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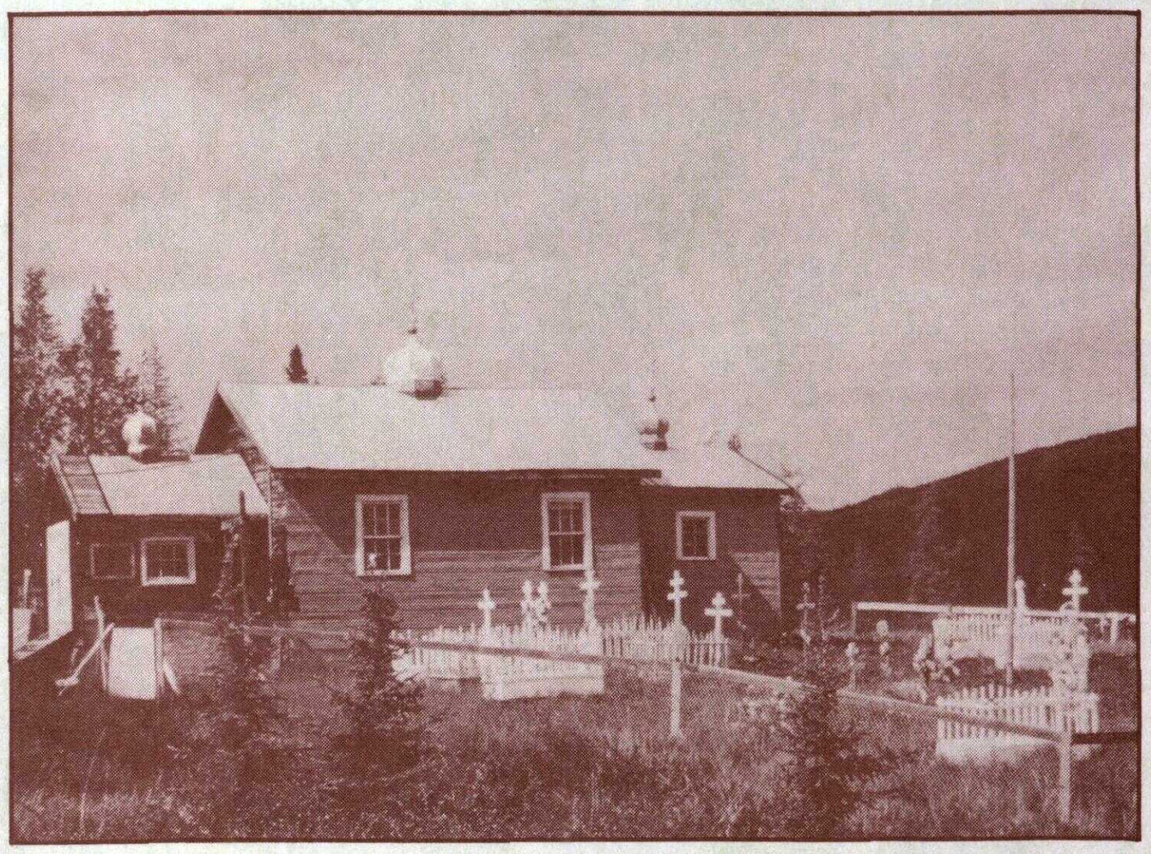
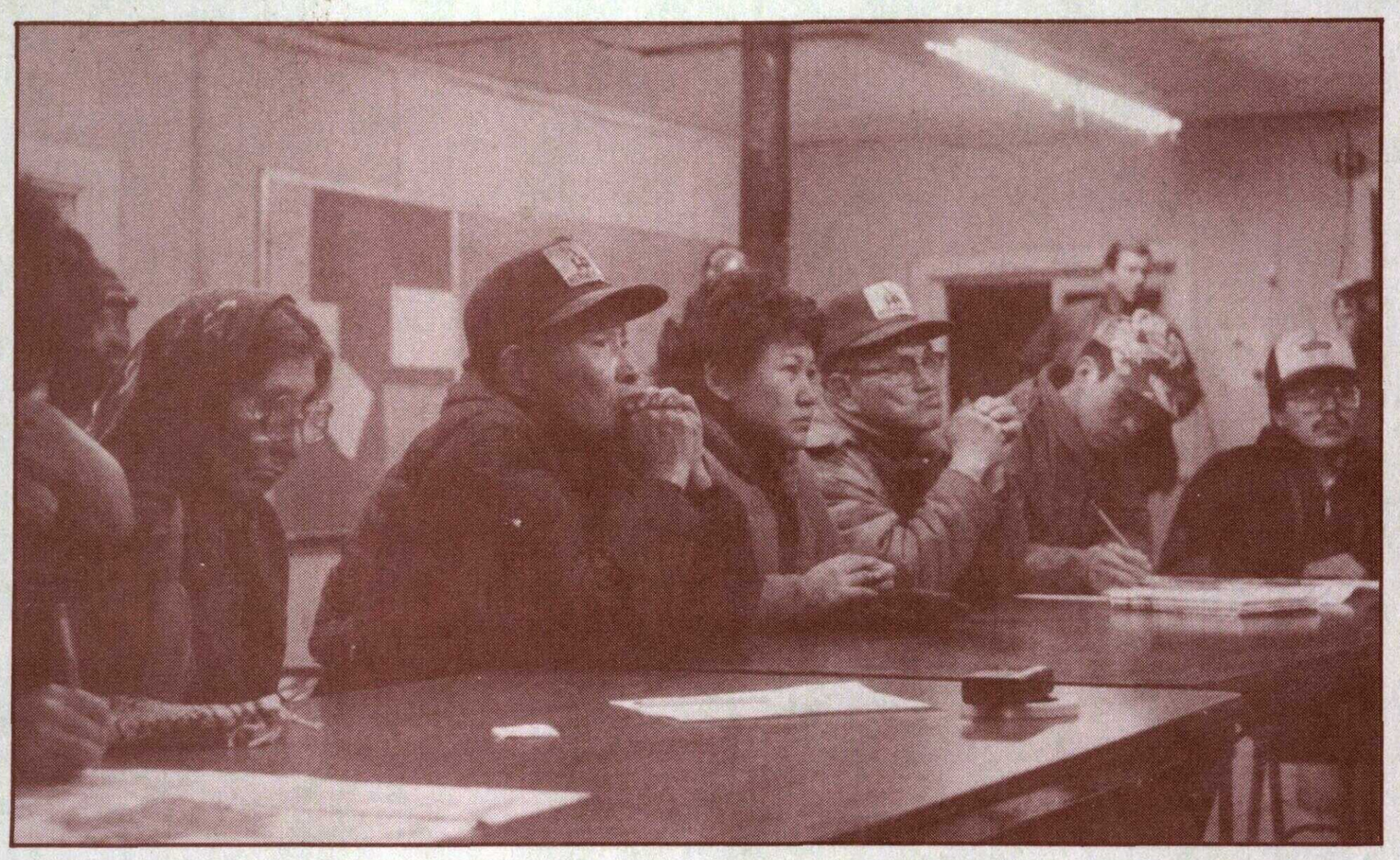




Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Summary of Purpose

The Kuskokwim Area Plan describes how the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will manage state land in the Kuskokwim River basin and a portion of the Innoko River basin. The plan determines land offering locations, remote cabin areas, land classifications, land selections and relinquishments, areas open to mineral entry, and guidelines for leases and permits on state lands. The plan does not make decisions on federal, Native, or private lands.

How this Document is Organized

Chapter 1 describes the planning area, the purpose of the plan, and the process used to develop the plan. It includes a summary of how the plan will be implemented and the process for modifying the plan after it is adopted. The first chapter also documents the decisions made between the alternatives and the draft plan and between the draft and final plan.

Chapter 2 presents policies that guide state land management throughout the planning area. These policies are generally consistent for all state lands where area plans have been prepared. However, because the Kuskokwim Area is unique, some polices are tailored to reflect particular conditions in this area.

Chapter 3 contains detailed descriptions of the plan's land use designations. The study area is organized into 18 management units by watersheds. Each unit includes a statement of management intent, tables that list major resource values and land use designations, and guidelines specific to the individual management unit.

Chapter 4 discusses specific actions needed to implement the plan: classifications, mineral orders, new state land selections, relinquishments of previous selections, municipal entitlements, recommendations for field staff and research, and recommendations for legislative action. This chapter also describes the procedures for modifying the plan.

Appendix A is a glossary of terms used in the plan. **Appendix B** identifies the organizations that should receive official public notices of pending state actions in each management unit. **Appendix C** contains maps that show important trails in the planning area. **Appendix D** lists various reports written as background for this plan. **Appendix E** presents the criteria used to establish the ratings in the Resource Information Summary charts in Chapter 3. The maps in **Appendix F** show habitat ratings for all state lands. **Appendix G** is a summary of permits and leases issued or applied for on state lands in the planning area. **Appendix H** lists areas reopened to mineral entry, closed to new mineral entry, or subject to leasehold location requirements by the mineral orders that implement this plan. **Appendix I** lists the approximate acreage in each subunit.

Why Plan for State Land?

The state lands in the Kuskokwim planning area can provide fish, wildlife, water, timber, minerals, materials, transportation routes, places to live, and recreation areas. There are many different ideas as to how these lands should be used, and some of the uses conflict with each other. However, if the land is managed carefully, many uses can occur together.

The planning process openly reviews resource information and public concerns before long-range land use decisions are made. It is a way of settling differences among possible uses. Through planning, the people who use these lands can help choose the ways the land should be managed. The planning process also lets the public know what choices were made and why.

Land use plans for state lands are required under Title 38 of the Alaska Statutes. Once a plan is adopted, permits, leases, land sales, cooperative agreements, and other DNR land management actions will be based on the plan.

Description of Planning Area

The Kuskokwim planning area includes all the lands in the Kuskokwim River basin upriver from Aniak (Map 1.1, following page). It also includes part of the Innoko River basin around Flat, Ophir, and Folger. In all, there are 22.8 million acres of land, including 14.3 million acres that are state-owned, and 1.7 million that are state-selected. The federal Bureau of Land Management controls 4.5 million acres, and 3.1 million acres are owned or selected by Native corporations -- Doyon, MTNT, Calista, Kuskokwim Corp., Lime Village Corp., and Cook Inlet Region, Inc. Some state and Native selections overlap. Less than one percent of the land (approximately 50,000 acres) is in other private ownerships, although there are over a thousand private parcels.

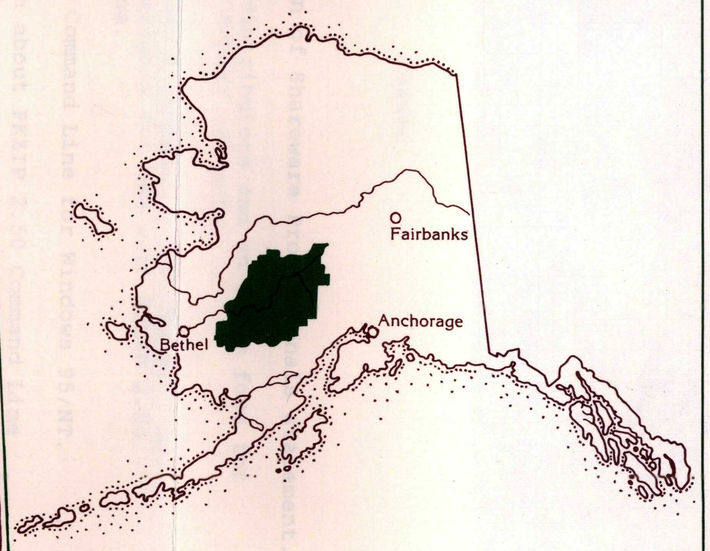
The central portions of the planning area are lowlands along the Kuskokwim and its major tributaries, especially the Holitna River, Nixon Fork, Big River, North Fork, and South Fork. The Innoko basin and the western part of the Kuskokwim basin are within the Kuskokwim Mountains which includes hilly terrain ranging up to 4,000 feet elevation. The eastern Kuskokwim is dominated by the higher, rugged peaks of the Alaska Range. The major rivers are lined with white spruce and hardwood forests, but the vast majority of the lowlands are muskeg. The uplands are predominantly shrublands and alpine tundra.

There are eleven year-round communities within the planning area -- Telida, Nikolai, McGrath, Takotna, Lime Village, Stony River, Sleetmute, Red Devil, Crooked Creek, Chuathbaluk, and Aniak -- with a total population of approximately 1,800. In recent years, the regional centers and adjacent villages have grown, while the population in smaller and more remote villages has declined. This trend is likely to continue as decreases in government funding reduce employment opportunities in the smaller villages. All the communities are located on major rivers. Access to the planning area is by boat along the Kuskokwim and its major tributaries; by commercial flights to Aniak and McGrath; by small plane to riverbars, lakes, and open tundra; and by snowmachine and off-road vehicles along trails throughout the region.

Location Map

MAP 1.1

The Kuskokwim planning area includes all the lands in the Kuskokwim River Basin upriver from Aniak. It also includes the parts of the Iditarod and Innoko river basins around Flat, Ophir, and Folger. The plan is only for state-owned and state-selected lands within this area. There are about 1800 year-round residents in the planning area. Most people live in the communities of Aniak, Chuathbaluk, Crooked Creek, Red Devil, Sleetmute, Stony River, Lime Village, McGrath, Takotna, Nikolai and Telida.



Alaska Department of NATURAL RESOURCES

0 6 12 18 24 30
Scale in Miles

Government, private sector employment, and subsistence activities form the basis of the regional economy. Government-funded employment such as school jobs, fire-fighting, and construction and maintenance of public works projects presently provide the great majority of cash income in the planning area. Local mineral, fish, wildlife, and timber resources are the basis for much of the private sector employment. These jobs include mining, guiding, trapping, and a small amount of commercial timber harvesting within the planning area, and commercial fishing in downriver communities and in Aniak and Chuathbaluk. In the regional centers of Aniak and McGrath, transportation services and retail sales also contribute to the economy. Cottage crafts such as skin-sewing and basket-weaving provide a small amount of income to some village residents. A high percentage of residents supplement cash income with subsistence activities. Hunting, fishing, berry-picking, and timber harvesting provide food, fuel, and building materials to members of the communities in the planning area and in downriver villages.

How was the Plan Developed?

The Kuskokwim Area Plan is the product of two and a half years of work by state agencies; representatives of other landowners, local governments, and interest groups; and the general public. Sixty-one public meetings and workshops have been held in Telida, Nikolai, Takotna, McGrath, Lime Village, Stony River, Sleetmute, Red Devil, Crooked Creek, Chuathbaluk, Aniak, Anchorage, Bethel, and Lake Minchumina to gather public comments and ideas. The steps in the process are shown in Table 1.1

Table 1.1 Kuskokwim Area Planning Process

Step 1- Issues are identified through public meetings to learn about local interests and problems on state lands. *(Fall 1985)*

Step 2 - Information is collected about natural resources, present land use, land ownership, local history, economics, etc. *(1986 and throughout planning process)*

Step 3- Land Use Alternatives are prepared and are reviewed by the public. *(Spring 1987)*

Step 4- Agency Review Draft is prepared and reviewed by Kuskokwim Area Plan Advisory Board. *(Summer 1987)*

Step 5- Revised Draft is reviewed by public. *(Fall 1987)*

Step 6- Final Plan is prepared *(Winter 1987-88)* and approved by commissioner. *(March 1988)*

Step 7- Implementation. The plan is used to guide state land management decisions in the Kuskokwim planning area.

The plan was developed by the Kuskokwim Area Plan Advisory Board. The board is made up of representatives of the agencies that manage state resources and work with communities in the planning area, other major landowners, and regional governmental organizations. The following agencies and organizations are represented on the board.

- Alaska Department of Natural Resources Divisions of Agriculture, Forestry, Land and Water Management, Mining, Oil and Gas, and Parks and Outdoor Recreation
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game
- Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
- Alaska Department of Community and Regional Affairs
- Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation
- U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management
- Upper Kuskokwim Regional Strategie Committee
- Calista Corporation
- Doyon, Limited
- Kuskokwim Corporation
- Kuskokwim Native Association
- MTNT, Limited
- Tanana Chiefs Conference

Public Participation

Private citizens, private organizations, local councils, and other state and federal agencies took part in the process by attending public meetings and workshops, submitting written and oral comments, and participating in working groups and advisory board meetings on specific issues. Four rounds of public meetings and a set of workshops were held before the plan was completed. Nine informal meetings were held in June 1985 to introduce the local communities to the planning process, and to introduce the planners to the Kuskokwim Area. Fourteen meetings were held in October 1985 to identify issues in the planning area. Eight workshops were held in April and June 1986 to document local land use preferences. Fifteen meetings were held in March and April 1987 to review and gather comments on the plan alternatives, and again in October and November 1987 to collect comments on the draft plan.

Summary of Plan Implementation and Modification

The Kuskokwim Plan will be implemented through administrative actions such as land sales, leases, permits, land selections and relinquishments, interagency memoranda of agreement, cooperative agreements with other landowners, research, classification orders, and mineral opening and closing orders, and leasehold location orders. In addition, DNR and ADF&G may make recommendations to the state legislature on legislative designations or changes in legislation consistent with the plan.

Land classification orders, mineral closing orders, and mineral opening orders, and leasehold location orders implementing the plan were adopted concurrent with adoption of this plan. These orders are the formal record of primary uses allowed on state lands, and are recorded on state status plats.

Economic and social conditions in Alaska and in the Kuskokwim planning area are sure to change, and the plan must be flexible enough to change with them. The Kuskokwim Area Plan will be reviewed approximately every five years to determine if revisions are required. In addition to the regularly scheduled review of the full plan, specific modifications may be made at any time when conditions warrant. Substantive changes to the plan can be made by amendment when approved by the Commissioner of DNR, with public review and consultation with affected agencies. A minor change to the plan, for example, correction of

an error, does not require public review. Special exceptions to the plan may be allowed when compliance is impossible or impractical in a particular case. See Chapter 4 for a more detailed description of implementation and modification of the plan.

Documentation of Changes to the Draft Plan and Alternatives

This plan is designed to balance competing interests in state lands in the Kuskokwim Area and to contribute to DNR's statewide goals in a manner appropriate to the resources, economy, and communities of the area. The six statewide goals are:

1. Economic Development. Provide jobs and income through the management of state lands and resources to support a vital, self-sustaining local and statewide economy. Subsistence activities are a part of the local economy.

2. Public Use. Provide diverse opportunities for public use of state lands, including such uses as hunting, fishing, recreation, and firewood collection.

3. Private Land. Provide opportunities for the private ownership of state land.

4. Quality of Life. Maintain or enhance the quality of the natural environment and cultural resources, and the character of existing communities.

5. Fiscal Costs. Minimize the cost of providing necessary government services and facilities, such as state land management programs, schools, and transportation facilities.

6. Public Safety. Protect public safety, for example through avoiding development in areas of natural hazards.

The policies, land use designations, management guidelines, and implementation actions in this plan describe the way resources in the Kuskokwim Area will be managed to contribute to these goals. The main provisions of the plan, and the reasons for these decisions are summarized below. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are the detailed descriptions of these actions.

Proposals and alternatives for resolving the major issues in the planning area were described in a brochure, "Land Use Alternatives for State Lands", circulated for public and agency review, and discussed at public meetings in March and April 1987. Public and agency comments on these proposals were used to revise the proposals and choose among the alternatives to form the draft plan. The draft plan was then reviewed by the public and state and federal agencies. As a result of public and agency comment, numerous changes were made to the draft before the final plan was adopted.

Land Disposals

At the alternative stage of plan development, 19 areas with a net acreage of 47,200 were proposed for land disposal. These areas were selected because they offered accessible sites that would be attractive for private ownership, but were thought to avoid the areas of severe conflict with community preferences and current land uses. An additional 21 areas with a net acreage of 63,000 were identified as alternative disposal sites. The alternatives also had good land for private ownership, but were in areas that were thought to have more conflicts with present uses.

Numerous changes to the land disposals were made as a result of public comment on the alternatives and draft plan. In general, sales in the final plan are concentrated in the McGrath area because of interest in additional private land in that region. Land offerings in the Alaska Range were reduced and concentrated near past sales because of concern over conflicts with guiding. Land is not proposed for sale along the Holitna, South Fork, upper Aniak, or Stony rivers because of strong local opposition.

In the final plan, 14 sites are designated for disposal over the next twenty years (Table 1.2 and Map 2.3): nine of the original proposals, three of the alternatives, and two new sites. These areas offer 33,855 acres net for private ownership. They were chosen because they either had the most public support or received little opposition. The net acreage available for private ownership on two proposals -- North Fork and Big River Reoffer -- was reduced from the level originally suggested because of local concern about conflicts with existing use, or because of determinations that the amount of land suitable for settlement was less than previously estimated. Offering of two sites near communities -- Aniak-Doestock and Sleetmute North -- will be delayed for ten years to allow other landowners to make land available for private use; the state will retain these lands for public use if other land offerings eliminate the need for additional private land. Two new disposal areas -- McGrath Townsite and Fuller Creek -- were identified as a result of public comment favoring land offerings in the Red Devil and McGrath areas. The area offered at Dillinger River was increased to include some of the original Farewell area.

Four of the proposals and sixteen of the alternative areas were dropped from the disposal list for the draft plan. These were the most controversial of the potential settlement areas. Two areas -- Tonzona and Door Mts. -- were changed from land sale to remote cabin areas because of the limited resources to support settlement. Five areas, Candle, Nunsatuk, Gagaryah, Dishna, and Iditarod, are designated as resource management areas. They have good settlement potential, but support conflicting uses. They will be kept in public ownership and managed for general use in the near term. When the plan is updated they will be reevaluated to determine whether they should remain in public ownership or be offered for sale.

Table 1.2 Land Disposal Areas in Final and Draft Plans

Land Disposals in Final Plan

Name	Net Area Offered
Upper N. Fork	800 ac.[1]
Appel II/III	3,000 ac.
McGrath Townsite	55 ac.
Vinasale	5,500 ac.
Selatna Mt.	5,000 ac.
Nunsatuk North	4,600 ac.
Big R. Reoffer	1,200 ac.+
Big R. South	1,400 ac.
Mt. Rich Addn.	2,100 ac.
Dillinger River	4,600 ac.
Sleetmute North	2,200 ac.
Fuller Creek	600 ac.
Aniak-Doestock	1,400 ac.
Boundary Lakes	1,400 ac.
TOTAL:	**33,855 ac.+**

Proposals and Alternatives Dropped at Draft Plan Stage

Name	Net Area Offered
Upper N. Fk. Addn.	2,100 ac.
Lower North Fork	5,500 ac.
Halfway Mountain	1,600 ac.
Halfway Mt. North	1,000 ac.
Halfway Mt. South	600 ac.
South Fork	4,000 ac.
Lower South Fork	2,900 ac.
Farewell	9,400 ac.
Windy Fork Reoffer	1,000 ac.
Windy Fork Addn.	2,900 ac.
Big River West	1,200 ac.
Hartman River	1,300 ac.
Door Mountains	2,200 ac.
Stony Headwaters	4,000 ac.
Sparrevohn-Hoho.	2,200 ac.
Stony River West	300 ac.
Lower Aniak	5,400 ac.
Aniak-Kipchuk	6,200 ac.
Upper South Fork	2,900 ac.
Chuilnuk Mountains	3,400 ac.
TOTAL	**60,300 ac.**

Proposals and Alternatives Designated as Resource Management Areas in Final Plan

Dishna River	3,100 ac.
Iditarod River	2,200 ac.
Nunsatuk River	750 ac.
Gagaryah	3,700 ac.
Sterling-Candle	3,700 ac.
TOTAL	**12,150 ac.**

Proposals and Alternatives Dropped in Final Plan

Shohomish Hills	600 ac.
Tonzona	2,100 ac.
Takotna R. & Ext.	2,250 ac.
TOTAL	**4,950 ac.**

[1]Net area offered for sale is decreased from level proposed in alternatives brochure.

Remote Cabin Areas

The alternatives brochure proposed six areas for remote cabin permits, and identified as alternatives an additional five areas with more potential for conflicts with current use. The proposals offered 230 to 460 cabin permits, and the alternatives an additional 140 to 270 permits.

As a result of public comment, the remote cabin area boundaries and permit numbers were modified significantly. Parts of all six proposed areas are open to remote cabin permits in the final plan, as well as parts of three of the alternative areas (Table 1.3). In the northwestern part of the planning area, remote cabin area boundaries were redesigned to avoid important mining and trapping areas. However, there has been local interest in the program and the cabin permit density in remaining areas was increased to three per township. The area open to permits in the Alaska Range was reduced from the area shown in the alternatives due to opposition by guides and concerns about public and commercial recreation. The density of permits allowed was reduced to 1 permit per township to minimize impacts on guiding operations and scenic quality. The Shotgun Hills and Titnuk-Taylor permit areas were reconfigured to avoid important brown bear denning areas. Two permits per township are allowed in these areas. Remote cabin permits will not be allowed in the Holokuk and Aniak River areas due to strong local opposition.

Because the amount of land suitable for settlement in the proposed Door Mountains and Tonzona disposals was very limited, these areas were combined with the North Door Mountains and Alaska Range permit areas, and are proposed to be open to cabin permits rather than disposal. A small area at the east end of Whitefish Lake which was proposed by the plan working group for remote cabins was included for consideration in the draft plan, but was dropped from the final plan due to conflicts with local subsistence activities, the availability of other permit areas in the Upper Hoholitna drainage, and the small number of sites available at Whitefish Lake.

Table 1.3

Areas Open to Remote Cabin Permits in Final and Draft Plans

Areas Open in Final Plan

Name	# Permits Allowed
Dishna-Folger-Tatalina	121
Alaska Range (incl. Swift Fork)	54
Door Mountains	18
Holitna Headwaters (incl. Shotgun Hills and Titnuk-Taylor)[2]	38
TOTAL	231

Four additional permits may be offered near Boundary Lakes (subunits 15b, 15d, and 15e) if the land quality is not sufficient to justify a disposal.

Proposals and Alternatives Dropped for Draft Plan Stage

Name	# Permits Allowed
Holokuk	55 - 110
Upper Aniak River	25 - 50
TOTAL	80 - 160

Proposals Dropped from Final Plan

Whitefish Lake	3
TOTAL	3

In total, 231 remote cabin permits will be available in the planning area. Permit density will be kept very low -- one to three permits per township -- in keeping with public opinion. (See Table 2.4 and Map 2.2 for more detailed information on cabin permit areas in final plan.)

Commercial Recreation Leases

The alternatives brochure proposed that all state lands be available for leasing for commercial recreation facilities subject to the standard areawide guidelines on leasing, new guidelines requiring notification of the local Fish and Game Advisory Committees and community representatives, and new guidelines protecting important fish and wildlife populations.

These guidelines are included in Chapter 2 of the final plan. In addition, new commercial recreation leases are prohibited on state lands in the Aniak drainage and on Tishimna Lake. A single new lease is allowed in the Holitna drainage, with up to three more leases allowed in the future if the initial lease has not caused significant adverse impacts on salmon populations or public use in the area. A limit of two leases is placed on the Beaver Mts. subunit. These additional restrictions are the result of public concern for trout, salmon, and moose populations in the Aniak drainage; subsistence fishing at Whitefish Lake; salmon populations and fish and wildlife harvests in the Holitna drainage; and public recreation, wildlife habitat, and scenic values in the Beaver Mts. In both the Holitna and Aniak watersheds, there is ample private land to meet near-term demand for additional commercial facilities.

Agriculture

The alternatives brochure proposed that no land be offered for disposal as agricultural homesteads or larger agricultural parcels. Public and agency comments concurred that state lands in the Kuskokwim Area have low suitability for agriculture and there is little demand for agricultural land. Therefore, the final plan does not designate any areas for agricultural use. Agriculture can take place on homesteads offered through settlement programs (see Table 1.2) and on private lands.

Trapping Cabins

Trapping is an important part of the regional economy and public comments stressed the importance of protecting traplines and the wildlife populations that support trapping. The plan cannot control trapline location, but it can guide the siting of trapping cabin permits on state land. As a result of public comment, the final plan increases the required distance between trapping cabin permits from 2 miles to 5 miles. Guidelines in Chapter 2 also require notification of local Fish and Game Advisory Committees and community representatives before a trapping cabin permit is granted.

Mining

The alternatives brochure proposed that all lands kept in state ownership remain open for new mineral entry, subject to existing laws and regulations, and to new guidelines on mitigation of mining impacts. Lands offered for disposal would be closed to mineral entry prior to sale. There was little comment about mining management in upland areas, but public opinion on mining along anadromous streams was strongly divided.

Thirty-nine percent of those who responded to the brochure's question on mining policy favored keeping all state lands open to mineral entry. Mining organizations supported this position. Forty-two percent of the respondents favored closing lands along all salmon spawning streams in the southern part of the planning area. This position was strongly supported by commercial fishing groups. Comments at public meetings within the planning area were split on the issue of mining near anadromous streams. Few people (6%) favored the alternative of closing lands only along nine important king salmon spawning streams in known mineralized areas.

Public opinion on the draft plan proposals remained strongly divided between those opposing any mineral closures and those sup-

porting more widespread closures. DNR and ADF&G reviewed the comments and recommended increasing the closures to cover salmon rearing areas as well as spawning beds in the southern part of the planning area. Closures are limited to the actual streambed where mitigation of adverse impacts of mining on fish is most difficult. The final plan recognizes the importance of both mining and salmon to the regional economy. The goal of the plan is to protect salmon populations while keeping opportunities for new mineral development available on as much state land as possible. The draft plan proposed a combination of mineral closures and leasehold location on spawning areas in mineralized zones, and leasehold location on rearing areas in the southern part of the planning area where fishery values are highest. Two streambed segments that provide all the sheefish spawning areas in the planning region also were closed to mineral entry.

Mineral management in the final plan is as follows:

On anadromous streams in the Tatlawiksuk, Swift, Stony, Holitna, Oskawaik, Holokuk, Aniak, and George river drainages,

1. Portions of the streams identified as salmon spawning and rearing areas in the ADF&G catalog of anadromous waters will be closed to new mineral entry bank-to-bank (between the ordinary high water marks on either side of the stream). Sheefish spawning areas also are closed bank-to-bank.

2. On identified salmon spawning and king salmon rearing areas, uplands within 200 feet either side of the ordinary high water mark will be subject to leasehold location requirements.

3. All other retained lands will remain open to new mineral entry by location. Lands offered for sale will be closed before they are sold. Existing claims will not be affected by these mineral closures or leasehold location requirements.

4. In leasehold location areas, the following guidelines will apply:

a. Instream mining will not take place unless it can be demonstrated that mining will not significantly affect salmon productivity.

b. An application for a mining lease will be required when the owner of the leasehold location is prepared to produce minerals for sale in commercial quantities or to process more than 500 cubic yards of material during bulk sampling or production.

Oil and Gas

The alternatives brochure stated that state lands in the Kuskokwim Area would continue to be available for oil and gas leasing. The decision on whether to lease state lands will be made through the DNR Five-year Leasing Program. The Five-year Program will develop specific guidelines for any future leasing, and will include a public outreach program. In addition DNR encouraged local groups interested in oil and gas issues to form an organization to coordinate local comments and exchange information on these issues.

Public meetings on the alternatives included a briefing on the potential for oil and gas in the Kuskokwim Area, and on the oil and gas leasing process. There were many questions on the methods and effects of oil and gas exploration and development, and interest in public involvement in the leasing process, but relatively few comments and no consensus on the desirability of oil and gas activities.

The final plan reiterates the description of the oil and gas leasing policy from the alternatives brochure. It includes the standard areawide guidelines on oil and gas, and a new guideline restricting development of commercial and industrial facilities adjacent to the Aniak, Holitna, Hoholitna, and Kuskokwim rivers.