



FWS Wilderness Safety Policy Topics (excerpts from 610 FW 1-5, Wilderness Stewardship Policy)

Prohibited and allowed activities/uses:

1.16 What activities does the Service prohibit in wilderness?

B. Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act also lists a number of generally prohibited uses in wilderness, subject to existing private rights:

- (1)** “[E]xcept as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area), there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area.”

1.22 What effects do emergencies involving the health and safety of people have on the uses generally prohibited by the Wilderness Act?

In an emergency involving the health and safety of people, we may use or authorize the use of motorized vehicles and equipment, mechanical transport, or aircraft. An MRA is not required, but we will take all reasonable measures to minimize impacts on the wilderness character.

2.6 May the Service allow roads and trails in wilderness? Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act prohibits permanent roads in wilderness. We will inventory and evaluate all roads, vehicle routes, and trails in existence at the time of wilderness designation in the unit’s comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) or WSP.

B. We may provide trails, but only where they are essential for resource protection or where significant safety hazards exist during normal use periods. We determine the need for trails, trail improvements, and maintenance through MRAs and include them in the unit’s WSP. We manage historic trails according to approved cultural resource plan requirements.

2.21 What is the Service’s general policy for managing wilderness fires? Three types of wildland fire may occur in our wilderness areas: wildfire, wildland fire use, and prescribed fire. We manage all wildland fires to achieve wilderness objectives in accordance with an approved fire management plan (FMP) that is developed or reviewed and revised in concert with the WSP. In the WSP, we must identify and address wilderness character and the values to be protected, desired fire regime, condition class, ecological conditions, and specific fire management considerations.

A. Firefighter and public safety is always the first priority on all wilderness fire operations.

2.23 May the Service use prescribed fire in wilderness?

B. We must include prescribed fire use within wilderness in an approved FMP and develop a fire plan for any prescribed fire. The FMP must be incorporated through reference in the unit’s WSP. We should plan prescribed fire to avoid or minimize adverse effects on:

- (1)** Safety of visitors and staff;

Visitor Safety:

2.33 How does the Service address visitor safety in wilderness? Wilderness visitors have an increased responsibility for their own safety. We will not modify wilderness areas to eliminate risks normally associated with wilderness. We provide visitors with general information about the unpredictable nature of risks inherent in wilderness, including potential dangers related to isolation, terrain, water, wildlife, and weather. We use caution in providing site-specific information to avoid the implication that we have identified all potential hazards. Information on risks and recommended precautions should emphasize that safety is the visitor's responsibility and that the freedom, independence, and self-reliance of the wilderness experience requires proper mental, physical, and material preparation. We must be prepared to respond appropriately to emergencies related to public safety, including conducting or assisting State or local agencies with search and rescue functions. We must not convey the impression, however, that assistance is readily available in all situations.

2.36 How does the Service inform and educate the public about wilderness?

B. We should limit interpretation of wilderness to locations outside a wilderness area, except as necessary to address visitor health and safety, to administer wildlife-dependent recreation, or to protect wilderness character. However, we may conduct educational programs, such as LNT training or Interpretative walks, inside a wilderness area when deemed suitable to help foster a better understanding and appreciation of wilderness. Such programs should remain sensitive to the wilderness resource, wilderness character, and the experience of other users. Where appropriate, we should also produce materials for the nonvisiting public who may want to learn about wilderness and who find value in just knowing that it is there.

5.14 What special provisions apply to management of structures and installations in Alaska wilderness areas? Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act generally prohibits structures and installations in wilderness areas. ANILCA, however, contains specific direction about the authorization and management of the types of structures and installations described in the following sections. We conduct and document an MRA as a part of the authorization process for the facilities described below and include it in the WSP. (See section 5.15 for guidance on temporary facilities and equipment related to the taking of fish and wildlife.)

A. Cabins. We manage cabins within Alaska wilderness areas in accordance with sections 1303 and 1315 of ANILCA and the implementing regulations at 50 CFR 36.33.

(1) Subsistence and commercial cabins. We authorize the use and occupancy of cabins existing prior to the passage of ANILCA on December 2, 1980 (pre-ANILCA), for traditional and customary uses that are compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established, including wilderness purposes.

(b) We may authorize construction of a new trapping cabin in a wilderness area where trapping has been a traditional and customary use, the proposed cabin is necessary to provide for continuation of that use, and no reasonable alternative site exists (see ANILCA section 1303(b)(1) and 50 CFR 36.33(d)). New trapping cabins in wilderness will be available for public use to ensure public health and safety (50 CFR 36.33(d)(5)).

(2) Public use and administrative cabins. The public may continue to use, and we may maintain or replace existing (pre-ANILCA) public use cabins in wilderness areas. We may place restrictions on their use that are necessary to preserve the wilderness character of the area (see ANILCA section 1315(c)). We may construct or authorize construction of new administrative or public use cabins in wilderness areas if they are built specifically for the administration of the area (section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act) or for public health and safety (section 1315(d) of ANILCA).