



Spencer Glacier Mineral Materials Management

Issue

The Spencer Glacier area of the Chugach National Forest contains significant mineral materials resources and high recreational values. The mineral resources include vast deposits of high quality sand and gravel, and durable armor stone used in marine engineering projects such as breakwaters. Managing for both resources in the same area is a challenge, but one that the Forest Service has successfully met in Portage Valley. In addition, the Forest Service is interested in the possibility of retaining fees from any future minerals sale to administer the sales contract and to reinvest in resource management in the project area.

Background

Mineral materials were first mined on this site in 1907. The vast sand and gravel deposit at Spencer is high quality. Its stone is exceptional hard and durable, and its property of breaking into large, competent pieces when blasted supplies excellent “armor stone” for harbors, break waters and other marine projects. The Chugach National Forest is considering offering an extensive mineral materials sale, greater than 10 million cubic yards. The Forest Service has an excellent track record of meshing gravel mining, fisheries enhancement, and recreation in nearby Portage Valley, which is a showcase area where both new and old mineral material pits have been reclaimed by designing them to function as rearing habitat for fish and campgrounds for visitors.

The recreational values of Spencer are now more accessible to the public through the Whistle Stop project, a partnership with the Alaska Railroad. Rail passengers access spectacular ice-capped mountains, glaciers, and wild rivers, facilitated by backcountry campsites, cabins, trails, and guide services. The site was designated a developed recreation complex in the revised forest plan. The revised forest plan establishes direction to manage this area in a manner that facilitates both recreational development and mining activities.

Current Situation

The Forest Service is currently working on a final environmental impact statement for the Spencer Glacier Mineral Materials Project. The proposed action for mineral materials extraction facilitates recreational development and will not materially interfere with existing placer mining claims.

Senator Mark Begich, D-Alaska, introduced an amendment in committee to HR 2996 on September 23, 2009. The amendment proposed allowing the Forest Service to retain receipts from sale of mineral materials at Spencer, and to reinvest those receipts in recreation developments planned as part of the Whistle Stop Project. The amendment was not adopted by the committee. Senator Begich may re-introduce the proposal in the future. Former Senator Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, originally requested drafting services for this legislation from the Forest Service.

Approximately 46 percent of the proposed sale area is in inventoried roadless areas. No new roads would be built, but an existing haul road from a previous sale would be used. The road is 0.6 mile, of which 0.3 mile is in roadless. Primary transportation of materials from the site would be by rail.

The roadless areas encompassing the mineral material sale total 476,358 acres. The proposed mineral material sale of gravel and rock is currently being analyzed under NEPA. It potentially could encompass more than 10 million cubic yards from an area of about 550 acres over a 15 year period.

If enacted, this legislative proposal would serve as a demonstration of reinvesting revenues generated from sale of a commodity into other management activities. It would also demonstrate the ability of the Forest Service to manage commodity production in proximity to recreation, creating final site conditions that enhance recreation opportunities. This integration of minerals management and recreation management has already been successfully demonstrated on the Chugach National Forest in Portage Valley, on a smaller scale. Extraction of gravel in Portage Valley is designed to create freshwater ponds and a natural appearing landscape, once gravel operations are completed. As a result, new fishing opportunities have been created that are accessible to many people in Alaska who might not be able to afford a boat or plane (the usual access needed for fishing in this largely unroaded national forest.)

More Information

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