

Chugach National Forest Proposed Plan Question and Answers

Chugach National Forest Proposed Plan

The Forest Service is revising the 2002 Chugach National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and amendments (commonly referred to as the forest plan) which requires preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

The proposed revised forest plan describes the strategic vision for managing the Chugach National Forest for the next 10 to 15 years and provides management direction in the form of goals, desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines. Comment period ends February 19, 2016

Question: Why is the Chugach National Forest revising their current management plan?

Answer: The National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires each national forest to develop a land and resource management plan (Forest Plan) and amend or revise the plan every 10 to 15 years. Forest personnel are revising the 2002 Chugach National Forest Land Management Plan (USDA Forest Service 2002) under guidance of the 2012 National Forest System Land Management Planning Rule (36 CFR Part 219). Land management planning is an interactive process that includes three phases (Phase I, Assessment; Phase II, Developing or revising a forest plan and Phase III, Monitoring.)

Question: What parts of the Forest Plan do you expect to change/revise?

Answer:

Management direction found the 2002 Forest Plan (as amended) doesn't need to change considerably. Modifications or new plan content that is needed is primarily in response to:

- Requirements of the 2012 Planning Rule and its associated directives;
- Updated guidance for the 2005 Travel Management Rule; and
- Opportunities to address needed change to the 2002 Forest Plan through corrections, clarifications or resolution of identified issues and concerns.

Several plan components or parts of plan components will be modified, revised or added:

- Descriptions of the plan area's distinctive roles and contributions to southcentral Alaska.
- New or modified plan components (desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines) that provide for integrated social, economic, and ecological sustainability, and ecosystem integrity and diversity, while providing for ecosystem services and multiple uses.
- Consideration of expected climate change impacts as integrated plan components are developed.

- Identification of watersheds that are a priority for maintenance or restoration.
- Updating of the plan monitoring program including relevant questions and indicators to address topics identified under the 2012 Planning Rule at 36 CFR 219.12.
- Updates to geographic or management area specific plan components. This includes review of suitable uses and activities (e.g. recreation, resource extraction or development, forest products and firewood collection, habitat improvement projects, utility and energy corridors, etc.).
- Identification of Inventoried Roadless Areas and applicable plan components.
- Analysis of lands for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.
- Analysis of rivers eligible or suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.
- Recommendations (if any) to establish additional or modify existing designated areas (e.g. Research Natural Areas, National Scenic or Recreation Areas, National Heritage Areas, etc.).
- Corrections/clarifications of ANILCA related management direction.
- Consistent with the guidance for implementing the 2005 Travel Management Rule, information and maps that show designation of specific travel routes (e.g. roads, trails, areas) that belong in a separate Forest access management plan have been removed from the proposed Forest Plan.

Question: What document is being created for the Chugach National Forest?

Answer: As part of Phase II of the Chugach Forest Plan Revision process, a proposed revised Forest Plan has been created and is available for public review and comment.

Question: What is the Chugach Forest considering in the revised Forest Plan?

Answer: The 2012 Planning Rule, which became effective May 9, 2012, requires the inclusion of forest plan components that address social and economic sustainability, ecosystem services, and multiple uses be integrated with components of ecological sustainability and species diversity. Management direction is needed to address ecosystem diversity in light of changes in climate, land ownership and recreational use patterns, and potential threats to ecosystem integrity from invasive species and pollution sources.

Question: When did the Chugach National Forest begin this current plan revision process?

Answer: Beginning in March 2012, the Forest Service initiated Phase I of the Chugach Forest Plan Revision process and began to lay the foundation to engage the public about the forest plan revision process. The public and stakeholders were informed through press releases, letters and Web-based information. The Forest Service partnered with the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) to hold 10 community open houses in the spring of 2012. Eighteen additional

public meetings and workshops were held in local communities in 2013. Following publication of the following documents: Preliminary Need to Change Report; Draft Wilderness Inventory and Evaluation Report; Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers Evaluation Report; and a spring 2015 Plan Revision newsletter, in Spring 2015 a public comment period was opened and nine additional open houses were held.

Question: When is the public comment period for review of the proposed revised forest plan?

Answer: The current comment period opens on December 18th, 2015 and will close February 19, 2016. The forest plan revision Webpage will be updated regularly, mailing list subscribers and interested parties will be notified and invitations to stakeholder meetings to present additional forest plan revision information will be solicited.

Question: Will there be other opportunities to review the proposed revised forest plan?

Answer: Yes, additional comment periods and public meetings will be scheduled to coincide with the availability of the revised forest plan and draft environmental impact statement expected in late summer of 2016.

Question: What supplemental documents are available for review?

Answer: The full proposed action text (proposed Forest Plan) describing desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines, and other plan content; the 2015 Need for Change; the 2014 Assessment; and other documents that support the proposed Forest Plan revision process; are posted on the Chugach National Forest's Website at:
<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/chugach/landmanagement/planning/?cid=stelprdb5408185>.

Question: How long is the revised forest plan going to be operational?

Answer: The revised forest plan will describe the strategic vision for managing the land and resources of the Chugach National Forest for the next 10 to 15 years. It will provide management direction in the form of goals, desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines to guide future activities, uses, and project-level decision-making on the national forest.

Question: How does the proposed plan address managing access for recreation and other national forest uses?

Answer: Managing access for recreation and other national forest uses continues to be one of the major challenges given the limited areas where roads and trails are currently located and could be built. With approximately 97 percent of the national forest located within inventoried

roadless areas, the ability to create access to new areas for firewood collection, mineral materials sources, motor vehicle recreation activities, or subsistence uses is very limited.

Though strategic guidance will be provided, no decisions will be made regarding the management of individual roads or trails, such as those that might be associated with a travel management plan under 36 CFR Part 212. Some issues, although important, are beyond the authority or control of a forest plan and will not be addressed during this revision process. For example, the revision process cannot be used to modify inventoried roadless area boundaries established by the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

The proposed revised plan *does* identify and characterize recreation opportunities as a spectrum of activities and experiences including non-motorized and motorized uses. The recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) map and associated spectrum characteristics provides guidance on where motorized uses should be authorized or restricted as future project-level decisions.

Question: During the forest plan revision process, will the Forest Service recommend areas of the Chugach National Forest for wilderness designation?

Answer: Yes, a wilderness recommendation will be made at the completion of a wilderness evaluation process:

- The Forest Service is following procedures from 36 CFR 219.7 (c)(2)(v) to identify and evaluate lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.
- The wilderness evaluation process has four primary steps: inventory, evaluation, analysis and recommendation. Each step includes public participation opportunities.
- A Draft Wilderness Inventory and Evaluation Report (documenting steps 1 and 2) was posted on the Chugach National Forest's Website in Spring 2015 coincident with a 60-day public comment period and nine open-house style community meetings in April and May 2015.
- A wide range of public comments about which if any areas to carry forward for further NEPA analysis as potential recommendations have been received at various public outreach forums and comment periods between 2013 and 2015.
- Many respondents encourage the Forest Service to consider recommending for wilderness designation, all of the Forest Service lands located within the Nellie Juan-College Fiord Wilderness Study Area.
- Many other respondents do not want to see any additional wilderness recommendation and several quote sections within ANILCA that they believe prohibit the Forest Service from any further study and recommendation of wilderness (Section 708(b)(4), Section 1326(b)).

- The Forest Service is currently considering which areas (documented in the draft wilderness inventory and evaluation report) to analyze as part of one or more alternatives to revise the 2002 forest plan. The wilderness analyses will be disclosed as an appendix of the forthcoming draft EIS.

Question: How does the Forest Service manage the Nellie Juan- College Fiord Wilderness Study Area?

Answer: This area was identified for wilderness study by Congress in 1980 under section 704 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). To date, Congress has not acted upon either of the previous two wilderness recommendations associated with this study area.

The management direction in the Proposed Revised Plan is to maintain the area’s existing wilderness character and potential for inclusion into the National Wilderness Preservation System. This management direction remains in effect until Congress makes a further determination on the status of these lands.

Question: How is management of the Wilderness Study Area (WSA) different from Wilderness management?

Answer: The WSA does not meet the legal definition of a Conservation System Unit (CSU) in ANILCA. Thus, provisions in ANILCA that relate specifically to CSUs do not legally apply to the WSA.

- Unlike designated Wilderness, lands in the WSA are open to mineral entry, though activities may be limited, modified, or restricted to maintain wilderness character.
- ANILCA allows certain structures and motorized uses in wilderness under specific conditions, but also emphasizes balancing the uses with maintaining an area’s wilderness character.
- The use of snowmachines is generally not allowed in designated wilderness. Snowmachine use, however, is allowed for purposes of subsistence and traditional activities in accordance with ANILCA.
- The Chugach National Forest only manages lands above mean high tide within the boundaries of the WSA.
- Other legal restrictions for designated wilderness and primitive areas under CFR 36 261.18, 261.57, and Part 293 are not legally enforceable in the WSA.

Question: Can I use a helicopter in the WSA for subsistence or traditional activities?

Answer: No, helicopters are not allowed in the WSA for general public access, and ANILCA does

not provide an exception for their use for such purposes. The Proposed Revised Plan (pages 42-43) clarifies this direction as Table 6. General Suitability Determinations for Management Areas.

Question: How do I Submit Comments?

Answer: Written comments concerning the proposed forest plan will be most useful in the development of the revised forest plan and draft EIS if received by February 19, 2016. The agency expects to release a second draft of the revised forest plan and draft EIS for formal comment by late summer 2016 and a final EIS and draft record of decision by April 2017.

Comments may be sent in one of the following ways: 1) via instructions located on the Forest Plan Revision webpage at <http://go.usa.gov/cBWvQ> or 2) send or deliver written comments to the Chugach National Forest's Supervisor's Office, Attn: Forest Plan Revision, 161 East 1st Street, Door 8, Anchorage, AK 99501.