FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

RECLAMATION OF MINED LANDS PROGRAM

Denali National Park and Preserve

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates the reclamation of various mined lands around the Kantishna area of Denali National Park and Preserve. The purpose of this action is to restore a natural appearance to the placer mining disturbed drainages, restore aquatic habitat, assist natural revegetation by eliminating abandoned equipment, buildings and debris used in past mining activities. This action will include recontouring washed gravel and boulder (tailings) piles, reconstructing channels and floodplains to restore the original flood capacity and function, redistributing available topsoil and fines, and planting native plants from park sources over the reclaimed areas. Recontouring of tailings piles, and reconstruction of stream channels and floodplains may involve the alteration of the existing active stream channel. This is necessary to encourage aquatic habitat recovery by stabilizing stream banks and providing cover for grayling and a food source for both aquatic and terrestrial insects. Reestablishment of floodplain vegetation in the Kantishna Hills would also provide habitat for a variety of birds and small and large wildlife.

The EA was available for a 36-day public review and comment period from May 25 through June 29, 2001. Two comments were received, one from the State of Alaska, and one from a private inholder in the Kantishna area. The State of Alaska requested that baseline conditions be established so that restoration mimics natural conditions. *Multiple studies were conducted during the 1980's that inventoried parts of the Kantishna hills mining district. These studies were used in designing the reclamation that is to be performed in the Kantishna area. Additional studies will be conducted when funding is approved for individual reclamation sites. Restored sites will be monitored and successful designs will be included in future site work.* A private inholder, along with the State of Alaska, was concerned that reclamation would occur in areas where valid claims were still privately held. *In compliance with National Park Service policy, the National Park Service will not conduct reclamation on lands not owned by the Federal Government or where the mineral interests are in private ownership. Additionally, reclamation would not be conducted on lands used as access to existing privately held claims in the Kantishna Hills area.*

Two alternatives were evaluated for the *Environmental Assessment for Reclamation of Mined Lands Program, Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska, May 2001*. Briefly those alternatives were:

Alternative 1 (Preferred Alternative) (Environmentally Preferred Alternative): Alternative 1(as described in the EA) is a 10-year plan to reclaim and restore about 517 acres of disturbed floodplain and wetlands in 10 drainages in the Kantishna area. Stream channel stabilization will occur on up to 22 miles of stream. Areas to be reclaimed include portions of Eldorado Creek, upper and lower Moose Creek, Spruce Creek, Rainy Creek, upper Glen Creek, Caribou Creek, Glacier Creek, Friday Creek, Eureka Creek, Crooked Creek, and Quigley Ridge.

The Preferred Alternative will include the disposal of all non-historic buildings, equipment and debris over a 2-4 week period each summer utilizing a helicopter and assorted heavy equipment to remove debris and equipment. Wood and other burnable materials will be incinerated on site. Heavy equipment will be used to recontour tailing piles, fill exploration trenches, scarify compacted areas, reconstruct stream channels and floodplains, and redistribute available fines and topsoil in several watersheds in the Kantishna Hills area of Denali National Park and Preserve. In addition, natural revegetation will be assisted by collecting and dispersing seed from local sources and by planting native shrub and tree cuttings from adjacent areas. Reclamation activities described above will take place in the summer months, between June 1 and September 15.

Certain creeks (Eldorado, Lower Moose, Spruce, Rainy, Caribou, Glacier, and Friday) will require substantial changes to the existing stream channel and floodplain, in order to create a stable system. Hydraulic analyses will indicate if a channel needs to be either deepened, narrowed, and placed in a more sinuous configuration, or removed from an incised condition. To achieve this design, a new channel is excavated at the site. Sediment traps, consisting of heavy gauged mesh and coconut or coir fiber material, will be placed across the channel in numerous locations throughout the new channel section to minimize sediment entering the stream.

Lower Caribou Creek and Lower Glacier Creek are not accessible via the constructed road system and will require winter access using heavy equipment over frozen, snow-covered ground, or heavy lift helicopter operations. All other sites are accessible via constructed routes. An 8-mile old mining route, along upper Moose Creek, serves as access for vehicles and heavy equipment to Rainy Creek, Glen Creek, and Spruce Creek (smaller routes run from the Moose Creek route up each individual watershed). Access to Friday Creek, lower Eureka Creek and middle Moose Creek will be gained from the main park road between the park boundary and the Kantishna airstrip. Access to upper Glacier Creek and upper Caribou Creek would be gained via the Skyline Drive mining route, a 15-mile route that starts from the park road at Mile 92. Access to Eldorado Creek will be gained by crossing Moose Creek just downstream from the Kantishna Roadhouse and traveling along a bladed trail, which crosses Eldorado Creek numerous times. These routes will support the travel of large heavy equipment, such as bulldozers, as well as 4x4 trucks, pick-up trucks, and 4-wheelers. Stream crossing will be made with high clearance vehicles and bulldozer crossings will be minimized.

An existing centrally located camp at Friday Creek will be used as a staging area for projects in other, more remote locations, such as Caribou Creek. Smaller 'spike' camps will be set up at particular project locations and will be more temporary in nature. All camps will be fenced and provide necessary sanitation facilities. Temporary camps used during reclamation activities would enforce stringent policies on food storage, handling and disposal practices, and NPS restrictions and training on feeding or harassing wildlife.

Alternative 2: No-Action: The no-action alternative would result in no mining reclamation program. The 10-year plan to reclaim and restore about 517 acres of disturbed floodplain and wetlands in 10 drainages in the Kantishna area would not be undertaken. Portions of Eldorado Creek, upper and lower Moose Creek, Spruce Creek, Rainy Creek, upper Glen Creek, Caribou

Creek, Glacier Creek Friday Creek, Eureka Creek, Crooked Creek, and Quigley Ridge identified in Alternative 1 would not be reclaimed.

The NPS has determined that the preferred alternative as described in the EA can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to the natural or cultural resources. Effects as documented by the EA are briefly summarized below.

Certain projects would require substantial changes to the existing stream channel and floodplain, in order to create a stable system. Some fine sediment and turbidity is expected to escape downstream during this operation, but these discharges are expected to be small, short-term, and have little effect on aquatic habitat more than 1,000 feet downstream of the work area. Access along Moose Creek, Caribou Creek and other creek routes will require occasional creek crossings with a tracked backhoe, bulldozer and rubber-tired trucks. Such crossings disrupt small amounts of stream sediments. This causes a small sediment plume to form behind the vehicles and a temporary and localized increase in stream turbidity. The use of high clearance vehicles and minimizing crossings with the bulldozer minimize these impacts.

The use of heavy equipment may impact some wetland areas. The goal of reclamation activities is to restore naturally functioning wetlands and floodplains, and in some project areas, new wetlands will be created as part of the overall restoration process. Additionally, floodplain function would be restored in many areas. Based on the EA analysis the NPS has determined that the benefits of creating and rehabilitating wetlands and floodplains during mine reclamation projects outweigh disturbance of wetlands and floodplain by heavy equipment operation.

Because of the necessity to recontour tailing piles and slopes to reduce erosion potential and reestablish natural conditions during a reclamation project, it is likely that some vegetation will be destroyed during these projects.

The preferred alternative will cause temporary, short-term disturbance and displacement of wildlife during access operations. Any field camp, helicopter operations and field crew activities will also have the potential of temporarily disturbing or displacing wildlife. Wildlife will likely avoid camp areas and areas where field activities are taking place if other habitat or routes of travel are available. Whenever wildlife is observed from the air and the helicopter is operating at low flight altitudes, the flight path will be altered if possible to avoid flying directly overhead. Often, conditions do not permit such alterations of the flight path. When possible, flights will be conducted 1,000 feet above the terrain to reduce wildlife disturbance. Restricted flight zones will be placed around raptor nesting sites and pilots are restricted from deviating flights to observe wildlife.

Minor short-term reduction of fish populations will occur. This will result from impacts to stream channels as they are reclaimed using heavy equipment. In addition to physical alteration of the channel, turbidity increases during and shortly after construction will result in the clogging and/or cementing of streambed gravels used for spawning. Eventually, a reclaimed riparian zone will increase stream bank vegetation, which will improve fish habitat by providing cover, food, and lower water temperatures.

The presence of work camps, access operations along Moose Creek, flight operations in the vicinity of Kantishna, vehicle and heavy equipment travel, fueling and staging operations at the Kantishna airstrip, personal property relocation activities, visual intrusions and encounters with field crews during backcountry travel all have the potential of affecting the experience of park visitors in Kantishna or surrounding backcountry areas. Such impacts are generally of a short-term, qualitative nature and are dependent upon a visitor's expectations and the extent and type of exposure to a visual or noise intrusion.

The project will have no effect on any known cultural resources. Should unknown resources be uncovered during construction, work will be stopped in the project area and the National Park Service will consult according to 36 CFR 800.11 and, as appropriate, provisions of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990.

The preferred alternative will not impair any park resource or value necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the park's enabling legislation. The impacts associated with the preferred alternative will not affect resources or values key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park or alter opportunities for enjoyment of the park. Overall, short-term adverse impacts to water quality, wetlands and floodplains, vegetation, wildlife, fisheries, cultural resources and visitor use resulting from stream and mine reclamation projects are minor and considered acceptable. The long-term positive benefits of restoring previously disturbed habitat outweigh the short-term minor resource impacts.

The NPS will obtain all necessary environmental permits and reviews required for individual reclamation projects. A Corps of Engineers Clean Water Act Section 404 Permit is required for any project that adds fill to the waters of the United States, including wetlands. An EPA National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit may be required for storm water discharge, for a project that would affect five or more acres, under Section 402 of the Clean Water Act. The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation issues a Certificate of Reasonable Assurance under authority of Section 401 of the Clean Water Act. Also, where any access route crosses a water body with fish, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game requires a Fish Habitat Permit.

The proposed action complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Clean Water Act, and Executive Orders 11988 (Floodplain Management) and 11990 (Protection of Wetlands).

There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810(a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

I find that the preferred alternative does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared

Recommended: _____ 7/17/01
Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve — Date

Approved: _____ 7/18/01
Regional Director, Alaska — Date