

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN

FOR SOUTHWEST ALASKA

A Summary of the BLM Southwest Alaska Plan for the Goodnews Block

Excerpted from the 1982 Plan

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General Description

The Goodnews Block was part of the Southwest Planning Area in 1982, but is part of the Bay Planning Area today (in 2004). The Goodnews Block consists of about 300,000 acres of land in three separate plots grouped around Goodnews Bay, off the southern end of Kuskokwim Bay. In this area the rounded slopes of the Ahklun Mountains reach toe coast, forming a southern boundary to the vast lowlands of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Togiak National Wildlife Refuge borders this planning block on the north, south and east. The Ahklun Mountains, low open mountains with gentle slopes, dominate this planning block. Local relief here varies from 1,000 to 3,000 feet. The entire planning block is covered with tundra; there are no forested areas. Waterfowl and shorebirds are plentiful in the area.

The mining community of Platinum (in 1982 with a population of 58), is located across Goodnews Bay from the town of Goodnews Bay (population of 248 in 1982). Platinum began as a boomtown in about 1937 because of discovery of the valuable mineral deposits here. The town had a peak population of 72 in 1950, when it was a center of commercial activity. As prices went up again, mining resumed in this locality in the 1980s.

Issues

When we began to work on the plan in the 1980s, we approached other Federal and State agencies, organized private interest groups, Native organizations and residents of the Planning Area to learn what they considered important land-use issues for Southwest Alaska. The following general concerns were expressed:

Subsistence

There appears to be general concern regarding the continued use of all resources for subsistence purposes as opposed to recreation and commercial development of resources for economic gain. The potential for conflict lies wherever development or additional use is possible.

Fire

The issues relating to fire center around the effects of fire on the resources and the suppression standards which will be used.

Energy Development

Energy development is an important issue in this region. Emphasis is focused on energy availability for local communities, state and national goals, and on impacts of energy development and transportation.

Mineral Development

These issues center around the effects of mineral development on water quality and on other environmental impacts of the development.

Split Estate Lands

The issues relating to lands where there are split estate (for example where BLM manages the surface and a Native corporation owns the subsurface), center around working out management that is agreeable to all parties concerned.

Grazing

The grazing issues concern potential conflict between domestic livestock and the wildlife populations.

Recreation

These issues concern two points, first the question of type, amount, and distribution of recreation use, and second the interpretation of cultural resources.

Cultural Resources

These issues concern the protection of cultural resources from destruction or alteration.

Lands

The lands issues center around private use of public land, and the possibilities of exchange or transfer to other governmental or private managers.

Access

These issues center around the need for, and the effects of, increased access.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC)

Environmental issues focus on limiting the designation of special areas to situations where normal management practices will not provide adequate protection for the special resource values.

The Plan

Some of the most important decisions in the plan relate to the opening of public lands to oil and gas leasing and to settlement entry. The consideration of specific areas for these

activities will follow the BLM statewide schedule for onshore oil and gas leasing on public lands. Environmental analysis will identify geographic locations.

A number of the decisions in the plan involve some disturbance of ground surface. To support these decisions, the plan calls for inventory of the resource and surveys of soils, vegetation, and topography to determine the suitability of the resource for the use proposed and to determine needs for surface protection.

Other very important decisions relate to the protection of wildlife habitat. Four Areas of Critical Environmental Concern, or ACECs have been designated in this plan, none of which are within the Goodnews Block. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act defines an Area of Critical Environmental Concern as an area “within the public lands where special management attention is required...to protect and prevent irreparable damage to important historic, cultural, or scenic values, fish and wildlife resources or other natural systems or processes, or to protect life and safety from natural hazards.” (FLPMA, Section 103 (a)). This designation does not prohibit development unless the agency makes a specific management decision that a particular activity would be harmful. The ACEC simply highlights for management an important and vulnerable environmental value.

There is a lot of interest now (in 1982) in opening public lands to oil and gas exploration and in opening land to settlement. At the same time, it is BLM’s responsibility by law to protect the land and its resources as a priceless heritage for future generations. In this plan we have tried to reach a balance that will fulfill both of these purposes.

In this summary, the plan’s decisions are grouped by resource, not geographic location. Highest priority decisions are discussed first.

Minerals

None of the oil and gas activities in 19982 affected the Goodnews Block. There has been a history of placer mining for platinum and gold in Southwest Alaska since the early 1900s. Recently this activity has increased, but generally it has been limited to small scale operations of minor economic importance. Inaccessibility and high labor costs have hampered serious efforts to develop hardrock minerals. However, many claims have been filed since the mid-1970s when the price of gold went up.

Other mineral deposits known to be present in the (Southwest Planning) Area include placer silver, mercury, stibnite, zinc, copper, tungsten, antimony, uranium, lead, tin, iron, and titanium. High occurrences of metallic minerals have been mapped in several of the planning blocks, notably ... in the southern tip of the Goodnews block... . Nevertheless, because of limited accessibility and marketability, opportunities for full development of the mineral potential are restricted.

Native groups and the State of Alaska have generally selected those parts of the overall Planning Area that exhibit the greatest potential for minerals. At the present time (in 1982), mining operations are under way at Goodnews

No major coal resources occur on BLM-managed lands.

The Minerals Decisions

Section 1008 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA, or the Alaska Lands Act) calls for an upland oil and gas leasing program on public lands. Leasing and development potential can be made most effective by programming the work to coincide with sales scheduled by the State of Alaska.

Those lands with the highest potential for petroleum resources will receive first consideration for leasing. At the same time, BLM is required to consider the impacts of mineral development on other resources. Some of these resources are protected by the mandates of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Bald Eagle Act, the National Trails Act, and others. As a multiple use agency, BLM must consider management of the lands for wildlife and fisheries habitat, recreation, cultural and historic resources, range, forestry, and watershed.

- ✓ **Open lands under its management to mineral leasing as directed by the Alaska Lands Act (with exclusions that do not affect the Goodnews Block).**

Wildlife habitat areas (such as caribou winter range, grizzly bear denning and high use areas, and fisheries habitat) may be leased with seasonal closures to prevent disturbance during crucial wildlife-use periods. Seasonal use closures or stipulations prohibiting surface occupancy will be used to protect fisheries habitat.

Priorities for selection of non-competitive oil and gas leasing areas and other mineral leasing areas do not include areas within the Goodnews Block.

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Some BLM-managed lands are not open under all mining and mineral leasing laws. The Secretary of the Interior has directed BLM to open lands to full operation of the 1872 Mining law where possible. Therefore, the plan calls for:

- ✓ **Review of those areas that are presently closed to the various mining laws, and the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920, for potential opening under these laws. (The area to be given first priority for review is not in the Goodnews Block.)**

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There are places in the planning blocks where local geothermal resources might be used for local space heating as an alternative to fossil fuels. While large commercial use is not anticipated, there is one known example of the use of local geothermal energy occurring in the region. Additional use may be accommodated through a permitting or small-lease system. Therefore, we plan to:

- ✓ **Identify opportunities for leasing geothermal resources on BLM-administered lands.**

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Except for a few sites, paleontological resources (such as fossil beds) are virtually unknown for the Planning Area. Yet Alaska is the only state that has the potential for the discovery of frozen Pleistocene animals either wholly or partially intact. An analysis is needed to predict the potential for significant sites. The development of other resources in the area may also lead to the discovery of new sites which could be analyzed and evaluated by means of a literature search. BLM plans to:

- ✓ **Assess known paleontological resources and other unknown resources that may be discovered through resource development, in order to protect significant sites.**

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Lands

The Resource

The Southwest Planning Area in 1982 included 72 million acres, of which about 12 million were expected to remain under BLM's management after land transfers were completed to Federal, State, and Native entities. In general, the State and Native corporations have chosen those lands that have the highest mineral, forestry, or recreation potential.

Since 1958 when the Alaska Statehood Act authorized the State to receive title to more than 103 million acres of land, the State has selected approximately 113 million acres from all over Alaska.

In addition to State selections, the Planning Area boundaries include lands selected or conveyed to Calista Corporation. This corporation as well as the village corporations are entitled under the Native Claims Settlement Act to lands in the Planning Area.

The Decisions

The Alaska Lands Act created vast acreages of national parks, preserves, and wildlife refuges on Federal land in the Planning Area. The State has selected more than 23 million acres, of which 11.7 million acres have been either approved or patented (in 1982). At present (1982), only a minor portion of the land in the Planning Area is in private ownership.

The Calista Regional Corporation has selected subsurface rights in [the Goodnews Planning Block] in lieu of similar rights that are not available to them in the former Clarence Rhodes National Wildlife Refuge (now Togiak NWR). This has created a

situation in which BLM owns the surface but not the subsurface rights. A formal understanding will serve to minimize potential future problems as the regional corporation seeks to develop its interests. For this reason the plan calls for BLM to:

- ✓ **Develop and enter into joint management agreement with the Calista Regional Corporation on substitute subsurface land selections located in the Goodnews... planning block.**

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As demand increases for use of public land for fish and wildlife resources, there will be a greater demand for shelter structures to use while hunting, fishing, and trapping. The law provides for the authorization of temporary shelter structures on a permit or lease basis, for both commercial and subsistence use. Therefore, the plan calls for BLM to:

- ✓ **Assure that any existing or new structures and shelters used in connection with hunting, trapping, or fishing are compatible with other land uses.**

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At present the needs for surface transportation are being adequately met by site-specific grants of right-of-way. BLM feels an obligation to facilitate the development of both public and private resources within the Planning Area to the extent that such development does not produce undue environmental degradation. With this in mind, the agency will use environmental assessments to address right-of-way actions. This will provide consideration of other resource values and land uses as grants are made. BLM plans to:

- ✓ **Make public lands available for grants throughout the Planning Area on a case-by-case basis.**

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Opening public lands to settlement and to the development of oil and gas and other minerals will increase demands for communication and navigation sites and facilities. A commitment to use identification and coordinated use of suitable sites within the Planning Area can serve to minimize impacts of development while still providing for all needs, so BLM plans to:

- ✓ **Make public lands available for the development of electronic communications facilities and sites.**

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Except for a small amount of village-selected land, Goodnews planning block of about 312,000 acres is surrounded on three sides by lands administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Because of its remote location and the fragmented land status, this area

is hard for BLM to manage. An exchange may allow the Bureau to consolidate management with larger blocks of land. Therefore BLM is to:

- ✓ **Propose to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State, or Native associations an exchange or transfer of BLM-managed public lands in the Goodnews planning block.**

Wildlife Habitat

The Resource

Waterfowl are plentiful in the Southwest Planning Area. This region provides significant habitat for the 6 million ducks and 250,000 geese produced annually in interior Alaska and provides nesting areas for the whistling swan. Several areas for the whistling swan. Several BLM-administered blocks of land are also important producers of waterfowl. There are waterfowl nesting and molting areas in the Goodnews planning block.

Eighteen species of hawks, falcons, owls, and eagles are known to occur in the overall Planning Area.

The moose, one of Alaska's most important wildlife species, is capable of using nearly all habitats in the region. Moose are found in the Goodnews planning block.

Black bears as well as brown bears are common throughout the Planning Area. Trapping is an important activity in the region during fall, winter, and spring months. Trapping for many different species, including wolf, coyote, arctic fox, red fox, lynx, marten, beaver, weasel, muskrat, and squirrel are all known to occur in the region, although numbers and distribution vary locally as food and habitat differ in availability. A variety of non-game animals and birds – the basic food items for the carnivores – also live in the area.

The Decisions

Because BLM is mandated by the Endangered Species Act to protect the habitat of endangered species, we plan to highlight falcon habitat areas to focus special management consideration on those areas. BLM will:

- ✓ **Designate nesting sites of the endangered peregrine falcon as Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. In support of this decision an inventory would be made of active and historically active nest sites, determination would be made of active and historically-active nest sites, determination would be made of yearly nesting success and population trends, and assessment would be made of critical habitat areas.**

This decision will necessitate an inventory of raptor nesting sites and yearly success as well as close coordination with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It will also require the assessment of critical habitat areas.

ACEC designation will call attention to the significant raptor concentrations along the Kuskokwim River and will enable the Bureau to place adequate protection requirements on activities near the raptor sites.

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No specific plans for caribou, brown bear, or moose were delineated in the 1982 plan for the Goodnews block.

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Riparian and wetland habitats are important to other species including furbearers and nongame animals, to economic and aesthetic values, and to diversified ecosystems. BLM plans to:

- ✓ **Consider non-game animals, furbearers, wetlands, and riparian habitats in any land use actions involving BLM.**

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Fisheries

The Resource

Streams in the overall Planning Area provide excellent habitat for salmon, burbot, pike, arctic grayling, char, rainbow trout and sheefish. The drainages of the region are important to commercial, subsistence, and sport fishing.

There were no planning decisions made in 1982 that addressed fisheries within the Goodnews Bay block.

Watershed Management

The Resource

Most of the rivers and streams in the Planning Area are of non-glacial origin. There are few records of water quality or quantity in the Planning Area. The U.S. Geological survey maintains gauging stations on rivers to record water flow.

The availability of groundwater may be limited by low annual precipitation, long seasons of freezing temperatures, and local permafrost conditions. Groundwater may be developed chiefly near the major streams. Galleries placed in gravel beds beneath large streams may provide year-round water sources. Groundwater obtained near the coast is

generally higher in mineral content than that from inland sources and is subject to saltwater intrusion.

The Decisions

BLM is required by law to maintain water quality standards to protect human safety and habitats for fish and wildlife.

Considering the current emphasis on resource development and the projection of future population increases, it is becoming imperative that we know the present water conditions in order to maintain the water quality. Therefore, BLM plans to:

- ✓ **Insure that any land use development is consistent with the Clean Water Act and the Alaska Water Quality Standards.**

While BLM would approve development plans and require that applicants obtain the necessary permits from the Alaska Department of Environmental conservation (DEC), the DEC would be responsible for enforcement. BLM would assist the DEC to monitor activities through routine compliance checks.

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The protection of wetlands and floodplains is mandated by executive orders. Therefore the plan includes the decision to:

- ✓ **Analyze the impacts of actions that may involve floodplains. Items for consideration would be human safety and management of resources. These would be considered in activity-level planning or in an Environmental Analysis for any projects planned or permitted by BLM.**

Forest Products

The Resource

Historically, residents in Southwest Alaska used wood products for heat, house logs, and mine timbers. Today the forests are still used for essentially the same products. Wood is still used for heating, house building, and other construction needs such as fish wheels and salmon drying racks. Generally speaking, areas most suitable for the commercial harvest of timber are located on State or Native land. At present (in 1982), low demand coupled with high transportation costs impede the growth of a forest-products industry in this region.

Forest products form an integral part of the subsistence-based economy within the Planning Area. Most wood products used for subsistence have come from State and Native-selected lands near the population centers along the major tributaries. These areas are relatively accessible and provide more high quality timber than is found on most

BLM-managed lands. As management of these lands is shifted from BLM to State and Native organizations, less subsistence use of forests on BLM-managed lands is expected.

The Decisions

Sustained yields of forest products are necessary for the subsistence way of life. In addition, houselogs, poles, and firewood are necessary for settlement in remote areas of Alaska. Inventory data would provide a basis for sound management of the resource. Therefore, BLM plans to:

- ✓ **Provide for use of forestry products throughout the planning blocks with priority in areas opened for settlement entry.**

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Recreation

The Resource

Southwest Alaska is not developed to utilize or promote the booming tourism industry that some other areas of the state enjoy. Most of the area is isolated and accessible only by water or by air. None of the decisions in the 1982 plan that address recreation pertain to the Goodnews block.

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Cultural Resources

The Resource

Prehistoric and historic archaeological sites and resources are present in the Goodnews block. However, not all archaeological properties have been identified or evaluated by field examination.

The Decisions

The Bureau is legally responsible to ensure that any actions it allows on public land consider the effects of those actions on sites eligible for or listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Because of the lack of cultural/historical data within the Planning Area, cultural resource management planning will primarily respond to other resource activities by:

- ✓ **Assuring that potential surface-disturbing projects either planned or authorized by BLM are examined in order to protect significant cultural resources. Cultural clearances could be performed either by a BLM**

archaeologist or contracted by the permittee to professional archaeologists who are recognized by BLM.

Visual Resources

The Resource

Overall visual impression of the planning block is of nearly complete naturalness with only an occasional minor indication of humans' presence. Villages are scattered throughout the Planning Area, but are clustered along the main transportation links between communities. Each village has a gravel airstrip and about 50 buildings. When viewed from an airplane or from a river, this country presents a powerful picture of great vistas of completely natural landscape, not marked by roads, power lines, or any other large-scale human creations.

The Decisions

- ✓ **Manage the sections outside of the Wild River corridor as Visual Resource Management Class II. This class allows management to make some visible changes in the characteristic landscape, as long as those changes do not attract attention.**

Management will particularly address potential crossings of river tributaries for transportation, rights-of-way, and utilities outside the Wild River corridor withdrawal.

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Certain Management actions would disturb the natural vegetative pattern or introduce cultural changes. Usually a proposal can be modified to reduce these impacts. Therefore, in order to assure that visual impacts are considered and that mitigating measures are designed to reduce the impacts before a project is started, the plan is to:

- ✓ **Evaluate all proposed management activities using the visual resource contrast rating system. Encourage those projects that are inherently compatible or designed to be compatible with the character of the natural landscape.**

What Happens Next

A comprehensive review of this plan should be undertaken at the end of five years.

A Management Framework Plan (MFP) such as this one is intended to be dynamic and Always subject to update and revision through the Bureau's planning process.