Wilderness/Backcountry Planning
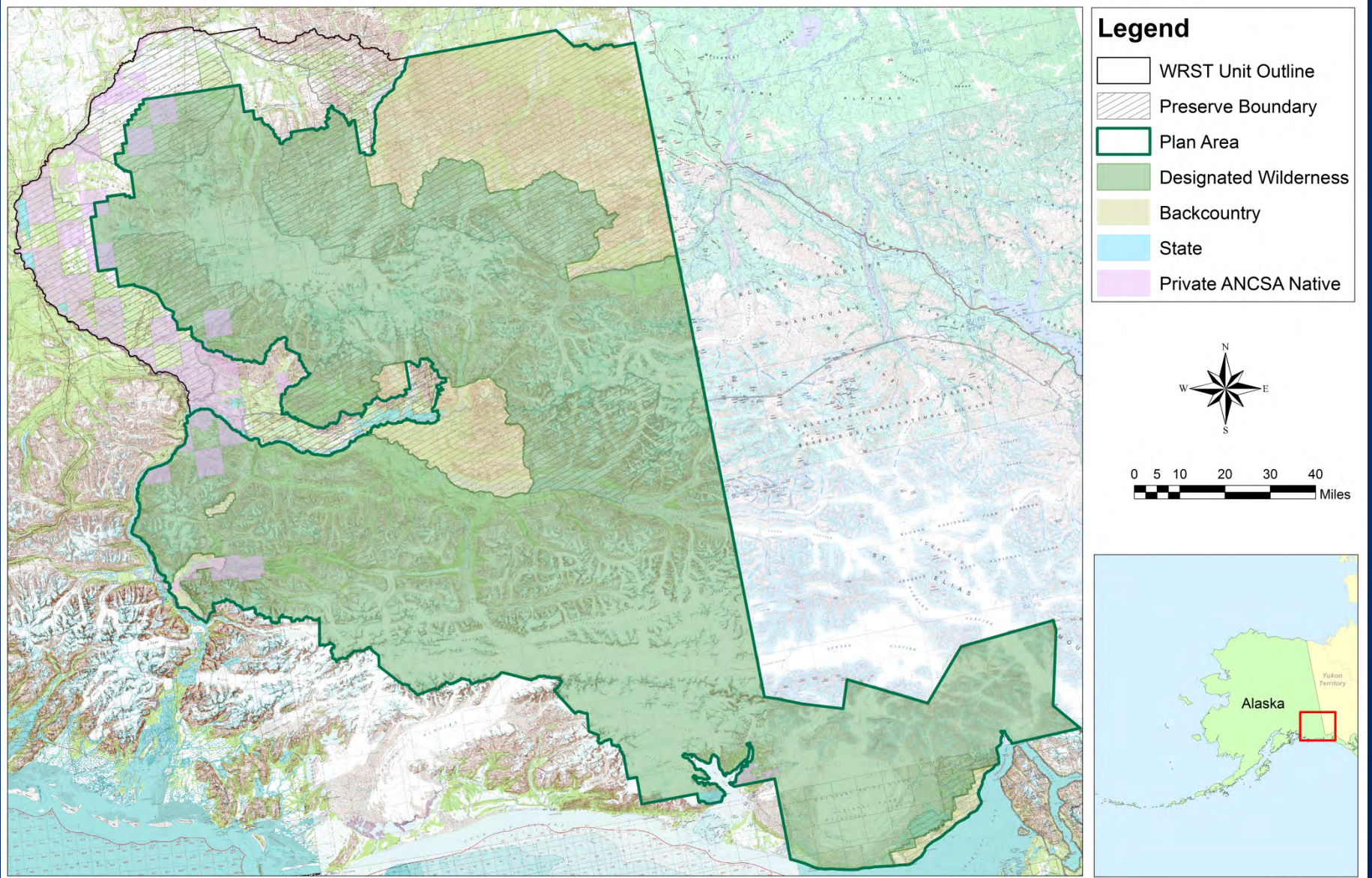
Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve

May, 2016

Stuff to cover in this presentation

- Background on the Backcountry and Wilderness Stewardship plan

- What we've done so far

- Proposed Action: What is it

- What's next

Plan Area Map

Legend

- WRST Unit Outline
- Preserve Boundary
- Plan Area
- Designated Wilderness
- Backcountry
- State
- Private ANCSA Native

Wilderness/backcountry plan: What will it do?

Provide guidance and management direction to help deal with the following issues:

- Airstrip management and maintenance
- Cabin management (public use, commercial)
- Visitor impacts (social trails, campsites, litter, human waste)
- Motorized use (ORVs, snowmachines)
- Commercial use: is there an issue? Will do an extent necessary determination as part of this plan

Develop desired conditions, indicators, standards, and management actions

Things we have done so far

Public scoping: from spring of 2015 through fall of 2015.

- Open house public meetings
- Nearly 60 interviews
- Government to government briefings
- Educational sessions

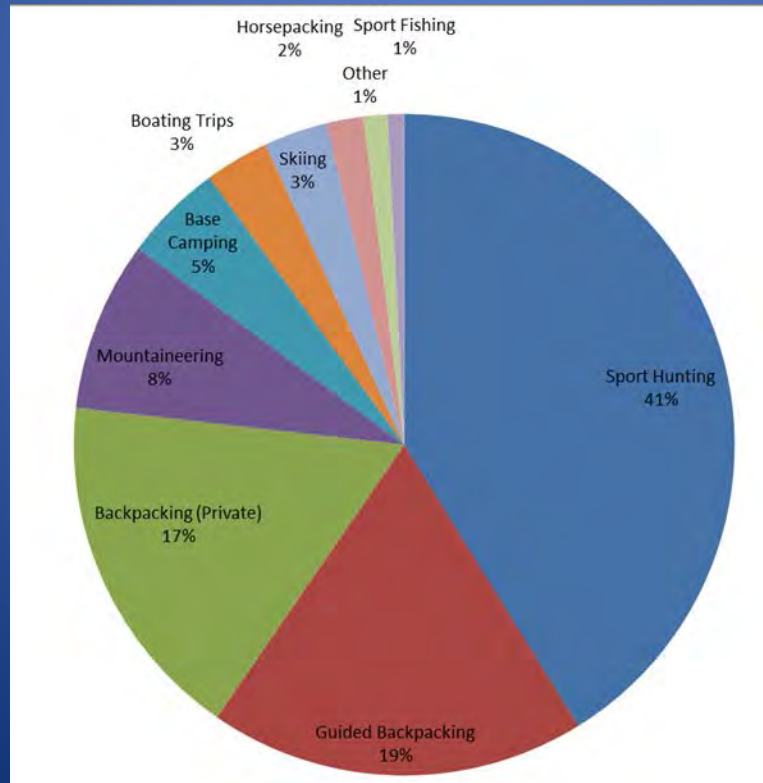Released a public scoping summary in December 2015

What we heard

- WRST wilderness provides a high quality visitor experience with few impacts. Keep it that way.

- Protect subsistence access and opportunities.

- If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

- NPS administrative use contributes to wilderness impacts and should be acknowledged and managed.

- Some conflict between sport hunting concessions and air taxis.

Also received comments requesting that NPS "address" recreational snowmachine use in the plan.

Wilderness/backcountry plan: Things we have done so far

Tallied visitor use in backcountry/wilderness, based on CUA reports:

- Average b/w visitor use, 2010 – 2014 = 2,000 or 8,000 user days.

Top 10 visited locations:

1) Skolai Pass
2) Iceberg Lake
3) Bremner
4) Wolverine
5) Fosse
6) Lakina River
7) Solo Creek
8) Glacier Creek
9) Nizina River
10) Ampitheatre Creek

Wilderness/backcountry plan: Things we have done so far

Assessing on the ground impacts:

- Data regarding backcountry/wilderness impacts has been collected since 2014.
    - Includes information on social trails, hiking routes, campsites, and horse trails.
- Purpose is to evaluate how impacts are changing over time.

Findings so far:

- Assessments to date have observed relatively few impacts.
- Approximately 510 miles were traveled looking for impacts in 2014 and 2015.
    - Of this distance, approximately 72 miles were found to have discernable impacts from trails—though most of the impacts observed have been minimal.
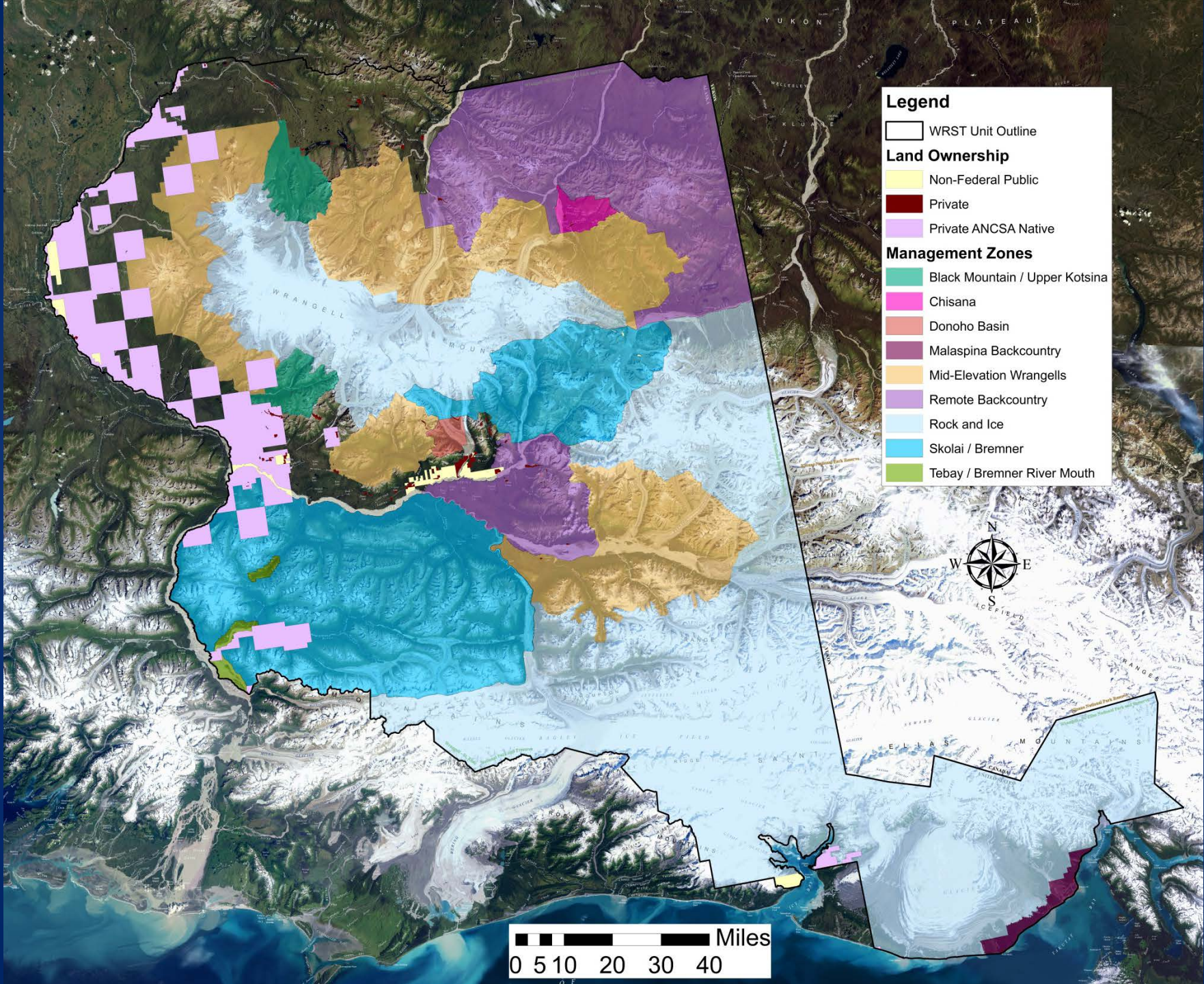
Proposed Action

The Proposed Action for management of backcountry and wilderness consists of:

- Management zones.
- Indicators, standards, and management actions that address issues identified during scoping.
  - For most management issues, the plan is adaptive and phases in more restrictive management only as needed.

WRST is prepared to release the proposed action for public review and comment.

- Comments will be used to change the proposed action and to develop alternatives that will be analyzed in an Environmental Assessment.

Legend

☐ WRST Unit Outline

Land Ownership

- ☐ Non-Federal Public
- ☐ Private
- ☐ Private ANCSA Native

Management Zones

- ☐ Black Mountain / Upper Kotsina
- ☐ Chisana
- ☐ Donoho Basin
- ☐ Malaspina Backcountry
- ☐ Mid-Elevation Wrangells
- ☐ Remote Backcountry
- ☐ Rock and Ice
- ☐ Skolai / Bremner
- ☐ Tebay / Bremner River Mouth

Miles
0 5 10   20   30   40

What we are proposing

- Airstrips
  - Identifies specific backcountry and wilderness airstrips that would be maintained and/or replaced in the event of a natural loss.

- Public use cabins
  - In backcountry, identifies cabins to be maintained as public use cabins.
  - In wilderness, identifies cabins that will be open for public use for health and safety, but not managed as public use cabins (stocked wood and cooking supplies, reservations, etc.).

What we are proposing

- **Subsistence cabins**
  - Allows continued use of cabins for subsistence purpose, under permit.

- **Campsite impacts**
  - Phases management actions in based on monitoring of trend. Actions include education, identification of naturally hardened sites at portals, and group size limits.

- **Litter, human waste**
  - Actions encourage education on leave no trace and proper disposal of human waste. Actions phase to portable systems for packing out human waste.

What we are proposing

- Group encounters
  - Standards and monitoring to be developed through a user survey. Actions involve concessions/CUAs and include cooperative planning (shared calendar concept), potential capping of CUAs in certain zones, and issuance of permits in some zones.

Discussed last week at annual CUA/concessions meetings.

What we are proposing

- **OHV use**
  - Extend the decisions from the Nabesna ORV EIS to the rest of the park wilderness. At this time, this would apply to upper Kotsina. OHV travel (for subsistence use) in wilderness will be on designated trails, with travel off trails only allowed for game retrieval.

- **Administrative use (including research)**
  - Establishes a system for tracking administrative use. For helicopter use in wilderness, sets limits per zone based on current baseline. Does not apply to emergency use.

What we are proposing

- **Recreational snowmachine use**
  - The WRST 1986 GMP stated "airplane, snowmachine, and motorboat access for recreational activities within the designated wilderness is currently permitted where such use is already established."
  - Current status: WRST has allowed recreational snowmachine use, including in wilderness, since then. Currently there is a low level of use.

What we are proposing: Recreational snowmachine use

- In areas where recreational snowmachine use currently occurs, manage use to minimize impacts to wilderness character. This may include:
  - monitoring (of numbers, distribution patterns, and sound); and
  - possible management through: requiring free permits; education regarding trip planning; designation of general point to point routes or corridors for travel; speed limits or prohibition of high-marking.

What we are proposing: Recreational snowmachine use

- In areas outside of those in the last slide, in designated wilderness:
  - Monitor use.
  - If recreational snowmachine use is determined to be impacting wilderness character (as evidenced by user conflicts, tracks from high-marking, growing number of snowmachine trails, or increased impacts to soundscapes), NPS would pursue closure to recreational snowmachine use under 43 CFR 36.11(h).

- For non-wilderness, backcountry: Continue to allow recreational snowmachine use.

What next?

- Release of Proposed Action package for public review and comment.

- Use comments to change proposed action and to develop alternatives to be analyzed in an Environmental Assessment.

- Public review version of the EA will be available for more public review and comment.