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2833 43rd Avenue South
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(P) 612.201.9266

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P.O. Box 9623
Moscow, ID 83843
(P) 208.310.7003

July 29, 2016

Wrangell St. Elias National Park & Preserve
ATTN: Bruce Rogers
P.O. Box 439
Copper Center, AK 99573

Dear Mr. Rogers:

This letter is in response to your call for public review and comments on Proposed Action related to the Backcountry and Wilderness Stewardship Plan (BWSP) for Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve (WRST). It is our understanding that these comments will assist in development of alternatives for the BWSP and a draft environmental assessment that will also be submitted for public review and comment at a later date.

Wilderness Watch is a national conservation organization that advocates and educates for appropriate administration and protection of our nation's National Wilderness Preservation System. Here we provide our general comments, followed by specific comments targeted to management issues that are suggested in your announcement dated 24 May, 2016.

General Comments

We are well aware of past failures at WRST to properly implement Wilderness Act and Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) provisions and requirements. Unfortunately, these mistakes occurred in the very early stages of ANILCA implementation, and some have continued to the present time. Very serious errors were made in vital determinations such as allowing the use of all-terrain vehicles and snow machines within WRST and its designated Wilderness. Access by ATV for traditional activities was not specifically authorized by ANILCA, yet park officials not only allowed such use, but also failed to limit expansion into new areas (See attached file for "Shredded Wildlands, pages 25-30). Recreational snow machining was not considered a traditional activity by ANILCA, however, WRST managers have not prohibited this use in the Park and Wilderness area (See comments submitted by Trustees for Alaska on behalf of Wilderness Watch and other conservation organizations) We strongly urge that the entire history of ANILCA implementation at WRST be thoroughly reviewed, and the NPS must identify all specific actions necessary to bring administration of the Park/Preserve and its designated Wilderness into full compliance with ANILCA and the Wilderness Act.

Specific Comments:

The Proposed Action (PA) identifies specific categories of issues, including airstrips and cabins, and also breaks the WRST into various zones. This comment focuses first on the categories then it addresses the zones.

Airstrips (Including Airplane and Helicopter Use)

Our first concern is that the PA states, “over 200 documented airstrips and landing spots” exist in the Wilderness and backcountry of WRST. How does perpetuating more than 200 “airstrips and landing spots” meet the requirements of the Wilderness Act, ANILCA or NPS policy to minimize impacts to the Wilderness or backcountry? How many of those landing spots were in existence in 1980? How many are in existence today and what will the PA do to stem the proliferation of new airstrips or landing spots? While the PA indicates the NPS won’t maintain the strips or landing spots, it also does not indicate the NPS will limit or regulate the use of them. How does that square with the agency’s obligation to preserve the area’s wilderness character? Will the plan permit non-administrative helicopter use? These are relevant questions and concerns that are either not addressed or poorly addressed in the PA.

Regarding the specific landing spots that are to be maintained, the PA concludes that 20 airstrips in the Wilderness and 14 in the backcountry are “necessary and important” for use and administration of the WRST. Rather than merely alleging these landing spots are necessary, the determination of what number of maintained (or unmaintained) landing spots may be necessary, should be made or revisited in this current planning process. Section 1110. (a) of ANILCA provides for access to inholdings and for traditional activities using snow mobiles, motor boats and airplanes within conservation system units, however, it also provides that: “*Such use shall be subject to reasonable regulations to protect the natural and other values of the conservation system units...*” Thus, in fulfilling the NPS responsibility to preserve wilderness character and properly protect Park values, we recommend that the PA fully address these requirements.

The NPS has the obligation to analyze the location and amount of aircraft use in the Wilderness and backcountry and then determine what amount of use, and at what locations is consistent with law and policy, including minimizing impacts to Wilderness, in this BWSP. Allowing use to occur on nearly 200 spots not slated for maintenance and another 30 to 35 spots slated for maintenance without such an analysis defeats the purpose of preparing a BWSP in the first place.

Maintenance actions should require public involvement through the site-specific NEPA process. This plan is a programmatic document not designed to look at site-specific issues. It can set the framework and sideboards for those determination, but only a site-specific NEPA can determine what maintenance actions are the minimum necessary and consistent with law and policy in any given place. The plan should include a clear statement as to whether additional NEPA analysis will be done prior to airstrip or landing spot maintenance.

The NPS should be responsible for any airstrip maintenance that needs to be done in the Wilderness and the backcountry, aside from circumstances like someone picking up a piece of driftwood or moving a large rock from a gravel bar. Whether with hand tools (no permit required

as per the PA) or power tools, outside entities should not be allowed to maintain airstrips. Only the NPS or those working under direct supervision of the NPS should do maintenance. That is the only way to ensure the maintenance is the minimum necessary.

Provision 2, which allows for replacement and relocation of airstrips in the Wilderness and the backcountry, is not clear. Does it mean new strips could be built where none currently exist (relocated or replaced from outside of the Wilderness)? Further, allowing potentially new strips for concessionaires seems to violate the Wilderness Act's general prohibition on commercial services and the finding that new airstrips is essential for subsistence use seems illogical. Why would subsistence users need new airstrips? This section seems inconsistent with the duty of the NPS to protect the wilderness, backcountry and Wilderness of the Park and Preserve.

We support no signage or kiosks at the Wilderness and backcountry airstrips.

Cabins

The BWSP should revisit whether all of public safety (Wilderness Table 3) and public use (backcountry Table 4) cabins meet law and policy and whether each one is needed. For example, concessionaires currently use cabins in the Wilderness, a couple of them exclusively, though there are no public use cabins in Wilderness. This should be ended immediately, not phased out, as proposed on the PA on page 6 as it is not legal. Similarly, any public use cabins in eligible wilderness and the backcountry must meet existing law and policy.

While ANILCA allows for subsistence use of existing cabins, the PA proposes no substantive stipulations or regulations regarding their use and maintenance (PA page 6). Some sideboards or standards should be considered. For example, why would an additional shed be needed at a cabin site for subsistence uses?

Maintenance of so-called historic structures in Wilderness that don't serve an administrative need, should not be part of the PA. Similarly, where a structure is necessary, the use of motorized equipment or vehicles for maintaining the structure should be allowed only when non-motorized means are not feasible. The Act doesn't permit actions to perpetuate a structure merely because it might be deemed "historic" any more so that it would allow a structure because it is deemed "educational," "scenic," or "recreational." The BWSP and its EA need to clarify the NPS's intention regarding non-essential structures in Wilderness and the backcountry and integrate the cultural landscape program into the BWSP.

Snowmobile/ORV Use

Again, we refer you to the two other comment letters referred to in this letter. This problem is not exclusive to the Wilderness. Indeed, the PA proposes similar problematic management direction for the backcountry (including eligible wilderness).

The PA is not clear on several issues. Does any intersection between subsistence ORVs or snowmobiles use and commercial use exist? Why is the Nugget Creek trail, which is not in the plan area, mentioned in the PA in context of ORVs? The BWSP should more clearly define

these issues.

Framework Tables/Zones

The introduction to the PA identifies various management zones. While this may be an appropriate way to administer WRST, the general zone direction and specific direction for each zone must comply with ANILCA, the Wilderness Act (zones that contain Wilderness) and National Park Service (NPS) policy for backcountry areas eligible for wilderness designation. Some of the direction strays from this requirement.

Further, one of the major problems with the PA is that almost nowhere inside such a remote and large national park unit, is there a place dedicated to an ideal wilderness condition no motorized use, no structures, no installations, and a place where the NPS won't trammel. Only the rock and ice zone comes close, and even in that section has caveats and exceptions. If NPS can't meet the ideal anywhere in the largest and one of the most remote Wildernesses on the continent, then it is truly failing to redeem its wilderness responsibilities to the American public.

It is hard to imagine any trammeling action that would be necessary in Wilderness, especially one so remote (see page 10). This section should be removed, as there is no statutory support for such an action. Regardless, it is better to prevent spread of invasive weed species than attempt to deal with them after they have been established. In light of this, the allowances of stock use (see pages 18 and 40) ought to be reconsidered. At the very least, measures to prevent weed spread by stock should be initiated. These might include:

- Quarantine all animals for at least 48 hours prior to entering the Wilderness or backcountry. If supplemental feed is brought in for stock, require pelletized feed.
- Prohibit stock use in areas that currently contain weeds. Stock grazing on weeds along trails or in meadows could carry and deposit those weed seeds into other parts of the Wilderness or backcountry.
- Implement Wilderness-wide campsite standards that will eliminate bare ground that serves as a ready site for weed invasion.

Regarding stock use (see pages 18 and 40), it is unclear if any commercial stock grazing takes place in the park unit, regardless of whether it is incidental or not to bringing in visitors. We are aware of no provisions that would allow stock grazing in WRST, especially when not in use by visitors. The Wilderness Act prohibits livestock grazing in Wilderness except where it was an established use prior to designation. If the PA proposes to allow commercial livestock grazing, the plan should provide evidence that grazing was an established use and the amount of use that was occurring at the time of designation. Further, what data exist that show suitability, range conditions or trend for areas grazed by pack stock?

The installations section of the framework suggests that an increase of installations in Wilderness, up to 10%, is acceptable (see page 10, also see pages 18, 32, and 40). It is hard to imagine where any new administrative installation would meet the criterion in section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act. The installation would have to be the minimum necessary for administration of the area as Wilderness. That is a high bar. Furthermore, existing administrative installations need to be evaluated. Many of them may not meet the requirements of section 4(c). The cumulative

effect of growing numbers of installations must also be evaluated in the PA.

Agency use of motorized equipment (including helicopters) also needs to meet section 4(c). There are no standards associated with this proposal and even baselines have not been determined. The MRDG process mentioned in the framework/zone section and elsewhere cannot replace NEPA and public involvement.

Commercial enterprise, including commercial filming, is prohibited by Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act. There is no provision that would allow it. Commercial services must meet the requirements of section 4(d)(5) of the Act. A timetable should be established to review existing permits and activities to determine if they all are necessary and proper.

The PA allows that campsite degradation could occur up to 10% of the sites in Wilderness and 20% in backcountry areas, including those eligible for Wilderness (for example, Donoho Basin, Malaspina Backcountry, Remote Backcountry, and Tebay Lakes and Bremner River Mouth). That is considerable degradation. Rather, any campsite degradation should trigger further action by the agency in both Wilderness and the backcountry. The NPS needs to encourage and require “leave no trace” camping techniques rather than plan for degradation.

Summary

We believe the PA is woefully deficient in its preservation of one of our nation’s treasures, the Wilderness and backcountry of Wrangell-St Elias National Park and Preserve. The NPS has a poor track record that must be changed. Further, the NPS needs to recognize that this is a national park, and consider the concerns of citizens both inside and outside of Alaska. The vast majority of Americans will never have the opportunity to visit Wrangell-St Elias, but they have every right to expect the NPS won’t allow those who do visit to degrade their national treasure, and that the NPS won’t diminish the Wilderness through the agency’s own actions. The BWSP EA needs to evaluate options that far better protect the Wilderness and wildness of the Wrangell-St Elias National Park and Preserve. To do any less would fail future generations of citizens as well as the other creatures that call this place home.

Sincerely,

George Nickas
Executive Director
Wilderness Watch