



Heli-Skiing on the Chugach

Issue

The remote, steep, and snow-covered terrain of the Chugach National Forest is in demand for backcountry recreation supported by helicopters. Segments of the public have voiced concerns about impacts of helicopter-supported recreation, especially heli-skiing. Since the mid-1990s, the Forest Service has permitted heli-skiing on the Kenai Peninsula and on the eastern side of the forest.

A framework for addressing heli-operations was created in the 2002 revised forest plan, utilizing extensive public involvement as well as experience gained with recent environmental analyses for recreational helicopter operations.

Background

In 1996, a temporary use permit was issued to Chugach Powder Guides (CPG) for backcountry heli-skiing on the Kenai Peninsula. From 1997 to 2007, the Forest Service issued a series of permits based on categorical exclusions, an environmental assessment, and an EIS. Decisions were appealed and litigated on several occasions to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. In 2007, the Ninth Circuit upheld the forest supervisor's 2005 EIS decision to issue a five-year permit and one-year exploratory permits to CPG. The forest reissued a 10-year permit in accordance with the legislative direction.

Under a separate categorical exclusion, annual permits were also issued to Valdez Heli-Ski Guides from 1998-2002 on the eastern part of the forest. The 2002 season was awarded by prospectus. Based on a high level of public and industry interest in commercial heli-ski opportunities, the Cordova Ranger District completed an environmental assessment, followed by a second prospectus in 2003. A permit, initially one year, and next for five years, was competitively awarded to H₂O Heli-Guides in 2003.



The 2002 revised forest plan addresses helicopter operations in management area prescriptions, in forestwide standards and guidelines, and in the analysis of effects on wildlife and recreation.

Current Situation

The Forest Service recently issued a 10-year permit to CPG, based on their request as provided for under new manual direction. The permit covers 159,100 acres and will expire at the end of 2017. An additional 127,515 acres of exploratory areas are authorized under a one-year permit. This permit includes areas on both the Glacier and Seward Ranger Districts. CPG was recently acquired by EPIC Corporation.

On the Cordova Ranger District, H₂O Heli-guide's five-year permit for 225,280 acres expired December 31, 2009. The district analyzed the reissuance of this permit during 2009, and a decision was made to renew H₂O's permit for 10 years. The Cordova Ranger District is currently assessing supply and demand to determine if any additional heli-ski permit opportunities will be analyzed for potential issuance in the future.

More Information

Travis Moseley, Seward District Ranger, (907) 288-7730, Teresa Benson, Cordova District Ranger, (907) 424-4742.