

Chapter 1: Purpose and Need

Introduction

The Chugach National Forest (CNF) has received an application from Chugach Powder Guides (CPG) requesting the issuance of a five-year special-use permit authorizing them to continue to conduct guided helicopter skiing operations on National Forest System (NFS) lands on the Kenai Peninsula and adjacent to Girdwood, Alaska (hereafter referred to as the Kenai Peninsula geographic area). This document assesses and discloses the potential environmental effects of issuing this permit.

Chugach Powder Guides has operated under annual U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); Forest Service special-use permits since 1997. These annual permits varied from 111,200 to 159,000 acres, with 800 to 1,200 client days. CPG is seeking to expand their operations to 338,200 acres with 2,400 client days with the five-year application. The permit area is used by increasing numbers of winter recreationists, including backcountry skiers and snowmachine users. The area provides habitat to a wide variety of wildlife species. These concerns have emerged as a consideration in deciding whether, and under what conditions to issue the multi-year permit to CPG.

The objectives for this project are to:

1. Provide helicopter skiing recreation opportunities on the Kenai Peninsula geographic area consistent with direction in the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan, Chugach National Forest.
2. Provide viable opportunities for businesses that in turn supply safe, high quality recreational offerings for the public.

The Proposed Action

The proposed action requested by CPG and being considered by the Forest Service is issuance of a five-year special use permit allowing guided heli-skiing operations on portions of the Glacier and Seward Ranger Districts, CNF.

The following areas would be used:

Core Units: Glacier-Winner, West Twentymile, North Twentymile, East Twentymile, Placer-Skookum, West Bench Peak, North Bench Peak, East Bench Peak, and Grandview

Exploratory Units: West Seattle Creek, Mid Seattle Creek, East Seattle Creek, East Moose Creek, West Moose Creek, East Ptarmigan, West Ptarmigan, Snow River; and Mount Ascension

The proposed level of use is 2,400 client days (1,800 for the core unit and 600 for the exploratory unit). The core units are areas historically authorized for commercially guided helicopter skiing operations as they provide suitable terrain to meet user demand. Exploratory units are areas in which CPG would explore options for commercial activity. These units have not been historically authorized for guided heli-skiing, except in the case of the Moose Creek Unit, which was authorized for temporary use in 1997 and 1998. Throughout the life of the permit, the core and exploratory units would remain as distinct units and would not be combined.

Helicopters would support 12 groups of four people with a maximum limit of 30 takeoffs/landings per staging area each day. Two of the proposed staging areas on NFS land are at the Mile 33.2 Gravel Pit and Mile 62 Gravel Pit on the Seward Highway. Additional staging areas located on non-NFS lands include Girdwood Airstrip, Kern Creek, Big Game Alaska, Ingram Creek, and Mile 12.4. (see Map 2-2)

The project area is bordered on the west by the Hope Highway, Seward Highway, and the National Forest (NF) boundary near Resurrection River; on the north by the NF boundary; on the east by the divide between the Kenai Peninsula and Prince William Sound, and non-NF lands; and on the south by the NF boundary and non-NF lands. (see Map 1-1)

Map 1-1

Back of map 1-1

Purpose and Need

The Forest Service is mandated to provide a range of diverse, quality, recreational opportunities on the lands under its administration (Revised Forest Plan p. 3-8). These opportunities are to be made available to the public. Many areas on the Kenai Peninsula geographic area have excellent terrain and snow conditions for helicopter skiing. The role of outfitter and guide operations in helping the agency to fulfill this mandate is to assure that recreational opportunities are accessible to people without the specialized knowledge, skill, and equipment to take advantage of them on their own (USDA-Forest Service 1997). Several factors make guided heli-skiing a unique experience and an important part of the range of recreational opportunities available on the Chugach National Forest, including the following:

- Helicopter skiing provides the opportunity to enjoy the beauty, freedom, solitude, and untracked snow of the backcountry for those without the desire or physical ability to ski tour.
- Helicopter skiing makes the above mentioned opportunity available to those who have adequate skiing skills but lack the specialized equipment, avalanche knowledge, and terrain familiarity to ski in the backcountry safely.
- Helicopter skiing provides a better chance to consistently find quality snow conditions.
- Helicopter skiing provides access to slopes beyond the range of the average backcountry skier.
- Helicopter skiing allows wider dispersion of recreational use in the backcountry by integrating helicopter skiing with other recreational uses.

The purpose and need for this project is to:

1. Provide helicopter skiing opportunities on the Kenai Peninsula geographic area. There is a need to provide helicopter skiing as part of the range of quality recreational opportunities offered on the Chugach National Forest and to respond to increasing demand for this service.

This purpose and need responds to the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chugach National Forest (USDA-Forest Service 2002a) (Revised Forest Plan) desired conditions and goals to:

- Maintain quality settings for motorized recreation opportunities (Revised Forest Plan p. 3-8).
- Expand recreational capacity by developing new recreation facilities . . . in response to user demands and where appropriate to management area objectives (Revised Forest Plan p. 3-9).
- Allow, during the winter season, snowmachine and other winter motorized recreation [to] occur over most of the Kenai Peninsula . . . Helicopter access for

skiing will occur at appropriate locations (Revised Forest Plan p. 3-15).

- Create improvements that will expand the areas available for winter recreation (Revised Forest Plan p. 3-15).
- Facilitate a variety of businesses that provide or support recreational opportunities on the Forest under special use permit. (Forest Plan p. 3-14).

This purpose and need also responds to regional emphasis areas to:

- Provide infrastructure, including developed and dispersed recreation facilities . . . and associated transportation systems appropriate to the recreation setting, to meet the demand for a diverse array of quality recreational opportunities (R10 Emphasis Areas, January 2003, p. 10)

2. Provide a viable, safe, and high quality recreation experience. There is a need to provide the permitted operator with a five-year permit so that the proponent can make the investment and business decisions needed to provide a viable, safe, and high quality recreation experience. The current scenario of approving one-year permits does not allow the operator to make long-term business investments.

There is also a need to provide an adequate number of permitted days and permitted areas so that the operation is feasible given changing weather and snow conditions throughout the season. It is important to the Forest Service to permit a viable operation because it allows for:

- A high quality recreational experience to be provided on National Forest lands.
- Economic benefits to forest dependent communities associated with heli-skiing operations.
- The greatest opportunity for hiring operationally experienced guides, keeping helicopter equipment well maintained, and an overall safely provided recreational experience.

This purpose and need responds to forestwide desired conditions and goals to facilitate

- A variety of businesses that provide or support recreational opportunities on the Forest . . . under special use permit. (Forest plan p. 3-14)

This purpose and need also responds to regional emphasis areas to provide recreation and tourism

- Which is ecologically sustainable and is an integral economic component of Southeast and Southcentral Alaska communities. (R10 Emphasis Areas, January 2003, p. 9)

- Enhance the health, stability, quality of life, economic vitality and adaptability of communities . . . throughout the State (R10 Emphasis Areas, January 2003, p. 2)

The National Environmental Policy Act Process

Since CPG's activities would involve NFS lands, and since issuing the permit could potentially result in adverse environmental impacts, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA), requires the Forest Service to assess and disclose the potential impacts on the environment. NEPA requires that environmental information be made available to federal, state, and local agencies, organizations, and individuals that may be interested in or affected by the proposed action. Opportunities to review and comment on this information must be provided before decisions are made or actions are taken on public lands.

This environmental impact statement (EIS) is being prepared in response to these requirements. The Glacier and Seward Ranger Districts collaborated in preparation of this EIS (see Chapter 5). An EIS is a disclosure rather than a decision document. Its primary purpose is to provide environmental analysis to inform the public and to assist the Forest Service in reaching a decision, documented in a Record of Decision (ROD). Specific decisions to be made by the Forest Service in consideration of this analysis are described below.

Following publication of this Draft EIS, public and agency comments will be accepted for 60 days. Subsequently, the Forest Service will review comments and respond to them as appropriate, in the Final EIS. The Final EIS and ROD will then be published, followed by a 45-day period during which the agency's decision can be administratively appealed in accordance with procedures outlined in 36 CFR 215.

Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations on the application of NEPA strongly encourage federal agencies to advise private applicants of any environmental studies and information requirements that may be required to support agency review and decision making (40 CFR 1501.2[d]). The objective is to ensure that the planning of proposed actions reflects the environmental values of an area, minimizes potential conflicts, and avoids delays in completing NEPA analysis. Agencies are further directed to utilize information collected by applicants, their consultants, or other parties as long as the agency makes an independent evaluation of the content and scientific credibility of the information (40 CFR 1506.5[c]). All such information used in this EIS has undergone independent evaluation by the Forest Service prior to being used in this analysis.

Forest Plan Direction

The *Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chugach National Forest* (Revised Forest Plan) (USDA-Forest Service 2002a), *Final EIS* (USDA-Forest Service 2002b), and *Record of Decision* (USDA-Forest Service 2002c) were approved on May 31, 2002. This EIS is tiered to these documents.

The management direction for this area is contained in the Revised Forest Plan. The Revised Forest Plan divides the Forest into Management Areas. Each Management

Area is assigned a prescription that includes specific direction for managing various resources within the Management Area.

Each Management Area prescription includes the following:

Theme: A short description of a management scenario or philosophy.

Management Intent: A summary of the desired conditions for ecological and social systems.

Activities Table: A tabular display of typical activities that may or may not occur in a given management area.

Standards and Guidelines: Specific management direction for conditionally allowed management activities.

The proposed helicopter skiing units are located in the following management areas:

- 132--Wild River 2,700 acres
- 210--Backcountry 313,000 acres
- 231--Scenic River 1,500 acres
- 242--Brown Bear Core Area 2,200 acres
- 244--Fish and Wildlife Conservation Area 12,700 acres
- 312--Fish, Wildlife, and Recreation 5,300 acres
- 331--Recreational River 100 acres
- 521—Minerals 700 acres

The Revised Forest Plan established standards and guidelines to protect and mitigate actions on various resources. Management Area 244-Fish and Wildlife Conservation Area has one guideline that is specific to this project, it is as follows: “Recreational activities may be seasonally restricted to meet wildlife habitat objectives or to reduce wildlife-human interactions in important habitat areas or movement corridors.” (USDA-Forest Service 2002a) Appropriate standards and guidelines have been incorporated into the mitigation measures for this proposal. (see Mitigation Measures, Chapter 2)

The Revised Forest Plan also contains a provision on motorized/nonmotorized use on NFS lands. All of the proposed alternatives are within areas in the category of “**Open to All Motorized Uses**” in the winter (December 1 through April 30)*. These areas are designed to allow a full spectrum of opportunities for winter motorized recreation. Both snowmachines and helicopters are permitted in these areas during the winter season. Site specific or other closures may be implemented to avoid resource damage, wildlife conflicts, or safety issues.

A decision to issue a special-use permit allowing CPG to continue to provide guided heli-skiing while minimizing the potential for conflicts with other recreationists, wildlife, and other resource values would not require any project specific or programmatic forest plan amendments.

* 5,800 acres in the Placer-Skookum unit are closed to all motorized use after March 31.

Public Involvement and Issues to be Considered

NEPA requires that the public and other agencies be involved in federal agency decision-making. An important part of this process is scoping. CEQ regulations refer to scoping as a process to determine the scope of the issues to be addressed in an EIS and to identify the significant issues related to a proposed action (40 CFR 1501.7). The major steps in the scoping process for this EIS include:

- The project was listed in the Chugach National Forest schedule of proposed NEPA projects in January of 2003. This list is sent to approximately 300 people.
- A Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS was published in the Federal Register on May 15, 2003 (Volume 68, Number 94).
- A total of eight public meetings were held at Girdwood, Seward, Moose Pass and Hope (two at each location).
- A notice describing the proposal, outlining the NEPA review process, and inviting comment was distributed to media outlets, agencies, groups, and individuals on October 31, 2002. The Districts received 221 comment letters or e-mails from federal and state agencies (3 letters/e-mails), organizations (14 letters/e-mails), and individuals (204 letters/e-mails).
- An interactive data base was developed (see Appendix A).
- The Forest Service interdisciplinary team internally reviewed the proposal and scoping comments.

As a result of the scoping process, three important issues were identified. These issues guided the analysis documented in this EIS and are summarized below.

Issue 1: Wildlife Impacts

The noise and visual disturbance of helicopters and the physical presence of heli-skiers has the potential to disturb wildlife. Factors include the distance to the disturbance, sensitivity of individual species to noise, and level of habituation (becoming accustomed to). Wildlife concerns emphasized brown bears, Dall's sheep, mountain goats, and wolverines, but potential effects on other wildlife species were also raised. Specific concerns included direct or indirect displacement of individuals by helicopters or heli-skiers, disruption of behavior, disturbance of animals on critical wintering areas or denning sites, and harm to overall health, growth rates, and reproductive success.

To contrast the proposed action and alternatives on the basis of this issue, our analysis focuses on: (1) impacts to federally listed threatened and endangered and Forest Service Region 10 sensitive species (unlikely); (2) impacts to Forest Service management indicator species, (brown bear, moose, mountain goat); (3) species of special interest (bald eagle, Canada lynx, gray wolf, northern goshawk, marbled murrelet, river otter, wolverine); and (4) other species of concern (Dall's sheep, migratory birds). These impacts are summarized in Chapter 2 and discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Issue 2: Recreational Conflicts

While many forms of winter recreational use have increased in recent years (e.g., ski touring, skate skiing, backcountry skiing, and snowmachine use), backcountry skiers expressed the most concern regarding this proposal. Some backcountry skiers said that the presence of a helicopter, primarily as a source of noise in an otherwise pristine area, detracts from their recreational experience. The conflict is also over competition for untracked snow. Some feel that the sudden presence of heli-skiers in areas that backcountry skiers have expended considerable effort to reach is unfair, especially involving terrain accessible for day tours. Concerns for the safety of backcountry skiers and snowmachine users down slope from heli-ski groups were also expressed. Some snowmachine users felt that allowing heli-skiing in areas closed to snowmachines was unfair. The four main elements of this user conflict are: (1) noise disturbance, (2) a sense of fairness in effort expended to reach backcountry locations, (3) safety concerns regarding avalanches, and (4) litter left behind by the heli-ski company and heli-ski clients.

To contrast the proposed action and alternatives on the basis of this issue, our analysis focuses on the availability of helicopter skiing opportunities and conflicts with other winter recreationists. The following units of measure will be used:

- Proximity of helicopter flight paths and staging areas to areas used by backcountry recreationists.
- Amount of use by motorized and nonmotorized users.
- Days of week of helicopter operations.

These impacts are summarized in Chapter 2 and discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Issue 3: Impacts on Communities

Lifestyles of rural communities can be negatively impacted by increases in permitted helicopter use either incrementally over a number of years or by a sudden increase. The noise and visual disturbance of concentrated helicopter operations could affect the quality of life for residents in the following areas: Cooper Landing, Girdwood, Hope, Moose Pass, Seward, and Sunrise.

To contrast the proposed action and alternatives on the basis of this issue, this analysis focuses on the impacts of helicopter noise and helicopter sightings on the identified communities. While the overall helicopter operation is the main topic, staging areas and travel corridors are discussed in instances where they impact residential areas.

Other Issues

Wilderness Classification

There is concern that allowing helicopter landing in roadless areas may affect future Wilderness recommendations. It is felt that the Forest Service, by permitting commercial helicopter use, is helping to build a constituency that will oppose future wilderness recommendations in these areas.

All of the proposed permit area is within inventoried roadless areas. None of the areas proposed for heli-skiing have been recommended for inclusion into the National Wilderness Preservation System (USDA-Forest Service, 2002b). While this could

change in the future, The Wilderness Act (section 4(d)) provides the Chief of the Forest Service the discretion to allow the continuation of helicopter use that was established prior to the designation of an area as Wilderness. The concern that permitted helicopter landings in the roadless areas may affect future Wilderness recommendations is addressed in the Revised Forest Plan EIS (USDA-Forest Service, 2002b) and is beyond the scope of this analysis.

All of the areas proposed for heli-skiing are "Open to All Motorized Uses" in the winter (December 1 through April 30)* through decisions made in the Revised Forest Plan (USDA-Forest Service 2002a). Whether permitting commercial helicopter use in these areas would help build a constituency that would oppose future Wilderness recommendations is beyond the scope of this analysis.

* 5,800 acres in the Placer Skookum unit are closed to all motorized use after March 31.

Cumulative Effects

There is a concern that a Forest-wide cumulative effects analysis be completed on helicopter skiing/motorized uses.

The Revised Forest Plan EIS analyzed the effects of allowing winter helicopter activities and other motorized uses on a Forest-wide basis. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this project. Cumulative effects for this project are discussed throughout Chapter 3.

Currently, there is one other area on the Chugach National Forest where commercially guided heli-skiing is permitted. Across Prince William Sound, the Cordova Ranger District permits heli-skiing in the Allen Glacier to Cleave Creek area. Near this area, the State of Alaska and the Bureau of Land Management permits heli-skiing on their lands in the Thompson Pass area. Because of the separation by long distances and over water, there would be no cumulative effects from these activities.

Closed Snowmachine Areas

Some snowmachine users felt that allowing heli-skiing in areas closed to snowmachines was not fair.

There are two areas within the proposed helicopter skiing units that are closed to snowmachine use: Glacier-Winner (6,100 acres) and North Bench Peak (5,600 acres). These are Revised Forest Plan decisions and beyond the scope of this project.

Decisions to be Made

The decision to be made is whether or not to issue the requested five-year special use permit for helicopter skiing in the core and exploratory units, and, if so, under what terms and conditions. The Glacier District Ranger and the Seward District Ranger are the Responsible Officials who will make these decisions.

Required Permits and Approvals

This EIS is intended to provide analysis to support decisions to be made by the Forest Service and other agencies with permitting authority over CPG's operation. The Forest Service decision will apply only to NFS lands. However, potential effects resulting from implementation of the proposed action and alternatives on lands and activities

administered by other federal, state, and local jurisdictions are also disclosed in this document.

A Forest Service special use permit would be the authorizing document of any selected alternative. A special use permit would require aircraft operating on NFS lands to have: (1) a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)-FAR Part 135 Certificate documenting safety standards and requirements, and (2) written permission to stage and refuel helicopters on private land. While the Forest Service assumes no responsibility for enforcing laws, regulations, or ordinances under the jurisdiction of other governmental agencies, Forest Service special use regulations require that permittees abide by applicable laws and conditions imposed by other jurisdictions.

Under the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended (CZMA), Forest Service activities and development projects that affect the coastal zone must be consistent to the maximum extent practicable with the enforceable policies of the Alaska Coastal Management Program (ACMP). This project falls under CZMA category Federal License or Permit (15 CFR 930.50) ACMP consistency certification is normally not required.

Planning Record

This EIS takes advantage of existing information included in the *Revised Forest Plan Final EIS* (USDA-Forest Service 2002b), other environmental analyses for heli-skiing, project-specific reports and related information, and other sources as indicated. Where applicable, such information is briefly summarized and referenced to avoid duplication. The planning record for this analysis documents all project-specific information, including resource reports and other field investigations. The planning record also contains information resulting from public involvement. The planning record is located at the Glacier Ranger District in Girdwood, Alaska, and is available for review during regular business hours. Information from the record is available upon request.