

STATE OF ALASKA

ANILCA IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM

FRANK H MURKOWSKI
GOVERNOR

550 W. 7TH AVENUE, SUITE 1660
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA 99501
PH: (907) 269-7470 / FAX: (907) 269-3981
Sally_Gibert@dnr.state.ak.us

April 30, 2004

Ms. Mary Emerick
Tongass National Forest
Sitka Ranger District
204 Siginaka Way
Sitka, Alaska 99835

Dear Ms. Emerick:

The State of Alaska reviewed the U.S. Forest Service Environmental Assessment for the South Baranof Wilderness addressing Fixed Wing Aircraft Lake Landings by Outfitters and Guides. This letter contains the consolidated comments of the State's resource agencies.

General Comments

We support the Service allowing guide/outfitter aircraft lake landings¹ in this area. However, the State is concerned with the proposed limited number of permitted aircraft lake landings for outfitters and guides in the South Baranof Wilderness. Section 1110(a) of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) protects the public's access via airplane to conservation system units unless restricted by regulation to protect resource values. Without a better understanding of current air access in this area, establishing specific limits is premature, arbitrary, and therefore inconsistent with ANILCA.

The area contains a large number of lakes; yet many are challenging to pilots due to mountainous terrain and frequent bad weather. Foot travel is difficult and many lakes may only be reasonably accessed by air. These challenges currently translate into low visitor density in the area. In addition, commercial operators are an essential component of air access. For example, non-residents may not access this area to participate in legal hunting for several species without hiring a guide under State hunting laws. Other users, both residents and non-residents, often use guides and outfitters to facilitate trips by providing equipment and services in this remote area. We recognize that the higher levels of airplane use authorized in the Tongass Forest Plan – if they ever got that high – may not be desirable or sustainable in this area; but current or historic levels of use do not appear to be problematic. There is little basis upon which to determine at what point increased use would have detrimental effects on resource values, especially since current use is not well understood.

¹ Comments on the proposal do not imply that the state concedes federal jurisdiction over public uses on waterbodies. The State of Alaska reserves the right to challenge that authority.

To address these concerns, we urge a delay in implementing limits pending additional data about current use levels and potential impacts. At a minimum, the Service should increase the number of guide landings in the South Baranof Wilderness Area to a level that reasonably provides for existing and/or historic uses.

PAGE-SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Page 9, Conflicts with Other Users, Direct and Indirect Effects

The State agrees with the Service that conflicts between guided and un-guided users would be extremely low. Data indicate that the primary recreational use in the area is hunting, which occurs primarily from August 1 to Dec. 31. Because only a small portion of the guiding season coincides with hunting seasons, combined with the low visitor use dispersed across many lakes in this remote area, it is unlikely the permitted activities would increase conflicts with other recreational users.

Pages 11 – 15, Disturbance to Fish and Wildlife

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) Statewide Harvest Survey indicates that fishing effort in this area is low. Because less than 12 responses were received for this area, the ADF&G is unable to generate an estimate of sport fish harvest. Due to the low levels of dispersed recreation use as previously noted, the proposed additional activity is unlikely to impact fish (or wildlife) populations.

Pages 17 – 21, Impacts to Wilderness Values

The wilderness values listed in this section only include discussion from the Wilderness Act (P.L. 88-577) and do not reference the wilderness provisions under ANILCA (P.L. 96-487). Section 1110(a) of ANILCA allows the use of airplanes, snowmachines, motorboats, and non-motorized surface transportation in all conservation system units in Alaska, including all Wilderness Areas. Congress specifically protected these uses to maintain the unique way of life in rural Alaska. A complete understanding of wilderness values in Alaska must recognize that wilderness contains the sights and sounds of airplanes. We, therefore, request the Environmental Assessment explicitly recognize how the values listed in the Wilderness Act are modified by ANILCA.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. If you have questions, please contact me at 907-269-7477.

Sincerely,

/ss/

Sally Gibert
State ANILCA Coordinator