

Background

The program to collect information on forest resources on the national forests in Alaska is managed by the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station (PNW) and is called Forest Inventory and Analysis (FIA). As part of the inventory in wilderness, the Alaska Region and PNW are proposing to use helicopters to access a portion of the inventory plots. The Wilderness Act only allows the landing of aircraft to meet the minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of the Act.

In the past, plots within the wilderness areas in the Alaska Region have not been inventoried because of the inability to gain approval to access plots by helicopter, and many locations are not otherwise accessible. An environmental analysis and the resulting decision granting approval for the use of helicopters in wilderness in Alaska to accomplish the project was remanded in an appeal decision in 1997 by the Washington Office Appeal Deciding Officer. He stated that additional analysis was needed to clearly show that the purpose for gathering the data supports the administration of wilderness, consistent with the Wilderness Act, section 4(c), and address other deficiencies of the analysis. Because of continued interest in the data that will result from the inventory work and a growing need for baseline information in wilderness, we are reanalyzing access options to complete the inventory.

The Forest Service categorically excluded the project in the spring of 2005 after completing a Minimum Requirement Decision Guide (MRDG) that determined helicopter use was the minimum tool necessary to complete portions of the inventory. Continued concerns about the impacts of helicopters in wilderness areas prompted an environmental assessment after the 2005 field season. As the assessment process continued it was evident that a Finding of No Significant Impact required for an environmental assessment could not be made because of the potential effects to wilderness. As a result, a decision was made to do an environmental impact statement.

Project Area

The wilderness system within the Alaska Region includes 19 wilderness areas on the Tongass National Forest and one wilderness study area (WSA) ¹ on the Chugach National Forest. These wilderness areas include many types of ecosystems, ranging from the high mountains of the Coast Range to the maritime islands on the outer coast on the Tongass National Forest to the glacial fiords and marine environment of Prince William Sound on the Chugach National Forest. The Tongass National Forest represents one of the world's largest coastal temperate rainforests, and approximately one-third of the 17million acre forest is designated wilderness (5.8 million acres). The Nellie Juan College Fiord WSA on the Chugach National Forest makes up about one-third of that 5.45million acre forest (2.0 million acres).

¹ For this analysis, the term wilderness study area will be used interchangeably with wilderness since the Chugach National Forest Plan states that "the WSA is to be managed to maintain and protect the existing (1984) wilderness character. The WSA shall be managed as described in this prescription until Congress acts on this area."