

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Case File No.: AA-53202 (2920)
AK-040-EA00-027

Type of Action: Recreation and Public Purpose Lease
Tahini River Research Station

Location: A portion of the NE¹/₄NW¹/₄, sec. 12,
T. 26 S., R. 55 E., Copper River Meridian, Alaska,

Applicant: State of Alaska, Department of Fish and Game
Division of Sport Fish
P.O. Box 330
Haines, Alaska 99827

Prepared by: Dorothy J. Bonds, Realty Specialist

Preparing Office: Bureau of Land Management
Anchorage Field Office
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Anchorage, Alaska 99507

Date: October 4, 2000

I. INTRODUCTION

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), applied for a lease on July 2, 1998, for an existing Tahini River Research Station. This station has operated under a Land Use Permit since 1984. On May 19, 1997, ADF&G applied for a lease to conduct chinook salmon research.

The land is selected by the State of Alaska. The State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources issued a concurrence in accordance with Section 906(k) of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), on July 13, 1998.

A. Need for the Proposed Action:

ADF&G is studying chinook salmon in the Tahini River. The studies are used to manage the fishery and to estimate the abundance of chinook salmon. They need this site to continue their research.

B. Conformance With Land Use Plan:

No land use plan exists for this area. However, the environmental analysis assesses the impacts of the Proposed Action and provides a basis for a decision on the proposal (43 CFR 1610.8(b)(1)).

C. Alternatives Considered, But Not Analyzed in Detail:

An alternative to relocate the Research Station to another area was considered. This would entail the construction of another tent platform and an outhouse. This Alternative would include the removal and/or disruption of trees, bushes, and soils. Because the Research Station is already constructed and in use, relocating and constructing another station is not a reasonable alternative. Therefore, this Alternative will not be considered further in this document.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVE

A. Proposed Action:

The Proposed Action is to continue the operation and maintenance of the existing Tahini River Research Station near the confluence of the Tahini and Chilkat Rivers in southeast Alaska. The station is located within a portion of the NE¹/₄NW¹/₄, Sec. 12, T. 26 S., R. 55 E., Copper River Meridian, Alaska, on the west bank of the Tahini River. It contains 0.2 acres.

The Research Station is maintained by ADF&G. The purposes of the Research Station are to conduct chinook salmon research studies, to estimate the abundance of chinook salmon and to manage the fishery. The upper section of the Tahini River is one of the major spawning areas for Chilkat chinook salmon. ADF&G examines chinook salmon captured on the spawning grounds for coded wires placed on the fish downstream.

The Research Station is used as a base camp by two ADF&G technicians from July to mid-September. Access to the station is by jet drive river boat.

The Research Station consists of a tent platform and an outhouse. The tent platform was constructed on an elevated river bank six years ago. The outhouse was constructed above the highest flood stage mark.

Solar panels are used to recharge batteries for radios and camp lighting. After each season's use, the pit from the outhouse is back-filled, all unsecured camp equipment and refuse are removed from the site. Water is hauled in for drinking and cooking. Propane is used for cooking and heating.

The lease would be for a period of ten years or until the lands are conveyed to the State of Alaska.

B. No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative would require the removal of all facilities at the Tahini River Research Station and rehabilitation of the existing site. The applicant would not be able to continue to conduct ongoing research of chinook salmon.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Critical Elements:

The following critical elements of the human environment have been analyzed and are either not present or will not be affected by the Proposed Action:

- Air Quality
- Areas of Critical Environmental Concern
- Cultural Resources
- Environmental Justice
- Farmlands (Prime or Unique)
- Floodplains
- Invasive, Non-native Species
- Native American Religious Concerns
- Subsistence
- Threatened and Endangered Species
- Wastes (Hazardous/Solid)
- Water Quality (Ground/Surface)
- Wetlands/Riparian Zones
- Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Wilderness

1. Threatened and Endangered Species Clearance:

The Proposed Action has been analyzed and was determined to have no effect on any threatened and endangered species or their habitat.

2. ANILCA Section 810 Clearance:

The Proposed Action is administrative in nature and does not alter the current status of the lands regarding the Federal Subsistence authority and regulation. The lands are validly State selected and are not public lands as defined under ANILCA. Therefore, the Proposed Action was determined to have no effect on subsistence uses and needs under Section 810 of the ANILCA.

3. Cultural Section 106 Clearance:

The Proposed Action has been analyzed under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and was determined to be in compliance with pertinent historic preservation laws and regulations.

B. Vegetation:

The lands included in this lease application are situated on the west bank of the Tahini River. The area is located on a river bank at the base of a rocky outcrop. Up-slope, the vegetation is Sitka spruce forest with a thick mat of mosses. Down-slope towards the river, the vegetation is composed of small Sitka spruce, alder, willows, low growing shrubs, grasses, sedges and mosses.

C. Visual Resources:

This area is managed under a Class III Objective. The objective of this class is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The Visual Resource Scenic Quality of the area rates at 16 points which is Class B Quality. In the Class B type, there is a combination of some outstanding features (in this case the Tahini River) and others that are fairly common to the physiographic region (Sitka Spruce forest). There is some visible high terrain relief of the Chilkat Mountains from the lease site.

D. Wildlife:

The forest and shrub vegetation that cover the site provide nesting habitat for a variety of forest birds. Spawning salmon in the river provide a seasonal food source for black and brown bears, and attract them to the river. Bald eagles are common to the region and may nest on the forested slopes along the river.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Impacts of the Proposed Action:

The tent platform and an outhouse constitute a visual intrusion in a primitive landscape. Impact is low because of the small size and height of the structures.

Because these structures are nestled into a tree line away from the river it will generally not be viewable by most travelers. The tent platform will be left untreated and allowed to weather to natural colors and the outhouse will be painted a natural tone that will blend into the forest background. These structures will be difficult to see from an aircraft.

Some disturbance of wildlife may result from human presence and the sound of the jet drive river boat. This disturbance is short term and of minimal impact.

The tent frame camp and occupation of the site from May to September will have minimal impacts on wildlife, but has great potential to attract bears which concentrate on the river to feed on salmon. Bears in the camp could lead to the taking of the animals for defense of life and property.

The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention, but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. No visual resources will be disturbed because of the Proposed Action.

The remote location of this camp poses no threat to public health and safety. Occasional hunters have been observed passing through this area.

Human use at the site keeps vegetation from growing on trails and paths. However, the area impacted is very small, less than 1/10 acre.

- B. Impacts of the No Action Alternative:
Under the No Action Alternative, impacts would be of short duration. Vegetation around and near the structures would be temporarily impacted during the removal of the structures. Vegetation would reestablish itself within three to five years. There would be some temporary noise disturbance due to tearing down the tent platform and the outhouse.
- C. Residual or Cumulative Impacts:
Under the Proposed Action and the No Action Alternative, there would not be any cumulative impacts.
- D. Mitigation Measures:
 - 1. Wildlife:
Food and garbage should be stored in bear proof containers. Garbage should be removed regularly or burned and non-combustible materials removed.
 - 2. Vegetation:
The cutting and clearing of vegetation should be minimized to reduce impacts.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

- A. List of Preparers
Dorothy Bonds, Realty Specialist
Debbie Blank, Botanist
Jeff Denton, Wildlife Biologist

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David Kelley, Surface Protection
Donna Redding, Archaeologist
Jake Schlapfer, Outdoor Recreation Planner
Mike Scott, Fisheries
Bruce Seppi, Wildlife Biologist

VI. ATTACHMENTS

- A. USGS Quad - Skagway C-3
- B. Photographs taken September 16, 1999