 9th Street
PO Box 21628
Juneau, AK 99802-1628

Appeals may be faxed to the Reviewing Officer at 907-586-7840. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are 8:00 AM to 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), and Word (.doc) to) to appeals-alaska-regional-office@fs.fed.us. The appeal must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals. Please put the project name in the "subject" line.

Appeals must conform to the requirements of 36 CFR 217.9.

I encourage anyone with questions about this decision or the FEIS, to contact the Chugach National Forest Planner in Anchorage, at (907) 743-9500 before submitting an appeal. It may be possible to resolve the concern in a less formal manner.

Contact

If you would like more information on the Revised Forest Plan or the FEIS, please contact:

Sharon Randall
Forest Planner
Chugach National Forest
3301 C Street, Suite 300
Anchorage, Alaska 99503-3998
Telephone (907) 743-9500

Signature and Date



JOE L. MEADE
Forest Supervisor

July 25, 2007
Date

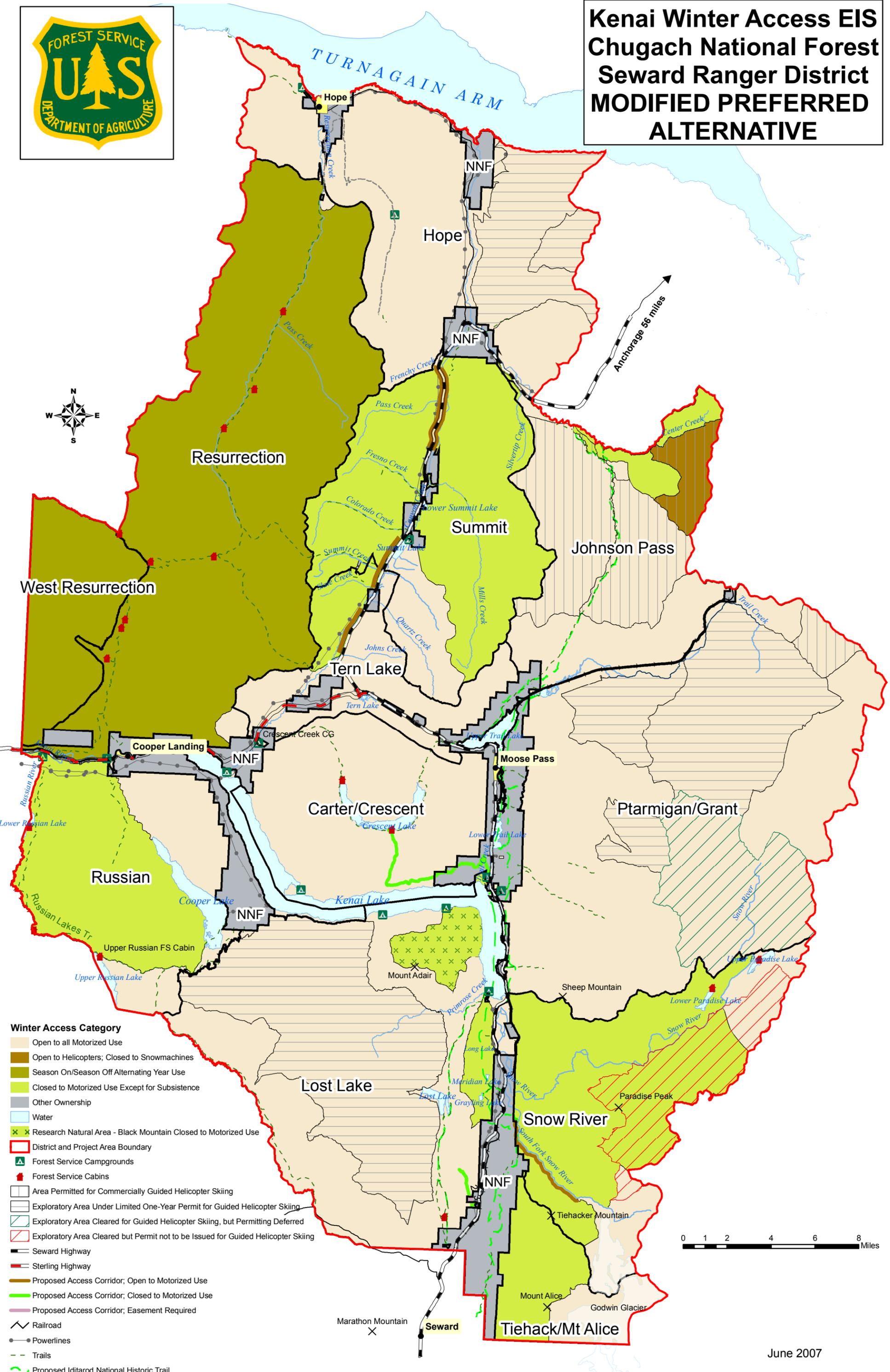
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Appendix A – Map

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Kenai Winter Access EIS Chugach National Forest Seward Ranger District MODIFIED PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE



- Winter Access Category**
- Open to all Motorized Use
 - Open to Helicopters; Closed to Snowmachines
 - Season On/Season Off Alternating Year Use
 - Closed to Motorized Use Except for Subsistence
 - Other Ownership
 - Water
 - Research Natural Area - Black Mountain Closed to Motorized Use
 - District and Project Area Boundary
 - Forest Service Campgrounds
 - Forest Service Cabins
 - Area Permitted for Commercially Guided Helicopter Skiing
 - Exploratory Area Under Limited One-Year Permit for Guided Helicopter Skiing
 - Exploratory Area Cleared for Guided Helicopter Skiing, but Permitting Deferred
 - Exploratory Area Cleared but Permit not to be Issued for Guided Helicopter Skiing
 - Seward Highway
 - Sterling Highway
 - Proposed Access Corridor; Open to Motorized Use
 - Proposed Access Corridor; Closed to Motorized Use
 - Proposed Access Corridor; Easement Required
 - Railroad
 - Powerlines
 - Trails
 - Proposed Iditarod National Historic Trail

