
**DECISION NOTICE AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
MENDENHALL GLACIER RECREATION AREA
MANAGEMENT PLAN REVISION
COMMERCIAL GUIDE, OUTFITTER AND TRANSPORT SERVICES**

**U.S. FOREST SERVICE
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JUNEAU RANGER DISTRICT
JUNEAU, ALASKA**

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INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service has revised the commercial allocation for guide, outfitter, and transport services in the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area (MGRA) Management Plan.

The purpose of this initiative was to evaluate the current commercial allocations for the MGRA Visitor Center and West Glacier Units and facilities to determine whether these allocations should be changed. This action is needed because there have been substantial changes in visitor use since 1996 (when the last analysis was completed) and an increase in visitor demand for commercial uses, including transport, outfitting, and most specifically guide services.

The number of MGRA visitors has increased substantially over the last 18 years and visitors have increasingly looked for guided services to help them experience the MGRA. To meet this increased demand, commercial operators have requested increased service days to operate in the MGRA, but have been denied since commercial use is currently at the maximum commercial allocation allowed under the existing plan.

Commercial guides provide a popular service that includes education and interpretation on a more individualized basis than is otherwise available during peak visitor periods. In addition, guided excursions provide a means to disperse visitors away from the most crowded areas near the MGRA Visitor Center. They provide visitors access to other areas in the MGRA where the visitor can experience and learn about the MGRA's natural setting and glacial environment. Guides also increase visitor safety, particularly for those visitors wanting to explore the Mendenhall River and/or Lake. The demand for access to Mendenhall Lake in particular is growing rapidly as the Mendenhall Glacier recedes and the lake becomes a prime area for glacier views. Since commercial tours on the lake are currently at capacity, many visitors attempt to access the lake and glacier on their own. Many people do not recognize the level of skill needed to safely operate on the lake, resulting in increased incidents of emergency responses and, in one case, a visitor fatality.

This effort was undertaken to evaluate commercial allocations at MGRA and determine if more commercial guided excursion opportunities may be provided to visitors while maintaining natural resource and social values.

DECISION

Based upon my review of the MGRA Management Plan Revision, Commercial Guide, Outfitter and Transport Services Environmental Assessment (EA), I have decided to implement Alternative 2, slightly modified. This decision will increase the commercial allocation on trails and Mendenhall Lake to meet the public demand for more opportunities for guided recreation experiences while protecting the MGRA's natural resources.

Increasing the commercial allocation for guide services is expected to result in greater dispersion of visitors in the MGRA, provide for a better visitor experience, while reducing visitor-related adverse effects on the natural environment. Increasing opportunities for guided trips on Mendenhall Lake is also expected to reduce public safety hazards associated with inexperienced visitors trying to get near the glacier on the lake by themselves. Visitors would still have the option to rent kayaks to tour the lake on their own, but the boat tour options would be a safer alternative for visitors who don't have the skills to safely kayak the lake on their own.

Commercial Allocations: Commercial allocations for both the Visitor Center Unit and West Glacier Unit and specific facilities are established or revised based on the new capacity levels and the 25% longer commercial season. The total commercial allocation for the Visitor Center Unit does not change, but the distribution changes to allow for more guided tours on trails. The commercial allocations for West Glacier Unit are changed and allow for more guided trips on West Glacier Unit trails and Mendenhall Lake. The commercial allocations under this decision are shown in Table 1 below and the MGRA management units and facilities are shown on Figure 1. With this decision I am increasing the allocation of service days for outfitting and guiding in the Recreation Area from the existing 85,400 to 103,856; an increase of 18,456 service days (about a 21% increase).

Table 1: Commercial Allocation

WEST GLACIER UNIT			
Facility	Total Capacity²	Commercial Allocation¹	Percent of Capacity
West Glacier Unit	150,552 ²	50,000	33%
Mendenhall River	30,000	15,000	50%
Mendenhall Lake	32,480	16,240	50%
West Glacier Trail	36,720	7,344	20%
Tolch Rock Trail	36,720	3,672	10%
VISITOR CENTER UNIT			
Facility	Total Capacity²	Commercial Allocation¹	Percent of Capacity
Visitor Center Unit	485,000 ³	462,190	95%
Powerline Trail	36,720	11,016	30%
Photo Point Trail	153,000	0	N/A
Steep Creek Trail	153,000	3,060	2%
Moraine Ecology Trail	36,720	18,360	50%
Trail of Time	36,720	11,016	30%
East Glacier Trail	36,720	7,344	20%
Nugget Falls Trail	153,000	3,060	2%
Nugget Creek Trail	18,360	0	N/A

¹This includes transporters, guides, and outfitters.

²Capacity for the entire unit is not the sum of the capacities of each facility, as one visitor may use multiple facilities on one visit.

³Capacity should be re-evaluated if infrastructure improvements are constructed.

Commercial Use: The decision on electric boat use is deferred at this time. A decision in the future is possible on electric boat use and commercial interest in that use, following the on-going master planning and sustainability meetings.

Additional mitigation measures will be taken as explained in the Objections section below. These measures include identifying and protecting bird colonies and other wildlife resources; implementing a trail use monitoring plan, and regulating commercial use via a prospectus process.

ROS Designations: ROS designations for most areas and facilities will not change. The ROS designation for Nugget Creek Trail is changed from Roded Natural to Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized.

With this decision the ROS for most areas and facilities remains the same. However, the Nugget Creek Trail ROS will change from Roded Natural to Semi-Primitive Non-Motorized, as shown in Table 2. Nugget Creek Trail is a moderately difficult trail and cannot be traversed in a short amount of time. Therefore, it is more suited to non-commercial visitor use.

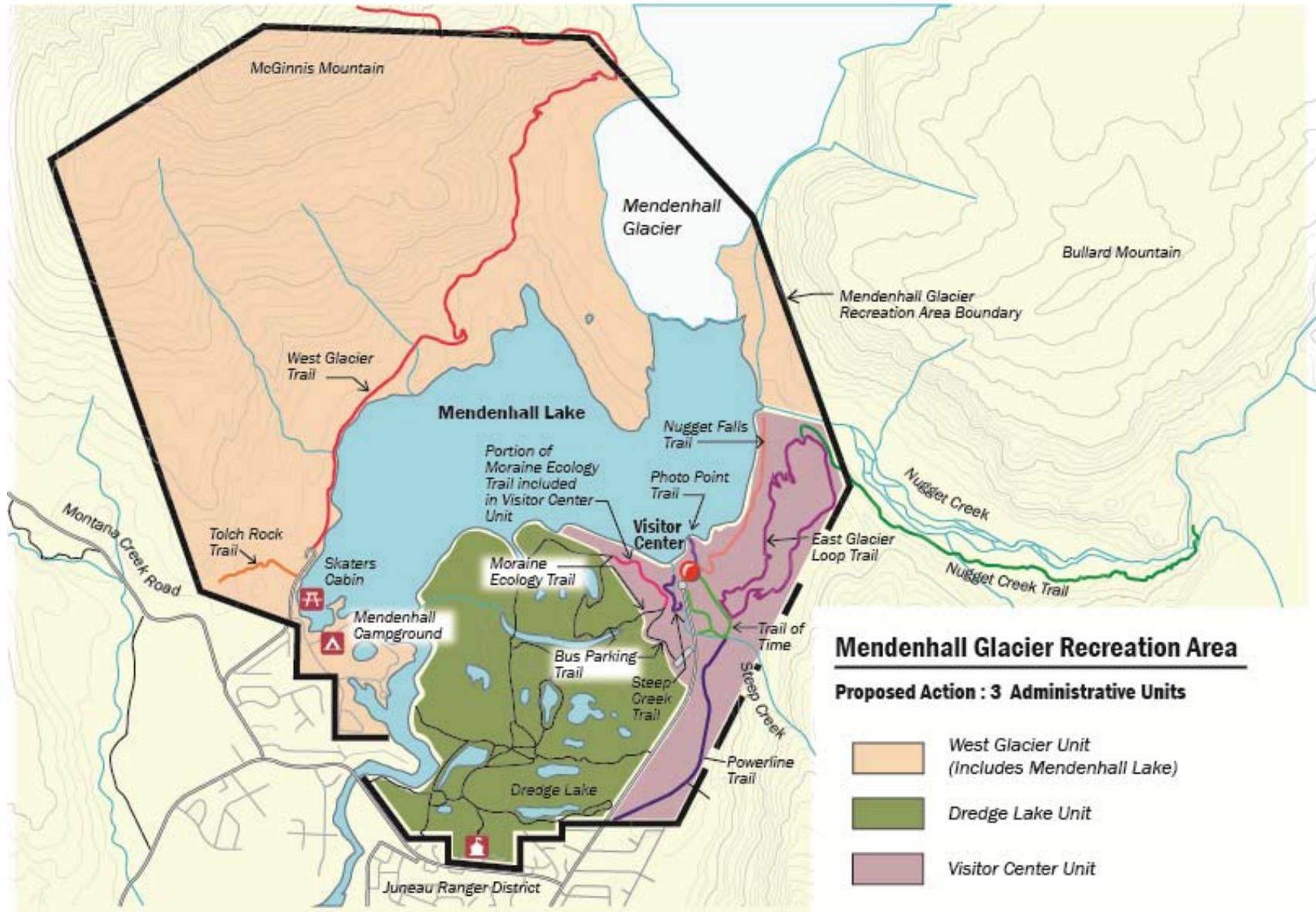


Figure 1. MGRA Management Units

OBJECTIONS

The Forest Service received three objections to the Draft Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) issued in March 2015. I have considered the information in the objections and consulted with the objectors. Proposed remedies and modifications as identified in the objection response letters from the Regional Forester, dated June 26, 2015, have been included in this document. None of the modifications or remedies are substantial changes to the analysis, nor do they present significant new circumstances or new information relevant to environmental concerns or bearing on the alternatives or impacts of the project; therefore, additional NEPA analysis is not required.

To avoid and minimize potential environmental impacts from the project, the following mitigation measures will be implemented:

- Active nesting areas will be marked and flagged for avoidance by both land-based and water-based commercial guided tours.
- The Forest Service will commit to detection and marking of the active nesting areas each year.
- The Forest Service will use adaptive management to implement changes, if necessary to manage for the safety of visitors and protection of wildlife resources in the project area. This includes providing for reporting of incidents, including potential visitor disturbance of bird habitat and hazardous bear/human interaction, along with an annual review of those reports to determine if any additional staff/volunteers are needed on site to address specific areas of concern, if changes to commercial operators' annual operating plans are necessary to respond to resource concerns, or if the number of commercial users in any given area should be reduced to respond to resource concerns.
- Commercial boats on Mendenhall Lake will be required to meet all relevant U.S. Coast Guard regulations for commercial boat operations, as applicable.
- Commercial boats on Mendenhall Lake will be limited to a maximum of 20 people including guides, consistent with the lake's ROS designation.
- Boats that have been used on other waterbodies should be thoroughly cleaned prior to use on Mendenhall Lake to prevent the potential spread of invasive species.
- All commercial uses on the lake surface must comply with restrictions near gull colonies and tern nesting areas.
 - All boats will be required to stay at least 250 meters from marked nesting areas during the nesting period.
 - If disturbance is noted by District staff, MGRA may modify special use permit conditions to require increased buffer areas or other conditions.
 - Landings on the exposed gravel beach within 250 meters of the nesting areas identified annually by Forest Service staff will be restricted during the nesting period noted above.
- Commercial boat tours are required to launch from existing hardened shoreline areas. No new infrastructure for launching boats is authorized under this decision.

- Guides may be required to use the outer tour bus parking area in the Visitor Center Unit for staging and parking to reduce congestion in the areas closer to the Visitor Center building.
- The Forest Service will implement a trail use monitoring plan to begin in May 2016 and continue for five years to provide information about encounters on trails in the MGRA. The monitoring program will use trail counters to record times when hikers pass by to give staff information on the frequency and time intervals of trail users. MGRA staff will supplement and ground-truth the electronic information with human observers to record the number of hikers and group sizes, and will hike the trails to record the number of encounters.
- The Forest Service will use adaptive management to implement changes, if necessary to manage for the appropriate level of encounters on trails in MGRA. If monitoring data after two years of monitoring indicates that Forest Plan standards and guidelines are not being met, actions would be taken to reduce commercial use to an acceptable level using the methods identified in FSH 2709.14, Chapter 50.
- The Forest Service will contact the Forestry Sciences Lab in Juneau to ascertain monitoring options (questions, design, and assessment tools) to better understand displacement of local residents who wish to recreate in the MGRA.
- The prospectus for commercial guides will specify that they are not allowed to use “shoulder season” service days during the “peak season” until monitoring of use by the agency indicates that such service day shifts are appropriate.

The decision on electric boat use is deferred at this time. The Forest Service will allow the MGRA to incorporate this option into local master planning and sustainability meetings. A decision in the future is possible on electric boat use and commercial interest in that use, following these meetings. Since the analysis of electric boat use is included in the EA, no additional NEPA would be required for implementation of a future decision on electric boat use.

The changes in commercial allocation will be implemented through the Forest Service prospectus process. A prospectus is issued by the Forest Service to invite proposals from interested tourism businesses to provide commercial recreation services to the visiting public. A prospectus informs Forest Service selection of tourism businesses best situated to provide visitors with a safe, satisfying recreation experience. Applicants are evaluated based upon their responses to criteria set to meet certain objectives. Sample objectives include: 1) description of services offered to customers, 2) ability to provide safe outfitted or guided experience to visitors, 3) experience and qualification of applicant, and 4) financial capability. This competitive process results in the awarding of commercial service days through special use permits issued to tourism businesses. Each service day represents a client participating in an activity, such as hiking, kayaking, or riding a bus. The special use permits set conditions on commercial activities and require reporting of commercial use each season.

DECISION RATIONALE

I selected the Proposed Action Alternative because it addresses the increasing demand for commercial services and the changes in visitor characteristics over the last two decades. Implementation of the Selected Alternative will allow the existing level of commercial activity to continue in the Visitor Center Unit while redistributing the commercial activity to reduce congestion in the most crowded portion of the Visitor Center Unit. It will also address the increasing demand for recreation experiences on Mendenhall Lake, resulting from changes in the natural environment that are making it more difficult to obtain good views of the glacier. The Selected Alternative will allow for more commercial activity in the West Glacier Unit, where parking has been upgraded since the 1996 Management Plan was approved.

These changes can improve recreation opportunities and experiences for the majority of visitors to the MGRA while maintaining healthy natural resources.

The MGRA Management Plan Revision, Commercial Guide, Outfitter and Transport Services, EA documents the complete environmental analyses and the conclusions upon which my decision is based.

ISSUES

Several issues were identified for consideration in the analysis based upon public comments received during the scoping period in August and September 2013.

- concerns that proposed commercial allocations are too high or too low;
- concerns about proposed changes to use of East Glacier Trail;
- concerns about allowing new types of commercial use (such as electric motor boats);
- concerns about the size of guided groups;
- concerns about changes to prohibit uses;
- concerns about changes to ROS designations;
- concerns about how increased commercial use on trails and the lake would affect local residents' recreation experiences;
- concerns that electric motor boat use and increased boat use on Mendenhall Lake would adversely affect nesting birds;
- concerns that increased commercial use levels on trails and the lake would adversely affect natural resources (vegetation, birds, bears); and
- concerns that the Forest Service was not providing enough commercial access to the MGRA.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Three alternatives were evaluated and compared in the EA; Alternative 1 (No Action), Alternative 2 (Proposed Action), and Alternative 3 (Higher Commercial Capacity Allocation).

Alternative 1, the No Action Alternative, would continue current management practices at MGRA. The commercial allocations for trails and other areas where commercial use is allowed would continue to be managed at their current levels. Most commercial visitors would continue to be concentrated in the core of the Visitor Center Unit and may not be able to access guided tours on the trails or lake since they are limited in supply compared to the demand. Demand for river tours would continue to be well below the allocation for these activities and demand for

lake tours would continue to exceed the available supply of lake service days. Visitors would continue to try to access the lake on their own and health and safety issues raised by unguided visitors on the lake would continue to increase.

Alternative 2, the Proposed Action, increases the overall allocation of service days for outfitting and guiding throughout the Recreation Area from the existing 85,400 to 103,856; an increase of 18,456 service days (about a 21% increase). Overall commercial allocations hold steady in the Visitor Center Unit, but would redistribute the commercial use allocation to allow more guided use on trails. This would result in less of the commercial allocation being available for clients who seek only transit to the site. (MGRA is beginning a new master planning process for the Visitor Center area that will look at design changes to better accommodate visitor use. The allocation for transport could be increased in the future if decisions made as part of that process provide more capacity and decrease congestion near the Visitor Center. Any future decisions to increase commercial allocations based on increased capacity are not covered under this evaluation and would require additional environmental compliance review.) These changes would be expected to better meet visitor demand and to redistribute visitor use in the Visitor Center Unit and reduce crowding in the core of the Visitor Center Unit. The commercial allocation for river tours would decrease and the allocation would be increased for lake tours.

Alternative 3 would allocate even higher commercial service days to trail and lake tours than in Alternative 2. This would result in even less commercial allocation for commercial transport services, but would provide more opportunities for guided excursions on trails and the lake.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in 2010 and a pre-scoping process was conducted at that time. Project scoping for this project began in August 2013. A proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping in August and September 2013. As part of the public involvement process, the agency held public scoping meetings on August 29 and September 19, 2013. These meetings were advertised in the Juneau Empire newspaper, on local radio stations, and on the Tongass Forest website. Letters were also sent to companies operating under existing special use permits. The EA lists agencies and people consulted on page 43.

The public was invited to review and comment on the EA, the legal notice was published in the *Juneau Empire* on October 17, 2014.

Public comments received on the EA were generally related to the issues described below.

Concerns that concerns that increased commercial use on trails and the lake would adversely affect local residents' recreation experiences.

My decision will likely affect various groups of visitors differently. There may be an adverse effect on the recreation experience for some local residents or non-guided visitors from distributing more commercial visitors onto the trails and the lake. However, the increase in recreation opportunities for the majority of visitors to the MGRA and the ability to disperse visitors to reduce crowding in the core of the Visitor Center Unit is expected to result in a positive effect on recreation opportunities and experiences for the majority of visitors to MGRA.

Concerns that electric motor boat use and increased boat use on Mendenhall Lake would adversely affect nesting birds.

Effects on nesting birds from the decision and increase in commercial boat tours allowed on Mendenhall Lake are expected to be minor. These will be mitigated by requiring commercial boat tours to observe a 250 meter buffer area during the nesting season. Forest Service staff typically observe the nesting areas a few times during the season to count bird numbers, document nesting chronology and estimate nesting success. If staff observes adverse effects on terns, buffer areas would be increased by changes to special use permit conditions on boat tour operators.

Concerns that increased commercial use levels on trails and the lake would adversely affect other natural resources (vegetation, bears).

Effects of the decision on vegetation are expected to be negligible, as no construction is proposed and visitor use will continue to occur in areas that are appropriate for this type of use. Similarly, effects on bears would be minor, as the increased use of guides would be expected to reduce the potential for adverse encounters between bears and visitors.

Concerns that the Forest Service was not providing enough commercial access to the MGRA.

Commercial allocations overall cannot be increased in the Visitor Center Unit at this time, since the area is currently at capacity. Commercial allocations are being redistributed within this unit to help redistribute visitor use and reduce crowding in the core portion of the Visitor Center Unit. Commercial access opportunities are expanded on Mendenhall Lake and some trails, but commercial transport opportunities are decreased. This may result in benefits to some commercial tourism operators and adverse effects on others.

A copy of the response to public comments is available on the Forest Service website for the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Plan at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=37050&exp=overview>

Regulatory agencies were contacted during project scoping and did not express any resource concerns associated with the proposed project.

CHANGES AND CLARIFICATIONS TO THE EA

After public and agency review of the EA, the following changes and clarifications have been made.

Page I, Summary. In the first sentence of the third paragraph, 2006 should be 1996.

Page 8, Public Involvement, in the second paragraph the date of the Scoping Summary Report should be changed from 2012 to 2013.

Page 9, Table 2, the response to the Scoping Issue “Concern about extending the season of use” should read: *The Forest Service considered alternatives to the commercial use season to be used in calculating visitor capacity and allocating commercial use. However, demand for commercial use occurs almost entirely during the cruise ship season and therefore using a different commercial season would not be consistent with actual demand and appropriate management of that demand. This is discussed further in the section on Alternatives Considered But Not Carried Forward.*

Page 14, Replace second paragraph under Alternative 1, No Action, with the following paragraphs: The 1996 MGRA Management Plan established commercial allocations for Mendenhall River, Mendenhall Lake, and West Glacier Trail in the West Glacier Unit. Commercial allocations were also established for the Visitor Center Unit, East Glacier Trail, and Nugget Creek Trail. The 1996 MGRA Management Plan did not set commercial allocations for other Visitor Center Unit trails, but noted that the Forest Service should evaluate the commercial use levels in the future and could consider changing the commercial allocations if use levels were not causing unacceptable impacts. Since 1996, the Forest Service has set commercial allocations for Powerline Trail, Steep Creek Trail, Moraine Ecology Trail, Trail of Time, and Nugget Falls Trail.

Restrictions in the 1996 MGRA Management Plan placed limits on days and hours of guided use. The character of commercial visitor use changed quickly over the years after plan development, however, and MGRA found that it was not feasible to manage commercial visitor demand using the 1996 limits. For example, cruise ship schedules change from year to year. Setting rigid limits on days and times for commercial use in one year could result in commercial use being allowed on days when no ships are in town and there is no commercial demand, or conversely not allowing any commercial use on those days or in those hours when there is commercial demand from cruise ships.

Because management plans and capacity determinations take substantial time periods to be updated, the Forest Service has moved from including rigid time and day limits in the management plan to managing this level of detail on commercial uses through the commercial service prospectus and permitting process. This allows Forest Service staff to address changes in demand and changes in resource conditions in a more timely manner. Thus, this plan proposes to set general guidance on commercial use levels for various areas and facilities and then allow MGRA to address commercial visitor demand within that guidance using adaptive management techniques under the prospectus and permitting process.

The prospectus process is issued by the Forest Service to invite proposals from interested tourism businesses to provide commercial recreation services to the visiting public. The prospectus process helps the Forest Service select tourism businesses best situated to provide visitors with a safe, satisfying recreation experience. Applicants are evaluated based on criteria such as: 1) a description of services offered to customers, 2) ability to provide safe outfitted or guided experience to visitors, 3) experience and qualification of applicant, and 4) financial capability. This competitive process results in the awarding of commercial service days through special use permits issued to tourism businesses. Each service day represents a client participating in an activity, such as hiking, kayaking, or riding a bus. The special use permits set conditions on commercial activities to protect MGRA resources, requires reporting of commercial use, and include regular performance reviews. Any non-compliance with conditions placed on the permits is addressed during performance reviews and if not adequately addressed can lead to revoking the special use permit.

Page 17, West Glacier Trail, last sentence, should read: Commercial use of the trail has increased by 333 visitors over the last five years, or approximately 3 percent per year.

Page 18, Moraine Ecology Trail, second paragraph should read: The trail was monitored by Forest Service staff for 58 days in 2013. Monitoring was conducted for two weeks in July, most of August, and throughout September. The maximum number of hikers on one day was 385, the minimum number of hikers was one, and the average number of hikers per day over the 58 days was 129. Commercially guided groups accounted for 95 percent of the trail use during the monitoring period.

Page 18, Moraine Ecology Trail, third paragraph, last sentence should read: Commercial use was 13,441 in 2013, slightly over the commercial allocation of 13,000.

Page 19, East Glacier Trail, second paragraph should read: Trail monitoring was conducted by Forest Service staff for 129 days in 2013. Monitoring was conducted periodically from mid-June to mid-October. Based on this monitoring, 25 percent of the use of this trail was by commercially guided groups. The maximum number of hikers on one day was 269, the minimum number of hikers was two, and the average number of hikers per day over the 129 days was 102.

Page 22, third paragraph, last sentence should read: This same level of capacity was assigned to Tolch Rock, which is also designated Roded Natural ROS.

The following discussion is added to West Glacier Unit, third paragraph on page 24, at the end of the paragraph: Commercial electric motor boat tours would use the existing launching and landing areas that are already used by boat tour operators. No infrastructure improvements for boat tours are proposed under this action.

The following discussion is added to Alternatives Considered but Not Carried Forward, on page 28 at the end of the page: Maintain Existing Commercial Season. Some comments received during public scoping suggested that the Forest Service maintain its existing commercial season (May 15 – September 15) despite the increase in the cruise ship season. Since the MGRA is one of the most popular visitor attractions in Juneau and demand for commercial tour access to MGRA is highest when cruise ships are in Juneau, maintaining the shorter commercial season would not address the demand for visitor access to MGRA. This would have an adverse effect on visitors and commercial tour companies. This alternative was not considered to be reasonable to carry forward in the EA.

Concentrate Visitors in Hardened Areas (Visitor Center Unit) and Reduce Commercial Use In Other Areas. The Visitor Center Unit has the most developed/hardened infrastructure in MGRA and gets the highest amount of commercial visitor use. The core of the Visitor Center Unit is already at capacity and so no additional commercial visitor use can be allocated to that area without improvements to visitor infrastructure. Since there is increasing demand for more active recreation tours on trails and the lake, it would not be reasonable to limit commercial visitor use to only the core of the Visitor Center Unit and not allow a reallocation from that area to other areas to help disperse visitors and reduce crowding in the core portion of the Visitor Center Unit. The Forest Service determined that it was not reasonable to carry this alternative forward.

Page 33, Table 11, Alternative 3, Paragraph 3, last sentence should read: The overall effect would be similar to Alternative 2, and would be minor and adverse.

Page 34, Table 11 Alternative 2, Economy, should read: The overall commercial allocation for the Visitor Center Unit would not change. The allocation for commercial use on trails would increase, but this would result in a decrease in the commercial allocation available for transport operations. This would have mixed economic effects as some commercial operations would potentially increase operations and others would not be able to increase or may have to decrease. Shifting more of the commercial allocation from transport to guided trail excursions would result in some positive economic effects as trail excursions require more staff per visitor than transport operations, resulting in additional tourism employment. In addition, the increase in commercial allocations for Mendenhall Lake and West Glacier Unit trails would also provide

for additional economic benefits through increased tourism employment and wages. Therefore, the overall effect on the local economy would be moderate and beneficial, although there may be adverse effects on some transport service companies.

Page 34, Table 11 Alternative 3, Economy, should read: The overall commercial allocation for the Visitor Center Unit would not change. The allocation for commercial use on trails would increase, but this would result in a decrease in the commercial allocation available for transport operations. This would have mixed economic effects as some commercial operations would potentially increase operations and others would not be able to increase or may have to decrease. Shifting more of the commercial allocation from transport to guided trail excursions would result in some positive economic effects as trail excursions require more staff per visitor than transport operations, resulting in additional tourism employment. In addition, the increase in commercial allocations for Mendenhall Lake and West Glacier Unit trails would also provide for additional economic benefits through increased tourism employment and wages. Therefore, the overall effect on the local economy would be moderate and beneficial, although there may be adverse effects on some transport service companies.

Page 39, The following discussion is added to the end of the cumulative effects discussion: In general, past development and increasing use levels have resulted in minor adverse effects on vegetation due to construction activities; minor to moderate adverse effects on nesting birds from high levels of visitor use; and minor adverse effects on bears from high levels of visitor use. Some past development, such as boardwalk construction near Steep Creek, have also had minor beneficial effects on bears through providing better separation between bears and visitors.

Potential future development, including trail and parking improvements in West Glacier and potential Visitor Center Unit improvements that might come out of a new master planning process, would also be expected to have minor adverse effects on vegetation and wildlife due to construction activities and minor loss of vegetation and habitat.

Page 43, Nesting Terns and Gulls, the following is added between paragraph five and six: Forest Service staff typically observe nesting colonies a few times during the season. If effects are seen, permit conditions would be revised to address effects.

Page 45, Nesting Terns and Gulls, paragraph 3 should read: This alternative would continue to have minor effects on gulls and terns. The effects would be similar to Alternative 2 due to the additional level of use on the lake, although the increased impact may be mitigated to some extent by guides helping to monitor visitor activities.

Page 45, Effects of Alternative 3, paragraph 1 should read: Overall effects would continue to be minor and adverse on gulls and terns.

The following discussion is added to the cumulative effects discussion after the second paragraph on page 48: In general, past development such as trail and parking improvements (including boardwalks near Steep Creek) have resulted in minor to moderate beneficial effects on health and safety from traffic improvements and more separation between visitors and bears, and on recreation opportunities and experiences for both local residents and visitors. The increasing level of use has had minor adverse effects on the quality of recreation experiences for local residents. The increasing level of lake use has had minor to moderate adverse effects on health and safety as more visitors attempt to access the lake on their own and put themselves in

a hazardous situation. Past improvements and increasing use has had minor beneficial effects on commercial tourism services and the local economy.

Potential future development, including trail and parking improvements in West Glacier and potential Visitor Center Unit improvements that might come out of a new master planning process, would also be expected to have minor to moderate beneficial effects on health and safety, and on recreation opportunities and experiences. Future continued high use of the area by visitors would continue to have minor adverse effects on the quality of the recreation experience for local residents. Future improvements and use of the area would likely have minor to moderate beneficial effects on commercial tourism services and the local economy.

Page 49, Effects of Alternative 1, second and third paragraphs should read: Cumulative effects on social resources from past, present and reasonably foreseeable projects combined with the effects of Alternative 1 would include minor to moderate adverse effects on health and safety; negligible to minor and beneficial on visitor recreation opportunities and experiences; and minor to moderate and adverse on recreation opportunities and experiences for local residents.

Cumulative effects on the economy combined with the effects of Alternative 1 would be negligible to minor and beneficial.

Page 50, Recreation Opportunities and Experiences, paragraph two, first sentence should read: More guided trail and lake excursions would provide opportunities for a wider variety of experiences and would provide an opportunity for higher quality interpretive and educational programs for many visitors.

Page 51, the following should be added to the end of paragraph three: There will continue to be opportunities for visitors that want to avoid commercially guided groups to use trails, such as the Dredge Lake Unit trails and Nugget Creek Trail, that do not allow commercial use. Since commercial groups are not present in the early morning or early evening, there are also opportunities during these times to avoid guided groups on trails.

Page 51, the following additional discussion should appear between paragraphs three and four: The current level of commercial guided boat tours on Mendenhall Lake is low and limited to guided human-powered large canoes. The proposed change would allow for electric motor boats in addition to the large canoes and would allow a much greater level of commercial activity on the lake. This would change the experience of visitors viewing the lake as there would be more activity on the lake between most viewing areas and the glacier and the boats seen on the lake could be larger and be different in design than the lower profile canoes. It would also change the quality of the current experience for people using human-powered watercraft on the lake (primarily local residents but also visitors on the commercial canoe excursions). These changes could result in a minor to moderate adverse effect on some visitors' recreation experiences.

Page 51, paragraph four, first sentence should read: Local residents would also have access to the expanded guided trail hike and lake boat tour opportunities.

Page 51, the following additional discussion should appear between paragraphs five and six: As discussed above, the proposed changes would have mixed effects on recreation – both positive and adverse. The increase in commercial hike and boat tour opportunities would have moderate

and beneficial effects on visitors' recreation opportunities and experiences. However, more commercial use of trails and the lake could adversely affect the quality of local residents' recreation experiences from increased commercial use on trails and the lake, changes in the views of the lake, and the addition of larger motorized boat tours. This would be a moderate adverse effect on some local residents.

Page 51, paragraph six should read: The cumulative effects of past, present and future actions combined with Alternative 2 are anticipated to be minor and beneficial overall for recreation opportunities and experiences at MGRA. Although some of the proposed changes could adversely affect the recreation experience for some local residents and non-commercial visitors, the vast majority of visitors to MGRA would benefit from the increased recreation opportunities. This combined with the beneficial effects of past trail and parking improvements and foreseeable future parking and trail improvements, result in a net cumulative beneficial effect on recreation.

Page 51, Alternative 2, Socioeconomics, paragraph one should read: The overall commercial allocation for the Visitor Center Unit would not change. The allocation for commercial use on trails would increase, but this would result in a decrease in the commercial allocation available for transport operations. This would have mixed economic effects as some commercial operations would potentially increase operations and others would not be able to increase or may have to decrease. Shifting more of the commercial allocation from transport to guided trail excursions would result in positive economic effects as trail excursions require more staff per visitor than transport operations, resulting in additional tourism employment. In addition, the increase in commercial allocations for Mendenhall Lake and West Glacier Unit trails would also provide for additional economic benefits through increased tourism employment and wages. Therefore, the overall effect on the local economy would be moderate and beneficial.

Page 53, second paragraph should read: Overall, local residents who use the trail system or the lake would likely feel that the increased level of visitor use, increased encounters with guided visitors, changes to the views of the lake and the characteristics of boat use on the lake under this alternative would have a moderate to major adverse impact on their recreation experiences.

Page 53, Alternative 3, Socioeconomics, paragraph one should read: The overall commercial allocation for the Visitor Center Unit would not change. The allocation for commercial use on trails would increase, but this would result in a decrease in the commercial allocation available for transport operations. This would have mixed economic effects as some commercial entities would potentially increase operations and others would not be able to increase or may have to decrease. Shifting more commercial allocation from transport to commercial trail excursions would result in positive economic effects as trail excursions require more staff per visitor than transport operations, resulting in additional tourism employment. In addition, the increase in commercial allocations for Mendenhall Lake and West Glacier Unit trails would also provide for additional economic benefits through increased tourism employment and wages. Therefore, the overall effect on the local economy would be moderate and beneficial.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

2008 Tongass Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan)

This decision is consistent with the Forest Plan and its direction for management of a Special Interest Area Land Use Designation (LUDs). Special Interest Areas (SIAs) are areas possessing unique or unusual scenic, historic, prehistoric, scientific, natural, or other characteristics. The objective of designating and managing such areas is to protect their unique values and, where appropriate, to foster public use and enjoyment of these areas. SIAs may be designated as scenic, recreation, historic, archaeological, geological, botanical, zoological, or paleontological areas. SIA designations are intended to maintain natural to near-natural conditions in most cases; the Recreation Area designation may include developed facilities within a natural or near-natural setting. The resources contained within these areas are not available for development, except for public facilities designed to allow recreation use while protecting the values of the area, or for interpretation and scientific study.

ANILCA Section 810, Subsistence Evaluation and Finding

The effects of this project have been evaluated to determine potential effects on subsistence opportunities and resources. There is no documented or reported subsistence use that would be restricted as a result of this decision. For this reason this decision will not result in a significant possibility of a significant restriction of subsistence use of wildlife, fish, or other foods.

ANILCA Section 811, Access Evaluation and Finding

This action has been evaluated to determine potential effects on reasonable access to subsistence resources on National Forest System Lands. There is no documented or reported access that would be restricted as a result of this decision. For this reason, this action will not result in a significant possibility of a significant restriction of subsistence users having reasonable access to subsistence resources on National Forest System Lands.

Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973

A determination of no effect has been made for all threatened and endangered species under the ESA. All project activities will be conducted in a manner consistent with the ESA and regulations. A complete Biological Evaluation (BE) is included in the planning record.

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966

The Forest Service program for compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) includes locating, inventorying and evaluating the National Register of Historic Places eligibility of historic and archeological sites that may be directly or indirectly affected by scheduled activities. Regulations (36 CFR 800) implementing Section 106 of the NHPA require Federal agencies to consider the effects of their actions on sites that are determined eligible for inclusion in or are listed in the National Register of Historic Places (termed "historic properties") The State Historic Preservation Officer concurred with the Forest Service finding of no adverse effect on historic properties on July 18, 2014.

Clean Water Act

The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) is the lead State agency for promulgating and enforcing water quality regulations under the Clean Water Act. The Clean Water Act recognized the need to control nonpoint source pollution. Section 313 of the Clean Water Act requires the Forest Service to comply with all State requirements for control and

abatement of water pollution to the same extent as any nongovernmental entity. No construction activities are proposed and none of the actions proposed are expected to adversely affect water quality.

Floodplain Management (Executive Order (E.O.) 11988), Protection of Wetlands (E.O. 11990)

E.O. 11988 directs Federal agencies to take action to avoid, to the extent possible, the long- and short-term adverse effects associated with the occupancy and modification of floodplains. No construction activities are proposed and no action proposed would occupy or modify the floodplains. This action will not impact the functional value of any floodplain as defined by Executive Order 11988.

E.O. 11990 requires Federal agencies to avoid, to the extent possible, the long- and short-term adverse effects associated with the destruction or modification of wetlands. This action will not impact the functional value of any wetland as defined by Executive Order 11990.

Recreational Fisheries (E.O. 12962)

Federal agencies are required, to the extent permitted by law and where practicable, and in cooperation with States and Tribes, to improve the quantity, function, sustainable productivity, and distribution of U.S. aquatic resources for increased recreational fishing opportunities. Since there are no recreational fisheries in the project area, there are no direct, indirect or cumulative impacts related to this Order.

Invasive Species (E.O. 13112)

E.O. 13112 directs Federal agencies whose actions may affect the status of invasive species to insure coordinated, cost-efficient agency actions addressing the prevention, detection, control and monitoring of alien species. "Invasive species" refers to those species that are likely to cause economic or environmental harm, or harm to human health. Actions to be taken include planning at the local, tribal, state, regional, and ecosystem levels, in cooperation with stake holders and organizations addressing invasive species. Agencies are not to fund or authorize actions that the agency believes are likely to cause or promote the introduction or spread of invasive species, unless the benefits of the action outweigh the potential harm caused by the species. No construction activities are proposed and no other activities proposed are anticipated to introduce or spread invasive species. This action will not affect the status of invasive species.

Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1996 (hereafter referred to as "the Act") requires consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service on activities that may adversely affect Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). EFH is defined as "those waters and substrates necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity." EFH for Pacific salmon includes marine waters, intertidal habitats, and freshwater streams accessible to anadromous fish. Marine EFH for the salmon fisheries in Alaska includes all estuarine and marine areas utilized by Pacific salmon of Alaska origin, extending from the influence of tidewater and tidally submerged habitats to the limits of the U.S. exclusive economic zone. The Act promotes the protection of these habitats through review, assessment, and mitigation of activities that may adversely affect these habitats. Although Mendenhall Lake is listed in the anadromous fish catalog for several species of anadromous fish, no construction activities are

proposed in the lake or on shore and none of the activities proposed are expected to adversely affect existing fish use of the lake. This action will not affect EFH.

Protection of Migratory Birds (E.O. 13186)

E.O. 13186 established the responsibility of federal agencies to protect migratory birds in furtherance of the migratory bird conventions, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Acts, the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the Endangered Species Act, NEPA and other pertinent statutes. EO 13186 requires agencies to determine if their actions will have or are likely to have a measureable negative effect on migratory bird populations. Migratory birds were evaluated in the Wildlife and Subsistence Resources Analysis for the MGRA Management Plan Revision, Commercial Guide, Outfitter and Transporter Project. As noted in that document, most species would not be affected by the project. Effects on nesting gulls and arctic terns were evaluated and found to be minor to moderate, but would be mitigated through marking of active nesting areas, a no wake zone, maintaining a 250 meter buffer from boat tours to active nesting areas, and adjusting commercial use as needed through adaptive management if unanticipated effects are identified. This action complies with E.O. 13186.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The significance of environmental impacts must be considered in terms of context and intensity. This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human and national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. In the case of a site-specific action, significance usually depends upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Intensity refers to the severity or degree of impact. (40 CFR 1508.27).

Context

The MGRA is a Special Interest Area within the larger Tongass National Forest. It is a local, regional, national and even international attraction. The area has been popular with local and out-of-town visitors since the 1920s, and the MGRA was established and set aside for public recreation use in 1947. The Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center constructed in 1962 was the first Forest Service Visitor Center in the nation. It was dedicated to the furtherance of the “understanding and enjoyment of glacial phenomena.”

The MGRA is unique in the Tongass National Forest in that it is adjacent to an urban area with high levels of commercial tourism based primarily on the cruise ship industry. The highest levels of visitation to the MGRA occur on those days when multiple cruise ships are visiting Juneau. The MGRA is one of the most popular attractions for visitors to Juneau, and many cruise ship visitors visit the MGRA either on a commercial tour or on their own. In addition, the area is a popular year-round recreation resource for local residents.

Commercial services at MGRA include guided excursions on trails, the river and the lake; outfitter services (rental of kayaks delivered to the lake shore); and transport services, such as taxis, vans and buses. Commercial services allow MGRA to accommodate a high level of tourism by using mass transportation to reduce traffic and parking demand, by providing guided tours that disperse visitors away from the core area, and by providing interpretive services to educate and inform visitors about the physical and biological characteristics of the area.

Intensity

The intensity of effects was considered in terms of the following:

1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial.** Effects are anticipated to be negligible to moderate for the Selected Alternative. (See Table 4 at end of document).
2. **The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.** The proposed action is anticipated to increase public health and safety by providing more guided experiences on trails and Mendenhall Lake.
3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** No changes to infrastructure or use areas are proposed; the proposed actions would have no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area.
4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. The EA acknowledges that the selected alternative would result in potentially moderate adverse effects on recreation experiences for some local residents and non-commercial visitors. However, the proposed action would result in moderate beneficial effects on recreation opportunities and experiences for the vast majority of visitors to the MGRA.
5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk.
6. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects. This action does not approve any changes to areas where commercial use is allowed, nor does it propose any changes to infrastructure. Although the proposed action does allow electric motor boat use on the lake for the first time under special use permits, this is consistent with the lake's designation as Semi-Primitive Motorized (see Tongass Forest Plan, Appendix I, page 3). This action would not change the Forest Order JRD-97-001 that restricts motorized uses that are not specifically allowed by special permit.
7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** The cumulative impacts are not significant. The effects of the Selected Alternative considered with the effects of the cumulative projects are expected to be in the minor to moderate range for all natural and social resources. (See EA pages 35-53)
8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.** The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. The State Historic Preservation Office concurred with a



finding of No Historic Properties Affected on July 18, 2014 (See EA page 55).

9. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.** The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973.
10. **Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.** The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA and built into required mitigation (see EA page 29).

After considering the effects of the actions analyzed, in terms of context and intensity, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Pursuant to 36 CFR 218.12, I may not sign the Decision Notice until the Reviewing Officer has responded in writing to all pending objections. Beth Pendleton, Regional Forester, is the Reviewing Officer and has responded to the three objections received in a letter dated June 26, 2015. I have incorporated those instructions into this decision under the Objections section on pages 4-6 above. Based on the discussions and findings in that review, I am issuing a final decision. The project may be implemented immediately upon the date that this decision is signed. No appeal period is provided after the final decision is made.

CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact:

Jennifer Berger, Lands Special Uses, Tongass National Forest, 8510 Mendenhall Loop Road, Juneau, Alaska 99801, 907-789-6278.

M. Earl Stewart
Forest Supervisor

Date

Table 4: Environmental Effects of Selected Alternative

Resource	Environmental Effects
Biological	
Vegetation	Most areas with high levels of visitor use are hardened appropriately for this level of use, but some visitors occasionally stray from hardened surfaces resulting in minor adverse effects on lakeshore and trailside vegetation. Guides would accompany a higher percentage of visitors and could prevent some adverse effects on lakeshore and trailside vegetation. Guided activities would primarily occur in hardened areas or areas more suitable for high use levels. Effects would remain minor and adverse.
Bears	Impacts to black bears would be mixed. The higher number of visitors on trails would increase the potential for encounters in outer areas of MGRA, but would also reduce crowding in the core visitor area where bear use is high. In addition, having a higher percentage of visitors managed by guides may reduce unpredictable visitor behavior during bear encounters, reducing the potential for adverse encounters that increase the stress on bears. The overall effect on bears is expected to continue to be minor and adverse.
Nesting Birds	Effects on nesting birds would be mixed. Reduced crowding near the Visitor Center may decrease the potential for adverse effects on nesting birds in this area. The higher number of visitors on lake excursions has the potential to increase bird disturbance. However, providing guided excursions on the lake would reduce the potential for adverse effects from non-guided visitors trying to access the glacier on their own. Guides would provide more visitor control to minimize visitor activities in or near nesting areas and educate visitors about sensitive nesting habitat. Guides would be required to follow permit stipulations regarding staying outside established buffer areas around nesting sites. The overall effect would be minor and adverse.
Social	
Health & Safety	Increasing access to the lake with guided excursions would reduce the number of visitors attempting to access these areas on their own, improving safety on the lake. This would result in a minor to moderate benefit to visitor safety.
	Guided visitors in the Visitor Center area and near Steep Creek would be under greater control and more educated about bear encounters reducing safety hazards from adverse bear interactions. Overall effects on health and safety would be minor and beneficial.

<p>Recreation</p>	<p>Visitor Recreation Opportunities and Experiences: Additional capacity would be available for visitors that want guided services, and new opportunities on the lake surface would be available. This results in moderate beneficial effects on recreation opportunities and experiences for most visitors.</p>
	<p>Local Recreation Opportunities and Experiences: The increase in guided visitors on trails would increase the number of social encounters and lower the potential for solitude. The effects on local resident recreation opportunities and experiences on trails would be minor to moderate and adverse. The decrease in non-guided visitors around the Visitor Center would likely be negligible to minor and beneficial on local residents recreating in this area.</p>
<p>Economy</p>	<p>The overall commercial allocation for the Visitor Center Unit would not change. The allocation for commercial use on trails would increase, but this would result in a decrease in the commercial allocation available for transport operations. This would have mixed economic effects as some commercial operations would potentially increase operations and others would not be able to increase or may have to decrease. Shifting more of the commercial allocation from transport to guided trail excursions would result in some positive economic effects as trail excursions require more staff per visitor than transport operations, resulting in additional employment. In addition, the increase in commercial allocations for Mendenhall Lake and West Glacier Unit trails would also provide for additional economic benefits through increased employment and wages. Therefore, the overall effect on the local economy would be moderate and beneficial, although there may be adverse effects on some transport service companies.</p>