

Kenai Winter Access Management Plan

This document was prepared by Gregg Walker and Steve Daniels. It provides background information that may be useful to participants in public workshops related to the Kenai Winter Access Management Plan. It is divided into three parts: Planning Constraints, Planning Assumptions, and Reference.

I. Planning Constraints

1. The purpose of this project is to provide long-term Forest Plan direction for winter recreation access for the project area. It may result in a Forest Plan Amendment, specifically to the Access Management Plan for methods of public access allowed (see Revised Forest Plan, page B-44) and a change to the Chugach NF Winter Motorized Recreation Access Map.
2. There is a need to determine the appropriate management direction for winter recreation access for the project area, with involvement from all interested parties, to ensure that the site-specific impacts of the various recreation activities in the project area are fully disclosed and that reasonable alternatives are considered. Utilize public input to help determine immediate and future issues and opportunities for quality winter recreation experiences.
3. The project will comply with Forest-wide direction and Management Area Prescriptions defined in the 2002 Revised Forest Plan, and utilize the existing management direction categories for Winter Motorized Recreation Access when designating suitable areas (see Forest Plan, page 4-91 to 4-94).
4. Regional Forester direction is to have a decision that can be implemented for the 2005-06 winter use season.
5. No winter recreation access plan should be put into place if effective compliance and enforcement are not feasible.
6. This project will not address issues on the Seward Ranger District where decisions have already been made such as the case with the Heli-ski EIS (core areas) and the Iditarod NHT EA.
7. This project will not address: (1) outfitter and guide allocations, (2) NFS lands on the Glacier Ranger District, or (3) summer nonmotorized and motorized recreation transportation options such as off highway vehicles (OHVs), motorcycles and mountain bikes (see Forest Plan, page 4-91).

II. Planning Assumptions

Planning assumptions are things the Planning Team believes to be true, and that are likely to have an impact on the outcome.

1. Recreation and tourism is projected to increase in South-central Alaska due to overall population growth (from FEIS, page 1-9).
2. Conflicts over access are most intense on the Kenai Peninsula, which is within an hour's drive of half of Alaska's population and host two-thirds of all visitors to Alaska. Conflicts over access are focused on: (1) Motorized and nonmotorized recreation in the winter and summer, including snowmachining, heli-skiing, cross-country skiing, and natural quiet; (2) Need for additional recreation access in both winter and summer (from FEIS, page 1-10).
3. The Kenai Peninsula offers a classic "Alaskan" experience reasonably accessible to large numbers of people. Every year, hundreds of thousands of residents and tourists are attracted to the Kenai Peninsula by its grand scenery, opportunities for viewing fish and wildlife, a multitude of recreation activities available along its trails, roads and at developed facilities, and world class sportfishing. Recreation activities on the Kenai Peninsula are the most diverse of any of the geographic areas [on the Chugach NF]. In the winter, snowmachining and cross-country skiing are the most popular activities (from FEIS, page 3-304).
4. The overall character of the eastern Kenai Peninsula is essentially wild. The steep mountains, rivers, and glaciers, and a relatively small road and trail system for the size of the land base limit access to many undeveloped backcountry areas. The result is concentrated use in valley bottoms or along corridors where access is available and recreation facilities are located, which has led to major conflicts over access have developed between winter motorized and nonmotorized uses and activities (from FEIS, page 3-304).
5. This planning process includes the opportunity to consider the feasibility of new or expanded areas for winter recreation.
6. Nonmotorized users find motorized users to be more disruptive to their experience than vice-versa. The major factor surrounding the motorized and nonmotorized situation is noise. Other issues raised by nonmotorized users are safety concerns, speed of machines and air pollution in wildland settings, and conditions of snow. Some of these issues simply reflect a core value held by individuals desiring nonmotorized opportunities without the presence of any motorized activities. As motorized uses have expanded, there has been a certain amount of displacement of nonmotorized users from areas traditionally used (from FEIS, page 3-358).
7. Limiting motorized recreational access potentially displaces current snowmachine users and moves them to other areas open on adjacent lands or within the Forest. Much of the half million acre Chugach State Park is closed to motorized access. Snowmobiles are allowed on 5 areas of the park when snow conditions are adequate. Kenai Fjords National Park has limited winter motorized access; the same is true for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge to the west. Limiting access may concentrate more users within areas open on the

Forest and areas adjacent to the Forest or to the north of Anchorage (from FEIS, page 3-376).

8. Limits on motorized access would provide areas for nonmotorized recreation activities (from FEIS, page 3-376).
9. Carter-Crescent provides high quality recreation opportunities to both snowmachine and nonmotorized users. Carter-Crescent Lakes Area is highly valued by individuals and communities for winter recreational opportunities such as ice-fishing, family day-trips, and cabin use.
10. The choices made in Carter-Crescent need to be made in conjunction with winter access management decisions elsewhere on the Kenai to ensure that all user groups have access to high-quality experiences.
11. The Carter and Crescent Lakes area was closed to winter motorized use in response to keeping open the Lost Lake areas (Appeal Response Letter).
12. Approximately 80 percent of [the Kenai Peninsula] is available for motorized winter use. This includes many popular snowmachine areas including Lost Lake, Moose Pass, Twentymile Valley, Place River, Skookum Creek, and Seattle Creek (Appeal Response Letter).
13. The five most desirable areas for high quality nonmotorized opportunities are Twentymile, Resurrection Pass, Johnson Pass, Lost Lake, and the South Fork of Snow River (Appeal Letter).
14. Snowmachines can generally travel farther into the backcountry than skiers in a typical day and thus require larger areas to recreate in; similar to general needs of ATV and motorbike users, focus needs to be given to large trailhead parking areas for trucks and trailers, an outhouse/vault toilet, trailhead information including maps, opportunities for long-distance travel (up to 20 miles), and opportunities for loop trails.
15. It is desirable to separate trailheads for winter motorized and nonmotorized users although they may end up sharing the same trail; that way nonmotorized users do not experience concentrated noise and smoke while snowmobiles are being off-loaded, warmed up and then loaded back on at the end of the day.
16. Parallel trails for motorized and nonmotorized uses can be effective especially from a safety standpoint. If the terrain allows, a nonmotorized trail in the trees or as far away from the snowmobile track as possible is a good idea.
17. Where trails/areas are shared by motorized and nonmotorized users, snowmachiners should be required to slow down when passing skiers/snowshoers and skiers/snowshoers should move to the side of the trail

and allow passing room. There are examples of speed limit restrictions for snowmobiles especially on multiple-use trails.

18. Conflicts can arise among nonmotorized users especially if a ski track is interrupted by a snowshoer. Good examples in Colorado of signs at trailheads saying "Keep tracks separate" and then showing a ski track next to a snowshoe track.
19. Time-sharing/split seasons may address some of the user conflicts. Timing restrictions could include alternating days, weeks, months, or years, but must be feasible for enforcement and compliance. Chugach State Park has a toll-free hotline number you can call to find out which trails/areas are open to what uses. One suggestion in an appeals letter was to allow motorized use (multiple uses) at Carter-Crescent from January 10th to April 10th and the rest of the time it would be closed to winter motorized access.
20. The early-season winter months of November, December and January have minimal daylight hours and can have variable snow conditions depending on the year. The late-season winter months of February, March and April are very popular for both motorized and nonmotorized users because the days are longer, the weather gets a little nicer, and the snow depths are more enjoyable and adequate for resource protection.
21. Nine FS recreation cabins aren't available to winter motorized recreationists after the February 15 motorized closure at Resurrection Pass.
22. In the Draft EIS, the eastern portion of Lost Lake was proposed to have been closed to snowmachining after March 31.
23. Spacing/spatial restrictions will also have to be feasible and properly marked in the field. At Hatcher Pass, a line of fluorescent orange flags (easily visible in low light and adverse winter conditions) spaced about 50 yards apart identifies the split between motorized and nonmotorized use areas.
24. The settlements of Cooper Landing and Hope are designated "rural" for subsistence and can access areas currently closed to winter motorized access (except Primitive areas). Moose Pass does not have a subsistence classification.
25. Some areas on the Forest that are closed to snowmachines are open to helicopters.

III. Reference: Forest Plan Guidance

Forestwide Direction: Goals and Objectives

- ⊙ The Chugach National Forest Revised Forest Plan (Forest Plan) identified Recreational Opportunities, Access and Facilities as one of the major areas of

emphasis to be accomplished through implementation of the RFP (from Forest Plan, pgs 3-1, 3-7 to 3-9).

- ⊙ Improve knowledge and understanding of recreational activity and user information; develop information on recreational activities, patterns of use and key recreational issues (from Forest Plan, page 3-7).
- ⊙ Maintain quality settings for motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities (from Forest Plan, page 3-8).
- ⊙ Provide winter and summer trails and areas for motorized and non-motorized recreation as shown on the Summer and Winter Motorized Recreation Access Maps (from Forest Plan, page 3-8).
- ⊙ Provide a guide to clearly inform winter recreationists of their opportunities and responsibilities to recreate in a manner that minimizes resource damage and user conflicts (from Forest Plan, page 3-8).
- ⊙ Acquire rights-of-way or fee simple title that improve access for motorized recreation opportunities or improve separation between motorized and non-motorized recreation activities (from Forest Plan, page 3-8).
- ⊙ Provide and maintain areas where natural quiet predominates consistent with the management area direction and Recreation Opportunity Spectrum settings (from Forest Plan, page 3-8).
- ⊙ Provide user education, resource interpretation, leave no trace principles, and visitor information through a variety of means both on and off the Forest (from Forest Plan, page 3-9).
- ⊙ Maintain current recreational capacity through the maintenance of existing recreational facilities and trails. Expand recreational capacity by developing new recreational facilities and trails in response to user demands and where appropriate to management area objectives (from Forest Plan, page 3-9).
- ⊙ Maintain the outstanding scenic quality of the Chugach National Forest (from Forest Plan, page 3-9).

Forestwide Direction - Desired Condition - Kenai Peninsula

- ⊙ The Kenai Peninsula geographic area of the Chugach National Forest is managed to accommodate high levels of human use, while maintaining its natural appearing character (from Forest Plan, page 3-14).
- ⊙ During the winter season, snowmachine use and other winter motorized recreation will occur over most of the Kenai Peninsula. However, a number of areas will be closed to winter motorized recreation. These areas will provide nonmotorized opportunities near existing roads, and in a few situations, in basins or larger areas where motorized sounds are not present (from Forest Plan, page 3-15).
- ⊙ Scenery along the Seward Highway All-American Road and other major travel corridors will be managed to maintain the natural appearance of the landscape (from Forest Plan, page 3-15).

- ⊙ Improvements such as bridges, trailheads and parking areas will expand the areas available for winter recreation. Existing cabins will be maintained and new cabins may be constructed to permit longer winter recreation trips (from Forest Plan, page 3-15).
- ⊙ Helicopter access for skiing will occur at appropriate locations (from Forest Plan, page 3-15).

Forestwide Direction – Standards and Guidelines – Air Quality

- ⊙ Comply with state standards for visible and particulate air quality (from Forest Plan, page 3-22).

Forestwide Direction – Standards and Guidelines – General Wildlife

- ⊙ Design and locate facilities or apply seasonal restrictions on human activities when necessary and appropriate to reduce disturbance in important habitat areas, such as birthing areas, nesting areas and winter ranges (from Forest Plan, page 3-28).

Forestwide Direction – Standards and Guidelines – Mountain Goat and Dall Sheep Habitat Management

- ⊙ Locate concentrated human activities away from important wintering, kidding and lambing habitat. A minimum one-mile avoidance distance is recommended but could vary depending on site-specific circumstances as long as these habitats are adequately protected (from Forest Plan, page 3-30).
- ⊙ Forest Service permitted or approved activities such as but not limited to, aircraft flights (fixed-wing and helicopter), heli-skiing, or heli-hiking should maintain a minimum landing distance of $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from all observed mountain goats or Dall sheep. While flying, aircraft will maintain a 1,500-foot minimum vertical distance from all observed goats or sheep. Pilots will use flight paths that avoid mountain goats and their habitat as much as possible. Such flight paths will generally avoid ridge tops (from Forest Plan, page 3-30).

Forestwide Direction – Standards and Guidelines – Raptor Nest Protection Management

- ⊙ There is a minimum 330-foot retention zone around known eagle nest locations. The active bald eagle nesting season is generally from March 1 to August 31 (from Forest Plan, page 3-31).
- ⊙ Protect active goshawk nesting habitat. Prevent continuous disturbance within a 660-foot radius of the nest during the active nesting season (generally March 1 to July 31) (from Forest Plan, page 3-31).
- ⊙ Minimize disturbance within 330 feet of active osprey nesting sites, during the nesting period (from Forest Plan, page 3-31).

Forestwide Direction – Standards and Guidelines – Recreation and Tourism

- ⊙ Management activities will be designed to meet the Scenic Integrity Objective (SIO) as mapped. In no case may the effects of an activity exceed the level of scenic integrity of the lowest SIO in the range (from Forest Plan, page 3-35).
- ⊙ Management activities will be designed to meet the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) class as mapped. In no case may the effects of an activity exceed the setting criteria of the highest ROS class in the range (from Forest Plan, page 3-35).
- ⊙ The winter motorized season is from December 1 through April 30, except in Turnagain Pass, where the season begins the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. The winter motorized season may be extended or shortened by Forest Order in response to snow conditions (from Forest Plan, page 3-35).
- ⊙ Where motorized access is permitted on one side of a ridge, but closed on the opposite side of the ridge, motorized uses may occur on the ridgetop (from Forest Plan, page 3-35).
- ⊙ The maximum noise level for snowmachines is the level expected for factory standard equipment (from Forest Plan, page 3-35).

Forestwide Direction – Standards and Guidelines – Emergency Motorized Access

- ⊙ Emergency motorized access for health and safety purposes is allowed throughout the Forest regardless of management area direction (from Forest Plan, page 3-41).

Forestwide Direction – Standards and Guidelines – Fixed-wing Aircraft

- ⊙ Fixed-wing aircraft will be allowed to land on all suitable lakes, beaches, ice fields, and other areas regardless of management area direction unless closed, by Forest Order, for health, safety or resource protection reasons. A special use permit is required for commercial operations, except air taxis, flying point to point. Special use permits for such commercial operations shall be issued consistent with the management direction for the area of the proposed use (from Forest Plan, page 3-41).

Forestwide Direction – Standards and Guidelines – Access for Subsistence Activities on National Forest System Lands

- ⊙ On federal public lands within the Chugach National Forest, use of snowmobiles, motorboats and other means of surface transportation traditionally employed for subsistence purposed by local residents shall continue as per ANILCA, Sec. 811 (from Forest Plan, page 3-41).
- ⊙ In Conservation System Units, access for traditional activities as defined by ANILCA, Section 1100 shall continue (from Forest Plan, page 3-41).
- ⊙ For purposes of maintaining access to traditional activities consistent with ANILCA, the following areas on the Chugach National Forest shall be managed as if they were Conservation System Units (CSUs): the Wilderness Study Area; areas recommended for Wilderness designation; rivers recommended for Wild, Scenic and Recreational River designation; and, National Recreation Trails (including Resurrection Pass National Recreation Trail and Williwaw National Recreation Trail) (from Forest Plan, page 3-42).

Forest Plan Activities and Outputs – Travel Management – Total Trail Miles, Ten Year Total (under full implementation of the Revised Forest Plan)

- ⊙ Winter [trail] miles available (includes roads closed to highway vehicles):
Motorized – 639 miles; Nonmotorized – 230 miles (from Forest Plan, page 3-49).

Forest Plan – Winter Motorized Recreation Access

- ⊙ The general philosophy in allocating winter motorized recreation access is to open the entire Chugach National Forest for winter motorized recreation activities except where specifically closed . . . to meet the needs of other Forest users and protect resource values (from Forest Plan, page 4-91).
- ⊙ Motorized access for subsistence purposes by rural Alaska residents are allowed throughout the Forest except for the small portion designated as “Primitive Management Area.” (Note: there are no “Primitive Management Areas” in the project area). In areas where recreational motorized access is prohibited, subsistence users are requested to avoid or minimize their use of motorized equipment to help protect the resource values of those areas (from Forest Plan, page 4-91).