



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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News

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Wilderness Reviews to be Part of Arctic Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Alaska Region announced today that the agency has completed its initial public comment period for updating the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's 1988 Comprehensive Conservation Plan. As part of this update, the Service will conduct wilderness reviews for three Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) for potential inclusion within the National Wilderness Preservation System. These three WSAs encompass almost all refuge lands not currently designated as wilderness.

In conducting a wilderness review for each WSA, the refuge will evaluate whether a recommendation to designate wilderness would assist in achieving refuge purposes and maintain biological integrity. The refuge will analyze values (e.g., ecological, recreational, cultural, economic, symbolic), resources (e.g., wildlife, water, vegetation, minerals, soils), public uses, and refuge management activities within each area. The analysis will also assess whether the refuge can effectively manage each WSA to preserve its wilderness character. The evaluation will consider a "Wilderness Alternative" and a "No Wilderness Alternative" in order to compare the benefits and impacts of managing each area as wilderness as opposed to managing the area under an alternate set of goals, objectives, and strategies that would not involve wilderness designation.

If the wilderness reviews lead to a recommendation to give wilderness status to any of the WSAs, the recommendation would require approval by the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Secretary of the Interior, and the President of the United States. If a recommendation receives the support of all of these parties, the President would submit it to Congress, which alone has the authority to make final decisions on any proposed wilderness designation.

As part of the planning process for Alaska refuges, the Service has authority to inventory, study, and possibly propose areas suitable for wilderness within the National Wilderness Preservation System. Wilderness areas preserve a landscape's natural conditions for the benefit and use of the American people.

The Service's decision to review nearly all non-wilderness Arctic Refuge lands for potential inclusion in the Wilderness System, including the coastal plain, is a response to many of the comments received during the public comment period. Lands found suitable for wilderness recommendation, if any, will be identified and vetted through extensive public consultation and review as part of the CCP revision process.

The wilderness reviews are expected to be completed by February, 2011. The Service plans to release a draft revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which will include

the wilderness reviews, for public review and comment in March, 2011. After thoroughly evaluating all comments on that draft, the Service plans to issue the final plan and record of decision, incorporating any recommendations arising from the wilderness reviews, in May, 2012.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.