

WEST FORK GULKANA RIVER
Proposed Area of Critical Environmental Concern

Note: This ACEC is being proposed under Alternative C, not Alternative D. See table below. Within the Alternative Table, “Interim” management refers to management of State or Native selected lands until conveyed, “Long Term” refers to management of lands if they are retained in federal ownership.

Importance: The West Fork of the Gulkana River contains a large percentage of the world’s known population of trumpeter swans (*Cygnus buccinator*), a BLM-Alaska designated Sensitive Status Species. The majority of these birds are breeders, utilizing the multitude of lakes in the West Fork watershed as breeding and rearing areas for their young (cygnets). A 1995 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service trumpeter swan survey of the Gulkana Unit determined that 5,316 square miles of potential summer habitat are available for nesting swans in this southcentral region of Alaska dotted with thousands of various sized lakes. During the census portion of this effort, 3,577 adult swans were observed (0.67 swans / sq. mi.) (white adult swans may or may not have been accompanied by gray young-of-the-year swans). From these data, researchers made a “speculative assessment” that by the year 2050, 5191 adult swans (0.98 swans / sq. mi.) would potentially occupy the available habitat within the Gulkana Unit (USFWS 1996). The most recent statewide trumpeter swan census conducted in Alaska during the breeding season of 2000 resulted in 3,986 total swans in the Gulkana Unit alone, or 23% of the statewide trumpeter swan population. Only the Lower Tanana Unit near Fairbanks supported more trumpeter swans in the state at 4,942 total swans, or 29% of the total trumpeter swans statewide (USFWS 2001).

In addition, this area is an important breeding area for large numbers of other waterfowl. These wetlands provide habitat for many nesting bald eagles and osprey which feed on both the waterfowl and the large numbers of fish in the area. The south face of the Alphabet Hills provides important habitat for trophy class bull moose, a habitat area beginning to be impacted by off-road vehicles. The West Fork Gulkana River and its tributaries provide extensive spawning areas for sockeye and king salmon stocks which in turn provide significant numbers of fish for subsistence, sport and commercial users.

Description of Area: Encompasses approximately 480,000 total acres, the majority of which is State-selected. On selected lands, measures identified below would only apply until conveyance occurs. Adoption of identified measures after conveyance would be at the discretion of the State of Alaska or the Native corporation.

General Stipulations in the West Fork Gulkana River ACEC:

Seasonal Limitations

- To protect trumpeter swans, ground disturbance or surface use exceeding fourteen days would not be permitted in priority swan habitat from 5/1 – 8/31.
- To protect raptor nests, ground disturbance or surface use exceeding fourteen days would not be allowed within ¼ mile of historically active nests from 4/1 to 8/31.
- Guidelines for protection of moose winter range and anadromous fish streams are identified in “Mitigation Guidelines for Surface Disturbing Activities”.

ALTERNATIVES – West Fork Gulkana ACEC

DIFFERENCES IN MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE BY ALTERNATIVE					
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Management Actions	Alternative A: Current management	Alternative B: Development end of spectrum	Alternative C: Conserve/maintain end of spectrum	Alternative D: Interim	Alternative D: Long Term
Decision	No ACEC Designation	No ACEC designation.	In cooperation with State of Alaska, designate ACEC as described above and shown on map.	No ACEC designation. Area identified would be managed under measures described below.	If sizeable contiguous blocks of land are left in federal ownership after conveyance, consider for ACEC designation with measures described below.
Off-Highway-Vehicle (OHV) Use	Currently no restrictions.	No restrictions.	OHVs restricted to designated trails 5/1 to 8/31. Designated trails should avoid nesting or staging areas. Stream crossings will be coordinated with ADF&G and permitted by DNR. Cooperate with State of Alaska on restricting aircraft landings on critical staging areas. No snowmachine restrictions.	OHVs managed under State’s Generally allowed uses.	Same as C.

ALTERNATIVES – West Fork Gulkana ACEC

Management Actions	Alternative A Current management	Alternative B: Development end of spectrum	Alternative C: Conserve/maintain end of spectrum	Alternative D: Interim	Alternative D: Long Term
Construction of new airstrips	Construction of new airstrips considered on a case-by-case basis.	Same as A.	No new construction of airstrips.	Same as A.	No new construction of airstrips.
New road construction	Construction of new roads and trails considered on a case-by-case basis.	Same as A.	No new road construction.	Considered if necessary for resource development. Seasonal restrictions would be applied (5/1 to 8/31).	No new road construction.
Minerals: Locatable minerals	Currently closed under a d(1) withdrawal. PLO 6329 specifically did not open this area to locatable minerals because of resource values and lack of mineral potential.	Revoke withdrawals and open.	Maintain PLO 6329. Closed to entry under the mining laws.	Closed to mineral entry by State or Native selection.	Maintain PLO 6329. Closed to mineral entry.
Minerals: Leasable minerals (Oil & Gas)	Open to mineral leasing, based on PLO 6329, with exception of Gulkana WSR corridor.	Keep open, with seasonal stipulations to protect trumpeter swan nesting and staging areas.	Recommend closure to mineral leasing.	Closed to mineral leasing by State or Native selection.	Open to mineral leasing, with seasonal stipulations from 5/1 – 8/31 to limit activities that would disturb swans.

ALTERNATIVES – West Fork Gulkana ACEC

Management Actions	Alternative A: Current management	Alternative B: Development end of spectrum	Alternative C: Conserve/maintain end of spectrum	Alternative D: Interim	Alternative D: Long Term
Minerals: Leasable minerals (coal)	Open to coal leasing, based on PLO 6329, with exception of Gulkana WSR corridor.	Open to coal leasing, suitable for development by all mining methods.	Recommend closure to mineral leasing, including coal.	Closed to mineral leasing by State or Native selection.	Area acceptable for further consideration for coal leasing, by only certain stipulated mining methods and with seasonal restrictions (5/1 – 8/31).
Minerals: Mineral material	Considered case-by-case.	Same as A.	No mineral material development.	Consider case-by-case, with seasonal restrictions (5/1 – 8/31).	No mineral material development.
Public use cabins	No public use cabins currently in area.	Develop public use cabin system for winter use. Close seasonally as needed for protection of values.	No public use cabins.	No public use cabins.	No public use cabins.
Special Recreation Permits (SRP)	Currently no limits.	Same as A.	Develop carrying capacity for SRP permits within the area.	SRP permits would adhere to general guidelines listed above. No carrying capacity developed for SRPs.	Same as C.
Recreation facilities	No facilities currently exist within the area.		No new recreational facilities.	No new facilities would be considered on selected lands.	No new recreational facilities.
Lands and Realty: Emphasis area for acquisition?	No, except within Gulkana WSR corridor.	No.	Yes, for entire ACEC.	No.	No, except within Gulkana WSR corridor.

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Management Actions	Alternative A: Current management	Alternative B: Development end of spectrum	Alternative C: Conserve/maintain end of spectrum	Alternative D: Interim	Alternative D: Long Term
Lands and Realty: FLPMA and R&PP leases	Considered case-by-case.	Yes.	No.	FLPMA and R&PP leases would be granted on a case-by-case basis, only if consistent with protection of values identified.	Same as D (Interim).
Lands and Realty: FLPMA 302 Permits	Considered case-by-case.	Same as A. New occupancy permits (for cabins) should be allowed if justified for legitimate commercial (trapping) use.	No cabins. Consider other permits only if proposal is consistent with protection of values identified.	New occupancy permits considered if justified for legitimate commercial use, such as trapping. Other permits considered, with seasonal (5/1 – 8/31) restrictions.	Occupancy type permits, such as commercial use cabins, would be authorized under the following conditions: 1) no new structures within the area; 2) Existing structures would be authorized only if they can be clearly tied to a commercial enterprise, such as guiding or trapping. Permits other than cabins would be considered if consistent with protection of values identified.
Lands and Realty: Rights of Way (ROW)	Considered case-by-case.	OK.	Avoid.	ROW avoidance area. Overhead powerlines will be avoided.	ROW avoidance area. Overhead powerlines will be avoided and not permitted in primary trumpeter swan breeding habitat.
Military permits, activities	Considered case-by-case.	OK.	No.	Recommend overflights limited to above 1500 feet from 4/1 to 9/15.	Recommend overflights limited to above 1500 feet from 5/1 to 8/31. Ground-based activities should be seasonally restricted (5/1 – 8/31).

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Fire	Mostly limited suppression class.	Same as A.	Same as D.	No problem with current suppression classes. Prescribed burning and wildland fire may be used to improve moose habitat in the area and should consider buffer on anadromous streams to protect water quality.	Same as D (Interim).
Forestry	No guidelines. Some personal firewood gathering takes place, consistent with 1983 Gulkana River Management Plan.		No commercial logging or firewood gathering should occur in the area.	Same as D (Long Term). Potential for commercial harvest poor due to low timber production and poor access (swamp).	Primary objective of any forestry practices in the area will be protection or enhancement of the values identified. Harvesting activities would take place in winter and any roads would be temporary (winter).