

## **Spencer Whistle-Stop Recreation Capacity** **February 26, 2009**

**Purpose:** The Spencer Whistle-stop has been available for summer public recreation use since August 2007. The Chugach National Forest manages this area in partnership with the Alaska Railroad. The Railroad provides access to the site while the Forest Service provides facilities for the public to use. A Recreation Capacity is needed to authorize summer commercial recreation service providers (Outfitter Guides), so that the amount and type of use is consistent with the summer recreation experience the Forest Service wants to provide at the Whistle-stop and the area surrounding it.

**Management Guidelines:** Chugach National Forest management is guided by the Forest's Land and Resource Management Plan, also known as the Forest Plan. Recreation Capacity is addressed in the Forest Plan by following guidelines defined by the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) Class assigned to the area.

The Spencer Whistle Stop was designated as a Developed Recreation Complex in the Forest Plan, where facilities are developed for user comfort and convenience and the ability to accommodate large numbers of people in a natural appearing setting. Frequent interaction with other parties is to be expected. This area is shown on the following map. The area immediately surrounding the Begich, Boggs Visitor in Portage Valley is the only other Developed Recreation Complex on Chugach National Forest, although the development scale at the visitor center exceeds Spencer Whistle Stop.

The ROS for the Spencer Whistle Stop Developed Recreation Complex is Roaded Modified (RM), which allows for over 15 encounters a day on trails, less than 15 encounters a day on shorelines, and less than 6 encounters/day off shorelines or trails. There is no maximum group size. These guidelines provide for a low degree of solitude.

The area immediately surrounding the Spencer Whistle Stop Developed Recreation Complex is in the Backcountry Prescription, where a variety of backcountry recreational opportunities and activities are managed for in natural appearing landscapes, with opportunities for solitude, isolation and quiet. Tourism activities with limited facilities are appropriate. This is the predominant management prescription on the Kenai Peninsula.

The ROS class for the area surrounding the Developed Recreation Complex is Semi-Primitive (SP), which allows for less than 15 encounters a day on trails, less than 6 encounters a day on shorelines, and off shorelines or trails. Group size should be under 24. These guidelines have been established to provide a high to moderate degree of solitude.

For both of these management prescriptions, Outfitter Guides are allocated 50% of the total recreation use. The summer motorized access determined by the Forest Plan for both management prescriptions is "open to helicopters, closed to OHV".

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The following chart summarizes the Forest Plan’s ROS guidelines for encounters and group size for the two management prescriptions:

ROS Class	Solitude	No. of Encounters with other parties			Maximum party size
		On trails	On shorelines	Off trails & shorelines	
RM	low	>15	<15	<6	NA
SP	high - moderate	<15	<6	<6	24

**Site-Specific Management:** The Whistle Stop site provides a unique recreation opportunity for people: a short train ride brings them to a small train station area, where they disembark and find themselves surrounded by snow-capped peaks towering 4000’. Spencer Glacier pours out between the mountains, emptying into Spencer Lake, providing an awe-inspiring landscape. A smooth, gravel-surfaced trail makes an easy hike to the lakeshore, which continues to the toe of the glacier where the more adventurous can continue onto the ice. People can choose to camp overnight or return to civilization several hours after their arrival on the train. One Outfitter/Guide offers Placer River raft trips or a canoe excursion on Spencer Lake, while another has been authorized for glacier hikes, but the limited train schedule has not made this operation feasible yet.

The District would like to promote an “edge-of-wilderness” experience for people, where they can appreciate the beauty of the surrounding landscape and escape the hustle and bustle of modern life, with simple facilities that provide a sense of security and offer basic comfort. The limited development is meant to allow people who may not otherwise venture off into the wilds of Alaska a glimpse of what the Alaskan wilderness is all about. In order to do this, the district has determined to limit activities that would add non-natural noise to the visitor’s experience such as motorized boats and vehicles, as well as maintain a recreational experience free of feeling crowded, and where the opportunity for solitude in the area beyond the Developed Recreation Complex is high. Establishing some form of rustic, yet secure shelter for overnight use would help to provide this type of recreation experience to those who may not wish to brave the area’s unpredictable weather. Torrential rains with high winds, point to the need for shelter more sturdy than most lightweight back-packing tents. These shelters should be located within the Developed Recreation Complex; as this is the management prescription where facilities for user comfort and convenience are appropriate.

Access to the site is relatively costly, both in terms of time and money, as compared to many other recreation opportunities on the Chugach National Forest. In addition to the train, snow-free access is available by helicopter, power boat, or with great difficulty on foot. Snow-free cross-country travel of at least 8 miles is nearly impossible due to wetlands and brushy vegetation, and would take a full day at a minimum. The river is difficult to navigate above Luebner Lake, and the cost to use your own boat would likely include costs of repairs due to shallow water channels. Access by the railroad requires purchase of a train ticket, currently at \$64 for the least expensive ride. The cost of helicopter access would be considerably more expensive.

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The limited access to the site helps to manage the crowding aspect; managing Outfitter/Guide permits is another way to manage noise and crowding issues. Limiting non-guided, or independent users through a permit system is another option. Instituting a permit system would detract from the desired recreation experience where regulations convey a more developed and less primitive experience.

Considering the site-specific management along with Forest Plan management guidelines leads to the following recommendations for activities and facilities at the Spencer Whistle Stop for Outfitter/Guides:

### 1) Boating:

- a) Non-motorized boating on Spencer Lake: Forest Plan direction is “open for helicopters, closed to OHV’s”. Applying this limited motorized use concept to the lake will provide opportunities for quiet recreation as prescribed in the Backcountry Management Prescription, and help provide the “edge-of-wilderness” recreation experience desired for this area. Recommend small boat size (under 10 passengers), dark colors on surfaces above water and low profile (no sails) in order to minimize how visible the boats will be.
- b) Non-motorized float trips starting on Spencer Lake: this use will be part of lake’s capacity as well as river’s capacity; non-motorized as explained above. Rafts, canoes, and kayaks are the type of boats suitable for this use, size and appearance as described in “1.a”, above.
- c) Non-motorized float trips starting on Placer River: this use will be part of river’s capacity; non-motorized use is recommended as described in “1.a”., above. Rafts, canoes, and kayaks are the type of boats suitable for this use, size and appearance as described in “1.a”, above.
- d) Motorized river trips: up to Luebner Lake only. Restricting use to this point will help maintain the desired “edge of wilderness” experience at the Whistle Stop by keeping O/G boat engine noise over 5 miles away; and the river further upstream is unsuitable for most motorized boats. Having the lower river open for motorized use will allow a currently permitted Outfitter/Guide the opportunity to continue operating on the lower river, while preserving the upper river as a place where there are opportunities for quiet as prescribed in the backcountry management prescription. Recommend boat size not exceed 6-passengers in order to minimize effects from engine noise, wakes and appearance when viewed from land.

### 2) Hiking on developed trails

- a) Spencer Glacier Trail within the Developed Recreation Complex begins at the train stop and continues just over 1.5 miles out to the boat launch site. Several short spurs provide access to other facilities, including a group campsite, a viewing platform and a primitive raft put-in site. Approximately half of the trail is within the Developed Recreation Complex. The Forest Service currently provides free interpreter-led hikes for people arriving for a day excursion from the train.

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- b) Spencer Glacier Trail beyond the Developed Recreation Complex continues another 1.5 miles out to the toe of the Glacier, and provides access to 9 dispersed camp sites (from 2 different spur trails) and the Spencer Bench Trail (currently only approx. 500' long).
- 3) Camping
  - a) Existing group campsite is currently off-limits to Outfitter/Guide use, but their clients could use it before or after a commercial outing. This facility has picnic tables, a group fire ring toilet and water (well to be installed in 2009). Entire site can be reserved for 25 people for \$100; or a 10-person portion can be reserved for \$35 and a 15-person portion can be reserved for \$65.
  - b) 9 hardened dispersed sites (cleared area with level gravel pad, no amenities) used on a first-come first served basis
  - c) Undeveloped dispersed sites can be used outside of the Developed Recreation Complex. No vegetation should be removed to create a site.
  - d) It is recommended that shelters for Outfitter/Guide client use be allowed due to unpredictable weather patterns that can often include torrential rains and high winds. Each camp area should be surrounded by bear fencing and have a sheltered area for cooking that is physically separated from sleeping area. Sleeping areas should provide space for setting up backpacker type tents, these would be set up only when used for the night. Sheltered Cook tents can also be used as gear storage, and should include a heat source. Shelter design need to be appropriate for the Whistle Stop, such as wall tents.
- 4) Hiking/ice climbing on Spencer Glacier – currently limited by train schedule, gear storage, and lack of permitted overnight use. To do this activity in 2009 using train access would require that clients stay overnight. Alternatively, a different means of site access, either by helicopter for either getting to ice or leaving, or both; or by river for leaving (since it is expected that no upstream river access will be allowed) would also allow this activity to take place in 2009.
- 5) Helicopter Landings on Spencer Glacier – can incorporate hiking, dog mushing or overnight camping along with landings.

During the 2009 season, the maximum amount of use for each of these activities, to be consistent with the Forest Plan and the recommended amount of use to provide the desired recreation experience, are as follows:

### **1) Non-motorized boating on Spencer Lake**

- a) The lake is within the Backcountry Management Prescription, with a Semi-primitive ROS. The ROS guidelines are less than 6 encounters per day and a maximum group size of 24 people; this would allow up to 5 groups on the lake at one time encountering each other, as well as people on shore outside of the Developed Recreation Complex encountering people on the lake. Half of the use (2.5 parties) can be provided by Outfitter Guides.
- b) The boat launch site has only been used by one O/G group at a time, and with limited time on-site due to train schedules, additional groups would need to launch at nearly the same time.

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- c) The recommended O/G capacity for 2009 is one party of 24 people/day in order to
    - 1. ensure people outside the Developed Recreation Complex or away from a developed facility within the complex can experience some solitude and isolation;
    - 2. allow monitoring of this amount of use prior to permitting more;
    - 3. allow some capacity for river trips that start on the lake; and
    - 4. monitor the boat launch site to see if additional use can be accommodated.
  - d) A group size of 24 could be handled by one very large boat, or up to 24 single-person boats, or a combination in-between. It is recommended that boat size be no larger than one that can carry 6 passengers plus 1 guide, resulting in 4 – 24 boats on the lake with the maximum party size of 24. Additionally, boats should have a low profile (no sails) to minimize how visible boats are by shore-based viewers.
  - e) The lake is just over a mile long, and up to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile wide, about 200 acres, allowing for a wide dispersal of these boats. Small icebergs are common on the lake, helping to obscure the views/encounters between boaters and between boaters and shore-based people. It is anticipated that boaters would move from the launch directly towards the glacier, thereby staying fairly distant to shore-based viewers for the majority of the time they are on the lake. The recommended smaller size and low profile will make them difficult to see from over  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile. By initially limiting this use to 1 O/G party a day, the launch site should be able to accommodate non-guided use.
  - f) Monitoring the use of the boat launch site by non-guided use will help determine if an additional lake launch site is needed, and how additional launches could be accommodated.
- 2) Non-motorized float trips on Placer River**
- a) Float trips that originate at the lake launch site would be included in the capacity for the lake, the same ROS and rationale as presented above would apply.
  - b) The Lake and river are both in the backcountry Management prescription with and ROS of SP.
  - c) The recommended O/G capacity for 2009 is one party of 24 people/day from the lake launch site, plus one party of 24 from a site launching directly into the river. This will allow people outside the Developed Recreation Complex, or away from developed facilities within the complex to experience some solitude and isolation, and to allow monitoring of this amount of use prior to permitting more. This would bring the total O/G parties permitted on the lake up two/day, allowing an additional three non-guided parties and be within ROS guidelines on the lake.
  - d) Once the float trip enters the river, the area is confined and becomes more like a trail, where encounters are expected to be higher as people travel past each other coming and going. If the upper stretches of the river remain generally un-motorized due to river characteristics and management action that does not permit motorized O/G use, then the encounter rates should be fairly low, as there would be predominantly one-way traffic (downstream). Permitting up to two float parties/day on the river will allow for up to three additional non-guided float parties/day to occur and be with ROS guidelines for shorelines, and up to 14 parties/day if the “on-trail” encounter rate is used.
- 3) Motorized river trips**

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- a) This area is in the Backcountry Management prescription, where less than 6 encounters/day on shorelines is prescribed. However, if the river is thought of as a trail (a linear transportation route) then less than 15 encounters is the ROS encounter guideline.
  - b) Motorized use has the potential to create more encounters/party than non-motorized because each party travels both upstream and downstream, potentially creating two encounters with each party on another boat or on the shore. 7 motorized parties/day traveling up and downstream could occur and stay with the ROS guideline. Half of these parties could be from O/G, or 3 parties for O/G motorized trips between Turnagain Arm and Luebner Lake if no float trips are considered.
  - c) **Maximum allowable O/G permits:** If the 2 float trip permits are in-place as recommended in no. 2, then there could be up to 2 encounters by O/G float trip parties, so the number of *motorized* O/G should be limited to 2 parties/day (resulting in a possible total of 6 encounters/day since each motorized party creates 2 encounters) However, one of the float parties, as currently operating, ends their trip at Luebner lake (their permit allows them to continue down stream if needed for unexpected reasons, such as train pick-up problems) Knowing this, and knowing that motorized permits would not continue above Luebner lake, allows an additional party/day to the motorized use category. With this limit, a stationary party on the shoreline below Luebner Lake could have, at most, 7 encounters with permitted O/G parties (1 from a float trip party and 6 from motorized river trips (each motorized trip creates one encounter on trip upstream and one on return downstream). An additional 7 encounters from non-guided groups could occur and be within the Forest Plan ROS guidelines for trails.
  - d) It is recommended that a party be limited to one motorized boat in order to safely travel as one party. Boat size for this river is assumed to be one guide and no more than 6 passengers, limiting party size to 7.
  - e) It is recommended that two motorized O/G parties/day be authorized for Placer River in 2009. This use should be monitored to determine if additional use can be accommodated without detracting from the recreation experience of all users in the area.
- 4) **Hiking on Spencer Glacier Trail within the Developed Recreation Complex**
    - a) Forest Plan/ROS guidelines do not restrict either the party size or number of encounters for people on trails, allowing unlimited opportunities for guided hiking starting at the train stop and ending just beyond the boat launch area, approximately 1.5 miles one-way. Hiking beyond this point would need to be limited to meet Forest Plan ROS guidelines.
    - b) The limiting factor is the capacity of the Alaska Railroad, because there is no other access to the trail if motorized boats are not allowed past Luebner lake.
    - c) It is recommended that no more than 3 parties/day of up to 24 people be permitted for the 2009 season, in order to monitor the effects from this level of use prior to permitting additional use. 24 people in a group would allow a hiker group to also be a lake or river float trip group.
  - 5) **Hiking on Spencer Glacier Trail beyond the Developed Recreation Complex**

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- a) This area is in the Backcountry Management prescription, with a SP ROS, where less than 15 encounters/day on trails and a maximum party size of 24 is prescribed. Each party has the potential to encounter all other parties on the trail, as they move out or back. Half (7) parties could be commercially-guided, for a total of 168 people/day.
  - b) The limiting factor is transportation to the site aboard the Alaska Railroad. For the 2009 season, day users would be hard-pressed to travel much beyond the 3-mile roundtrip hike, due to train schedules. Most participants in this activity will need an alternative to the current day-use train schedule, either camping overnight, floating out or leaving via helicopter
  - c) It is recommended that a guide base facility be located within the Developed Recreation Complex, but near the start of this SP section of trail to facilitate this activity. This facility should be combined with an O/G base camp shelter as discussed earlier in this document. It would enable a commercial guide to stay overnight and be available to lead hikes prior to the train's daily arrival.
  - d) It is recommended that capacity for 2009 be set at 3 parties of no more than 10 total people, including guides, in order to monitor the effect of this amount use prior to permitting additional use.
- 6) **Camping at a group site:** not available for commercially-guided groups to use. Located within developed Recreation Complex, no encounter or party size limit.
  - 7) **Camping at a dispersed site** – 9 sites located outside of the Developed Recreation Complex, each can accommodate up to a single 4-person tent, not reservable, first-come, first served. Access to these sites is from Spencer Glacier trail; trail capacity of 15 parties per day would include campers. Recommend these remain available to independent users.
  - 8) **Camping at an undeveloped site**
    - a) Located outside of the Developed Recreation Complex, capacity determined by access and density of vegetation. ROS guidelines indicate that there should be no other parties within sound or sight of a campsite, suggesting sites should be widely dispersed so that campers do not see or hear one another.
    - b) Campers could hike cross country from train tracks, but it is more likely they would use the developed Spencer Glacier trail as primary means of access, thus the daily capacity would be part of the 15 encounters for the trail, half of which can be by O/G parties. ROS guidelines allow for a party size of 24, but it is more likely to find natural opening for up to two to three small tents, no brush should be removed to support this activity.
    - c) It is recommended that for the 2009 season, 2 currently undeveloped sites be made available to O/G to set up dispersed camps with each site having a total capacity of 10 people, including guides. Each site should have a cook/gear shelter where the guides could sleep, and space for 4 2-person tents, or 3 3-person tents. The sleeping area should be at least 100' from the cooking area, and the entire camp should be surrounded by electric bear fence. Sites need to be separated enough so they are not within sight or sound of each other. This recommendation is made in order to monitor the effect of this amount use prior to permitting additional use.
  - 9) **Hiking/ice climbing on Spencer Glacier**

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- a) Access to this activity can be from the Spencer Glacier trail, or by helicopter. The trail capacity of 15 and party size of 24 would include this use. Access by Helicopter discussed below.
- b) It is recommended that capacity for the 2009 season be 1 party of 10 people/day if access is by hiking. This would bring the total capacity for activities that use a trail outside the Developed Recreation Complex to 6 parties/day, just shy of the maximum allowed through ROS guidelines.
- c) It is recommended that capacity for the 2009 season be 1 party of 10 people/day if access is by helicopter.

### **10) Helicopter Landings on Spencer Glacier:**

- a) This area is in the Backcountry Management prescription, where ROS guidelines call for less than 6 encounters/day. This would allow for up to 7 simultaneous helicopter landings, half by commercially-guided parties. Each party can be up to 24 people. Typical helicopters used for these types of tours in the area can hold up to 6 clients, resulting in up to 4 helicopters in one party.
- b) Activities could include picnics, glacier hikes, ice climbing and dog mushing. Overnight use in tents could be allowed.
- c) It is recommended that capacity for the 2009 season be 2 parties of 6 people/day, one party could be for the ice climbing activity. In order to help maintain an “edge-of-wilderness” experience for people using the Whistle stop facilities, each helicopter should be considered and the route into the site should not pass over the Whistle-stop site.

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The following Chart summarizes the recreation capacity at Spencer Whistle stop for 2009:

Activity	Maximum O/G daily Capacity	Recommended O/G capacity	Recommendations/notes
Boating on Spencer lake	2.5 parties of up to 24 people	1 party of up to 12 people	Low profile boats, dark upper surfaces, 6 passenger capacity
Floating on Placer River, lake launched		1 party of up to 24 people	
Floating on Placer River, river launch		1 party of up to 24 people	
Motorized river trips up to Luebner lake		2 parties of up to 7 people	
Hiking on Spencer Glacier Trail within the DRC	Unlimited parties and no group size limit	3 parties of up to 24 people	Group size matches float trips
Hiking on Spencer Glacier Trail outside of the DRC	7 parties of up to 24 people	3 parties of up to 10 people	A total of 6 O/G parties could be using the trail outside of the DRC; establish O/G base camp and tent areas
Camping		2 parties of up to 10 people	
Ice Climbing, trail accessed		1 party of up to 10 people	
Ice Climbing, helicopter accessed	7 parties of up to 24 people	1 party of up to 6 people	6-person group size based on what can be carried in medium-size helicopter
Helicopter landings		1 party of up to 6 people	