



File Code: 1950-1

Date: November 10, 2005

(Sent to the Tribes in Southeast and Southcentral Alaska)

I want to provide information about an upcoming project that will take place on the Chugach and Tongass National Forests. I also want to encourage you to share any thoughts you may have about the proposed work. To best consider your comments in our analysis, please provide them by December 14, 2005.

As part of our forest inventory work, the Forest Service is proposing to allow the use of helicopters to access remote plots in 19 wilderness areas on the Tongass National Forest and one wilderness study area on the Chugach National Forest. The total area encompasses approximately 7.5 million acres. The inventory work will be done by the Pacific Northwest Research Station and is part of a continuing national program called Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA) that takes place on wilderness and non-wilderness lands. The work will not result in ground-disturbing activities.

The first year of the FIA inventory was successfully completed in 2005 and was authorized under a categorical exclusion that allows research and inventory work. Due to continuing concerns about the use of helicopters in wilderness to accomplish the inventory, I have decided to analyze the proposed action and its potential effects in an environmental assessment. This will provide a formal opportunity for public notice and comment.

Research and inventory work is permitted in wilderness. Helicopter access, however, requires special approval. The Wilderness Act permits helicopter access to "meet the minimum needs for protection and administration of the area as wilderness" and "an essential activity is impossible to accomplish by non-motorized means because of such factors as time or season limitations, safety, or other material restrictions." As the Responsible Official, my decision will be whether or not to allow helicopter access to those plots where access is very difficult and safety is a concern. I will also decide what, if any, mitigation is required to minimize the potential impacts of helicopter disturbance to the wilderness resource.

This inventory would include establishing approximately 913 plots over a 10-year span with about 547 plots accessed by helicopter and 366 plots accessed by day hiking. Inventory protocol includes completing 10 percent of the plots each year. This means that approximately 92 plots will be inventoried each year and these plots will be scattered across the Tongass and Chugach National Forests. Of these 92 plots, an approximate average of 55 plots will be accessed by helicopter. Each inventory plot accessed by helicopter will require two landings.



The information collected from FIA provides the best chance to get a statistically valid sample of plots for each wilderness. This data will provide a baseline of forested and non-forested vegetated plots that can be used to detect change over time inside a wilderness, within the Alaska Wilderness system, and across the National Wilderness Preservation System. The crew will be doing measurements of tree diameter, tree crown size, vegetation types, down woody materials, and other related work.

Virtually all of these plots are located inland. Many of the sites are in steep, brushy terrain--the very reason why helicopter access is being proposed. The wilderness inventory does not have plots that fall within conveyed Native lands since it only includes national forest system wilderness lands. In addition, I don't anticipate the need to cross Native allotments or corporation lands. In the event that need arose, it would only occur with the landowner's permission.

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies to consider the effect of their undertakings on significant heritage resources. If you know of any heritage resources that have important religious or cultural significance, or if you have any questions or other comments related to the proposed inventory, please contact your local district ranger.

Maps of the areas where the inventory work will occur can be viewed and printed from the website: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r10/ro/projects-plans/fia/index.shtml>. If you have further questions about the project, please contact the project leader, Ken Post at (907) 586-8796 or via email at kpost@fs.fed.us.

I would appreciate your comments by December 14, 2005, and they should be sent to:

Ken Post
Alaska Regional Office
Ecosystem Planning
P.O. Box 21628
Juneau, AK 99802-1628
Email: comments-alaska-regional-office@fs.fed.us

Your interest in management of the Tongass and Chugach National Forests is appreciated.

Sincerely,

/s/ Beth G. Pendleton (for)
DENNIS E. BSCHOR
Regional Forester