

Capacity Determination for Visitor Use in Wilderness

Basis in Agency Policy

Fish and Wildlife Service Policy

6 RM 8 Wilderness Area Management

www.wilderness.net/NWPS/documents?FWS_wilderness_policy.doc

A. General. Congress has indicated that wilderness areas are to be set aside for the use and enjoyment of the public. A wide variety of activities, such as hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, and photography are permissible, but not mandated, in wilderness areas. Wilderness areas may be closed to all public use if such use is determined to be incompatible with refuge purposes.

Where public use is permitted, the possibility of serious damage to the wilderness resource through overuse exists. Habitats that recover slowly from damage, such as desert and tundra, must be identified and protected from overuse. Excessive public use of sensitive areas or small units, particularly those located in populated areas, may warrant special regulations to limit the number of visitors or the duration of visits. Generally, this can be accomplished through a permit or registration system.

The Wilderness Act also allows commercial services within wilderness areas to the extent necessary for activities that are proper for realizing the recreational or other purposes of the area. These services include guiding, outfitting, and transporting in wilderness and they must be in compliance with applicable refuge special use regulations.

B. Methods of travel. Public travel in a wilderness area will normally be by foot, horseback, or other non-motorized means. However, where public travel by motorboat or aircraft has been established prior to wilderness designation, such methods may be permitted under reasonable regulations to protect wilderness values, resource values, or for public safety.

In Alaska, the use of motorboats, snowmachines, and the landing of aircraft is permitted for traditional activities, the exercise of valid commercial fishing rights, for reasonable access to subsistence resources, and for travel to and from villages and homesites, subject to reasonable regulations.

C. Facilities. Public use facilities should be located outside of wilderness areas. However, when it is necessary to locate facilities on the wilderness unit, this need must be documented in the refuge management plan. These facilities must be essential to disperse visitors, protect refuge and wilderness resources, prevent

or correct unsanitary conditions, reduce other hazards, or to otherwise control uses in a wilderness.

Simple rustic shelters or cabins may also be provided for public health and safety purposes if they are the "minimum tool." All new facilities and improvements will be constructed of materials that blend with the wilderness landscape. In Alaska, previously existing public use cabins may continue to be used and may be maintained or replaced subject to restrictions necessary to preserve the wilderness character of the area. ANILCA Section 1315(d) requires the Secretary to notify the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs and the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources of his intention to remove an existing or construct a new public use cabin or shelter.

In Alaska, the use of temporary campsites, tent platforms, shelters, other temporary facilities, and equipment directly related to the taking of fish and wildlife (where it is permitted) may continue, and such new facilities may be constructed. New facilities will be constructed of materials that blend and are compatible with the surrounding landscape. Establishment and use of these facilities may be denied, after adequate notice, if they are determined to be detrimental to the area's wilderness values.

8.10 Wilderness management planning. Wilderness plans should translate overall management direction (as found in the refuge master plan, laws, regulations, and Service policy) into specific objectives and management actions. There is room for flexibility in the format and level of detail of wilderness plans to accommodate individual differences in wilderness areas.

Although management of a wilderness area must be planned, this does not mean that a separate wilderness area plan must be produced. Currently, refuges are required to produce a variety of plans covering special aspects of refuge management. Those plans may be used to document the actions that will be taken on a wilderness area. For example, the management of public use on a wilderness area may be addressed in the public use management plan, fire management in the fire management plan, and grasslands management in the grasslands management plan. Any actions described in these management plans must conform to Service policy for wilderness management if they affect a wilderness area and have the concurrence of the Assistant Regional Director, Wildlife Resources.

If a separate wilderness management plan is developed, it must contain the following:

A. Objectives for the wilderness areas, if they differ from the refuge objectives. These objectives must be based on or derived from applicable laws, policies, and refuge purposes.

B. A description of the current situation including resource conditions, existing facilities, and levels of public use.

C. A description of the desired condition, if it differs from the current situation.

D. A description of the proposed management actions and a schedule of implementation.

E. A listing of policies that are to govern the manager's response to unplanned but foreseeable events, e.g., wildfires, disease outbreaks, or other emergency situations. This section need be completed only if the refuge manager or the regional director determines that existing Service policies and regional operating procedures do not address the needs of a particular area.