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Finding of No Significant Impact
Environmental Assessment
Fire Management Plan
Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates potential impacts to cultural and natural resources associated with implementation of the fire management plan (plan) for Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve. The purpose of the plan, the preferred alternative, is to provide guidance for complex wildland fire management operations at the park and preserve. The plan is consistent with the NPS fire management policy (NPS Director's Order 18), and includes the following elements.

- Fire management goals
- Policies and actions required to achieve goals
- Decision-making process for fire management
- Procedures for fire management
- Strategies for fire management
- Park fire management organization and responsibilities

The plan continues the fire management strategies applied to NPS lands and structures in the park and preserve the previous 15 years. On-the-ground application of fire management will remain status quo and the Bureau of Land Management – Alaska Fire Service (AFS) will remain the primary suppression agency.

Public Involvement

The 45 day public review period commenced on February 15, 2003 and closed on April 1, 2003.

Forty-four letters with draft copies of the plan/EA were mailed to individuals, agencies, Native entities, and Subsistence Resource Council members. The plan/EA was also posted on the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve webpage for the entire period of the public review. No agency or public comments on the EA were provided during the comment period.

Alternatives

The preferred alternative is also the no action alternative given that it continues the fire management strategies applied in the park and preserve the previous 15 years. It satisfies the NPS policy to have a fire plan for every potentially burnable acre of NPS land. Based on a combination of pre-established and incident-specific decision making criteria, this alternative would allow all three of the major management actions in DO-18; wildland fire use, prescribed fire use and wildland fire suppression. Wildland fires not threatening life, property, or significant resources would be managed and allowed to burn to accomplish resource management goals; prescribed fire would be implemented, for the purpose of reducing hazardous fuel loads or restoring historic landscapes and/or conditions and fire suppression would continue in or near developed areas known to

contain sensitive cultural and/or archeological resources. This alternative will equip the NPS with a valuable management tool for planning and implementing fire policies and practices, with the requisite flexibility to achieve protection and resource management goals concurrently.

The EA also evaluated an alternative that combines the management actions of wildland fire use and wildland fire suppression without prescribed fire use. Natural ignitions occurring in certain areas and under predetermined conditions would be managed for the accomplishment of resource management goals, including the preservation of fire in its natural role and the reduction of hazardous accumulations of burnable vegetation. Any fire posing a threat to life or property would be immediately suppressed.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The NPS preferred alternative is the environmentally preferred alternative.

The preferred alternative incorporates prescribed fire use, wildland fire use, and wildland fire suppression to have a management strategy that most allows for a naturally occurring fire dependent ecosystem. This alternative would maintain wildlife habitat, subsistence use and provide for the long-term protection of cultural resources.

Mitigation

Certain fire suppression activities could threaten fragile soil layers and other ecosystem components. This risk will be mitigated by the use of minimum impact suppression tactics as allowed by NPS fire management policy. All non-emergency actions taken within the park/preserve will be subject to Minimum Requirement/Minimum Tool Analysis. Potential impacts will also be mitigated by actions of the Multi-Agency Coordinating (MAC) group. The MAC group will convene as necessary to implement temporary changes of selected fire management options. Such changes will be implemented for specific geographic areas during periods of unusual fire conditions such as numerous fires, predicted drying trends, smoke problems, excessively wet conditions, or shortages of suppression resources.

Environmental Consequences of Preferred Alternative

As documented in the EA, the NPS has determined that the preferred alternative can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to vegetation, biodiversity, cultural resources, aesthetics, recreations, wetlands, floodplains, subsistence use, wildlife habitat, air quality, water quality, and fisheries. The environmental effects of the preferred alternative are summarized below.

Vegetation and Biodiversity. Maintenance of a balanced and naturally functioning ecosystem. Cost-effective preservation of fire ecology and reduction of potentially dangerous fuel loads.

Cultural Resources. Improved long-term protection of registered and unregistered cultural resources would occur under the preferred alternative. In locations where site-specific cultural resource values prohibit the use of wildland fire as a management option,

prescribed fire would provide a cost-effective way to reduce fuel loads to protect cultural resources and as a tool for historic landscape preservation.

Aesthetics and Recreation. For visitor safety, there would be an occasional closure of specific areas affected by fire activity. This may result in an inconvenience to park visitors. Prescribed fire would be a cost-effective way to reduce fuel loads where site-specific recreational resource values prohibit wildland fire use as management option. There would be a decrease in aesthetics resulting from burned vegetation.

Local Economy. Slight influx of business revenue generated by suppression operations in local communities near fire incidents.

Wetlands and Floodplains. There is a minimal risk of disruption by fire suppression operations. Increased erosion will occur after fire has burned through wetlands or floodplains with associated loss of vegetation cover. Erosion will diminish with re-establishment of vegetative growth.

Subsistence Use and Wildlife Habitat. There will be a short-term habitat loss in areas affected by fire and a temporary displacement of wildlife. A significant restriction of subsistence use will not occur. Fire will play its natural role in the ecosystem and facilitate the long-term preservation of the area's natural process and maintenance of subsistence activities.

Air Quality. There will be short-term effects on air quality associated with smoke from natural and prescribed fire.

Water Quality and Fisheries. Following fire and before re-establishment of vegetative growth, there would be an increase in stream sedimentation. Sedimentation will decrease overtime and the long-term natural ecosystem function will continue.

Wilderness Character. Long-term impacts to wilderness character are not expected and fire would be allowed to play its natural role. Short-term impacts during fire suppression activities may occur and will be mitigated by using the minimum tool/minimum requirement analysis.

Decision

The NPS decision is to select the preferred alternative. The decision included the mitigation measures identified in this finding of no significant impact.

Rationale for the Decision

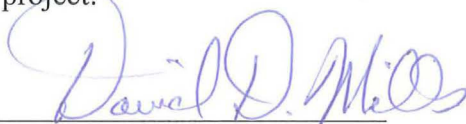
The preferred alternative will enable the NPS to plan for and effectively manage the complex natural phenomena of wildland fire at Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve. This will enable the NPS to implement a burn plan in accordance with NPS Directors Order 18. The levels of impacts to park resources anticipated from the preferred alternative will not result in an impairment of resources that fulfill specific purposes

identified in the establishing legislation or that are key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park and preserve.

The preferred alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and Executive Orders 11988 and 11990. There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 801(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 regulations of the Council of Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared for the project.

Recommended:


Superintendent, Gates of the Arctic NP/P

June 6, 2003
Date

Approved:


Regional Director, Alaska

6/13/03
Date