

STATE OF ALASKA

SEAN PARNELL, Governor

ANILCA IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM Office of Project Management and Permitting

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August 27, 2009

Christopher Savage, District Ranger
Petersburg Ranger District
Tongass National Forest
PO Box 1328
Petersburg, AK 99833-1328

Dear Mr. Savage:

The State of Alaska reviewed the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Access and Travel Management Plan (ATM) for the Petersburg Ranger District. The following consolidated state agency comments were compiled by the State's Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) Implementation Program and cover issues relative to ANILCA and other state interests. Any correspondence or response pursuant to the Coastal Zone Management Act and the Alaska Coastal Management Program will be provided separately by the Division of Coastal and Ocean Management.

We appreciate the ATM/EA explains the relationship between the Forest Service Travel Management Rule and access provisions under ANILCA Section 811, and includes a comprehensive table which provides detailed information regarding the various routes, conditions and uses, including subsistence. Taken as a whole, the EA appears to provide the public with sufficient information to assist the District with this important decision regarding access to subsistence resources and other uses, as well as provide a substantive accounting of proposed closures pursuant to ANILCA, Section 811(b).

We support the District's efforts to address impacts to fish passage and fish habitat through the implementation of their ATM Plan. We agree that by following the Standards and Guidelines of the Forest Plan and implementing all applicable Best Management Practices, the effects on essential fish habitat (EFH) will be minimized, and that implementing the Proposed Action would lower the overall level of impacts to EFH compared to the existing conditions. However, numerous red fish culverts will remain following implementation of the Proposed Action. We recommend continuing to seek opportunities for replacing all red fish culverts on the District.

Given the level of coordination with the State leading up to publication of this ATM we have relatively few additional comments. We request the final decision document address the following two key outstanding issues:

Summary of Effects (Section 810)

The 3.8.2.6 Summary of Effects on page 74 is underplays the impacts of the proposed action on subsistence access. As written, the basis for this ANILCA Section 810 finding of no “*significant possibility of a significant restriction*” on subsistence is premised on the fact that subsistence users will still have access throughout the District by non-motorized means. While continued foot or bicycle access is indeed still available, such non-motorized access does not necessarily mitigate the substantial loss of motorized access. Given the long history of motorized use in support of subsistence activities, including the taking of large game and the gathering of firewood, subsistence users depend on a certain amount of motorized access to conduct their subsistence activities. This important finding needs to be reevaluated to more directly address the loss of motorized access.

Partnership Agreements

The introduction to Appendix D on page D-2 explains how a route could be opened via a partnership agreement. As written, the potential for a partnership appears to be limited to only those few roads that have already been identified as such in the table under “*Circumstances Road/Trail Could be Opened.*” One of the Tongass Forest Supervisor’s intentions regarding this column is to help third party interests evaluate the merits of entering into partnerships with the District to assist with capital improvements (e.g., a replaced culvert) or on-going maintenance. With this additional information, the public can be more informed about likely costs and relative merits of approaching the District about a partnership agreement. If the Table in Appendix D is used in subsequent ATM revisions, we request the inclusion of the missing information about the physical impediments, if applicable, that are dictating route closures under “*Reason for Closure or Remain Open.*” We also recognize not all routes are suitable or desirable to open even under a partnership situation; however, there are likely more opportunities than the Table currently indicates. To address these concerns in the context of the Petersburg ATM, we request the final decision document clarify that District consideration of partnership agreements is not limited to the identified routes.

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

Sincerely,



Sally Gibert
ANILCA Program Coordinator

cc: Petersburg District Analysis Team, Highlands Ranch, Colorado Fax 720-344-3535