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First name: Brian

Last name: Okonek

Organization: Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition

Title: President

Comments: October 29, 2019

Objection Reviewing Officer

USDA Forest Service, Alaska Region

709 W. 9th Street

Juneau, AK 99801

Re: Objection to Chugach National Forest Draft ROD, 2019 Final Land Management Plan, and FEIS

Submitted electronically

Dear Objection Reviewing Officer,

Objector Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition (AQRC) submits this objection to the Chugach National Forest Plan Revision Draft Record of Decision, Final Land Management Plan, and Final Environmental Impact Statement. Jeff Schramm, Chugach National Forest Supervisor, is the Responsible Official.

AQRC filed scoping comments on the Plan Revision on February 19, 2016, and comments on the Draft EIS on October 26, 2018 ("DEIS comments"), establishing our standing to file this objection.

ABOUT AQRC

Founded in 1996, AQRC's mission is to maintain and restore natural sounds and natural quiet in Alaska through advocacy and education for the benefit of people and wildlife. More particularly, we're dedicated to protecting the rights of Alaskans to quiet places for the benefit of public land users, home and cabin owners, communities, businesses, visitors, future generations, and wildlife. We believe that natural sounds and natural quiet should receive the same consideration given to other ecological values, such as clean air and water, fish, wildlife, soils, vegetation, scenic beauty, and wilderness. Although there are many places in Alaska that look the same as they did 200 or more years ago, very few sound as they did just 20 or 30 years ago.

In addition to protecting ecological values like the ones listed above, one of AQRC's specific goals is a fair and equitable overall balance on the public lands between those managed for motorized recreation, and those managed for quiet, truly traditional forms of recreation like hiking, snowshoeing, cross country skiing, canoeing, and kayaking. Alaska's a Great, Big Land, and we should be able to provide high quality recreational experiences for both motorized and non-motorized recreationists.

SOUNDSCAPE (DEIS comments, pp. 3-4)/NOISE POLLUTION (DEIS comments, all pages)

The Service failed to address the Chugach soundscape.

As we noted above, there are many places in Alaska that look the same as they did 200 years ago, but very few sound as they did just 20 or 30 years ago. Natural sounds and natural quiet are a fundamental ecological resource, important to both humans and wildlife. Their diminishment by a variety of sources of noise pollution on the public lands is a critical and too often overlooked issue not just in Alaska but nationally. An increasing number of studies demonstrate the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual benefits of quiet environments, and the harm that can be done by excessive noise.

The FEIS (V. 2, p. 101) says that the Forest Service does not have any requirements within the National Environmental Policy Act, or other sources, that direct the Forest Service to address the soundscape. But would an EIS comply with NEPA if it failed to address water quality, or air quality, or wildlife populations and habitats? The loss of natural sounds and natural quiet is an equally important ecological issue-especially since that loss is increasing exponentially but is nevertheless being ignored by many land managers-and must be addressed in NEPA analyses. Furthermore, addressing this issue is the wisest choice from a policy standpoint as well.

Remedies

In the EIS, assess the CNF soundscape affected environment and the environmental consequences of the alternatives on the soundscape.

Prepare a Soundscape Plan which identifies measures to protect the soundscape and, where appropriate, restore the opportunity to hear and enjoy natural sounds and experience natural quiet. The plan must also include an effective monitoring program.

The Service failed to adequately assess and remedy the potential adverse effects of motorized recreation on the Chugach.

Recreational motorized vehicles are a major source of the noise pollution that degrades the natural soundscape on the public lands. Especially on the Kenai Peninsula Geographic Area, the most accessible of the three areas due to its road system-and therefore the least expensive to visit in both time and money-an excessive percentage of the lands are open to winter motorized use (79%; FEIS, Table 5, p. 41)), a use which displaces many non-motorized recreationists from the area (regarding displacement, see FEIS V. 2, pp. 94-95; the Forest Service's visitor surveys fail to attempt to assess how many potential visitors are displaced for this or other reasons).

This lack of balance and equity means that non-motorized recreationists, both residents and non-Alaskans, seeking a high-quality recreational experience free from the noise, busyness and artificiality of their daily lives, are unfairly limited to a small number of trails and areas, many of them the least desirable of the possible locations. One shouldn't have to spend an unreasonable amount of time and money to experience a natural recreational experience on the Chugach free of recreational vehicle noise, exhaust smells, and extensive tracking of the scenic snowscape.

We recognize that specific motorized/non-motorized recreation allocations will be made later in a Travel Management Plan, but the Land Management Plan can and should designate a considerably larger, more balanced, and fairer percentage of lands on the Kenai in the Primitive or Semi-primitive non-motorized ROS classes. A major goal of the Forest Service's management of recreation on the Kenai should be to provide a fair and balanced number of high-quality recreational experiences for both the motorized and non-motorized user. There's room for all of us, but allocations need to be fair.

The FEIS fails to adequately assess, at a generic, strategic level (the Travel Management Plan will apparently look at specific sites) the adverse effects of motorized recreation on the Forest's lands, waters and air. This should be done by reviewing and summarizing the extensive existing literature. This assessment would then inform later site-specific analyses in the Travel Management Plan, and would help produce a more balanced allocation between motorized and non-motorized recreation on the Chugach.

The noise pollution impacts of recreational snowmachining-but also, for example, other impacts like possible water and air pollution (see EPA, V. 2, p. 236); wildlife impacts (see, for example, FEIS, V. 1, pp. 420-421 beginning with "Motorized access, especially onto lands well outside the immediate road corridors, can have

major effects on the well-being, abundance, and distribution of wildlife populations"); and the marring of pristine scenic snowscapes-are antithetical to both small and large "w" wilderness. We continue to believe that the Forest Service's interpretation of ANILCA Sec. 1110(a) is incorrect; that the Congress never intended to make Alaska Wilderness a pale imitation of Wilderness in the lower 48; and that Sec.1110(a) does not overturn the Wilderness Act's prohibition on recreational snowmachining in Wilderness (or on lands managed as Wilderness to maintain their suitability for inclusion in the Wilderness system) (regarding lands managed as Wilderness, see Alaska Supplement to Forest Service Manual 2320.3 Policy)(DEIS comments, pp. 1-3). There is nothing wild, natural, primitive (or semi-primitive), or protective of solitude (see Plan, p. 103) about recreational snowmachining.

Finally, Executive Orders 11644 and 11989 require, when agencies are allocating areas or trails to ORV use, that they "minimize damage to soil, watershed, vegetation and other resources" (emphasis added). The Service has failed as it has made these allocations to assess and minimize damage to a fundamental and important resource, the soundscape.

Remedies

Increase the percentage of lands on the Kenai Peninsula Geographic Area in the Primitive or Semi-primitive non-motorized ROS classes.

Identify and implement a visitor survey component that helps quantify the number of visitors who are displaced from the Chugach by motorized recreation or other factors.

Review and summarize the adverse effects of motorized recreation on affected resources and activities like the soundscape, muscle-powered recreation, wilderness, scenic resources, air quality, soils, watersheds and water resources, riparian and wetland resources, aquatic ecosystems and habitats, terrestrial ecosystems, and terrestrial wildlife and habitats.

Adopt the "traditional activities" definition employed by the National Park Service for the Denali National Park and Preserve "old park", under which purely recreational snowmachining is prohibited, and the non-subsistence use of snowmachines is allowed only for truly traditional activities like hunting and fishing.

In its Travel Management Plan, assess, and minimize, damage to the soundscape from ORV use.

WILDERNESS (DEIS comments, pp. 1, 3)

The Service failed to adequately protect Chugach wilderness.

The vast majority of the Chugach National Forest is wilderness (the landscape, that is; some of the activities allowed on the Forest-including on the WSA-are not, unfortunately, wild). We're not, as they say, making any more wilderness, and wilderness is an increasingly scarce resource worldwide as the population and its needs and desires continue to grow. Alaska is vast enough to be a treasure house of wilderness while still fully accommodating its residents. Yet there is not a single congressionally designated acre of Wilderness on the Chugach's 5.4 million acres; the Plan's Wilderness recommendation, relative to the need to protect this dwindling resource for future generations here and abroad, is minimal; and not a single acre on the Kenai Peninsula Geographic Area is recommended for Wilderness. We can do better.

Wilderness is not just a physical concept (is there a road there?). Equally important is wilderness character (DEIS comments, p. 3): wilderness character, though intangible, is understandable, and is a characteristic which has been defined and refined over the 55 years of the Wilderness Act's existence. The preservation of wilderness character is referenced in the very first substantive section-(2(a))-of the Wilderness Act.

"Presently existing character", on the other hand, is poorly defined and sure to create confusion, misunderstanding, and conflict. We're all familiar with the concept of a shifting baseline. If I had started cross country skiing on the Chugach in 1977, for example, my baseline would be very different from the person who does so for the first time this winter. Forest Supervisors come and go. Each one will have a different sense of the Forest's 2019 "presently existing character," and the Chugach's wilderness will continue to slowly degrade.

The Wilderness recommendation is both far too low, and outdated. As we noted above, protecting wilderness becomes more important every year. Merely repeating the 2002 recommendation without recognizing how much things have changed is unreasonable.

The contracts between the Forest Service and the EVOS sellers require the Service to protect the wilderness values of those lands. That contract promise will not be met unless the Service includes in MA1 those EVOS lands that are within the WSA boundary.

Alaska is special-but not so special that a person shouldn't be able to enjoy a Wilderness experience on wild lands accessible to the road system the way one can in the lower 48. If we allow it to happen, a person can have a Wilderness experience on a day or a weekend on the Chugach without having to spend an unreasonable amount of time or money. There is no good reason why we can't make such an experience available on the Kenai Peninsula (DEIS comments, p.2).

The best, most effective way to determine whether a proposal for lands managed as Wilderness is necessary and appropriate, and consistent with presently existing or wilderness character, is to perform a minimum requirements analysis. Removing this requirement is a big step backwards and will result in a failure to adequately fulfill the Service's important wilderness stewardship responsibilities.

Throughout the Final Plan there has been a steady weakening of wilderness protections. This includes the deletion of some Draft Plan protective standards and guidelines for several specific activities, including commercial filming (Draft Plan, p. 73), fire suppression (p. 74), the use of motorized equipment and mechanized transport (p. 72), and others. In addition, the Plan failed to address recreational chainsawing in spite of the strong public interest in doing so and its substantial negative impacts to the soundscape, scenic resource, and ecology (DEIS comments, p. 5).

Remedies

Decisions are required to maintain not "presently existing character," but "wilderness character."

The Service adopts the Alternative D Wilderness recommendation, modified to include the lands around Jackpot Bay, Paddy Bay, Elrington Island, all National Forest lands on Knight Island, and the Nellie Juan Lake area, and to exclude Blackstone Bay.

EVOS lands that are within the WSA boundary are included in MA1.

The Service recommends to the Congress a significant amount of Wilderness in the Kenai Peninsula Geographic Area.

The Service retains its MRA requirement for WSA and EVOS management decisions.

The Service restores the deletions from the Draft Plan of the standards and guidelines regarding commercial filming, fire suppression, motorized equipment and mechanized transport, snowmachine use, helicopter landings, and drones.

The Service prohibits recreational chainsaw use in the WSA and EVOS lands.

Thank you for the chance to submit these objections. The Chugach is an amazing place and we hope that it will remain so for future generations of Alaskans, other Americans, and people from around the world. Many of those visitors will not be as lucky as those of us who are privileged to live in Alaska; we should strive to be able to continue to welcome them to a wild natural environment.

Sincerely,

Brian Okonek, President
Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition
Lead Objector