Park Service considers options to accommodate increase in visitation

The Resource Development Council is calling for a wider range of alternatives for accommodating a large increase in visitors to the "frontcountry" of Kenai Fjords National Park near Seward.

Socio-economic forecasts indicate there will be substantial growth in visitation to the national park, a popular tourist destination on the eastern side of the Kenai Peninsula. Projections suggest that visitor numbers will exceed 300,000 annually by the year 2003, compared to 150,000 visitors in 1993. Studies also reveal that two-thirds of all visitors travel to Exit Glacier, 10 miles west of Seward while one-third stop at a small visitor center located in the Resurrection Bay community.

In a letter to park Superintendent Anne Castellina, RDC said that three alternatives developed by a Park Service planning team fall short of adequately addressing the projected increases in visitation at Exit Glacier. Visitor numbers at the glacier are projected to increase from 35,000 in 1993 to 225,000 by 2003.

The RDC letter was written in response to a draft management plan released by the Park Service in October, which proposed three menu options to accommodate increased visitation:

- Option A: Increase visitors to Exit Glacier from 35,000 in 1993 to 125,000 in 2003
- Option B: Increase visitors to Exit Glacier from 35,000 in 1993 to 150,000 in 2003
- Option C: Increase visitors to Exit Glacier from 35,000 in 1993 to 225,000 in 2003

The RDC letter stated that all three options are inadequate because they fail to consider alternative and less conflictive ways of accommodating increased visitation. The council called on the Park Service to create a wider range of alternatives for accommodating a large increase in visitors to the "frontcountry" of Kenai Fjords National Park near Seward.

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On the opening day of the 104th Congress, Alaska’s Congressional delega-
tion wasted no time in launching an aggressive agenda addressing
top priorities of the 49th state. At the top of the Alaska agenda is a bill jointly intro-
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The new measure includes changes addressing Alaska’s unique circum-
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be applied here, a long-standing policy omission sought by RDC.

Provisions specific to Alaska include changes to the sequencing method-
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Federal law will be amended to ensure national policy will “achieve a balance between wetlands conserva-
tion and adverse economic impacts on local, regional, and private economic inter-
est” and “eliminate the regulatory taking of private property by the regulatory program affected under section 404.”

RDC highly endorses a number of provisions of this legislation, lands owned by Alaska Native entities and the State of Alaska shall be considered economic base lands, highlighting the importance of the social and economic needs of Alaska Natives and the citizens of Alaska and recognizing prior agreements under other federal laws.

Congressman Young will form a wetlands task force this session ad-
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cation to Alaska and the nation. The
task force will include members from the House Resource, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Agriculture commit-
tees. Congressman Young will reportedly introduce a wetlands bill in the House of Representatives later this session.

Much thanks goes out to the Alaska delegation and staff for the introduction of a flow of water out of the tailings pond, the length of time

RDC has been a strong protagonist that it is still today.

A majority of the editorial board of Resource Review, which has been providing a service to the Resource Development Council for over 20 years, has been influenced by the leadership of the council. The council has been able to influence policy makers at all levels, from local to national, and has been able to achieve important victories for the resource industry.

Echo Bay is now engaged in discus-
sions with the agency on how best to reach common ground and resolve issues.

The company is considering new modifi-
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Stone said the company is will-

ing to go the extra mile to ensure environmental impacts from the mine are mitigated.

The area can be mined and

With a Republican led Legislature and a Democratic Governor, all of us have a tremendous opportunity, and obligation, to provide the best possible choices for the citizens of Alaska. My challenge is to ensure the new administration and the Legislature on our collective issues.

Lastly, but certainly not least, we have been blessed at RDC by a succession of extremely distinguished executive direc-
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alleled in their field. I know all of the former presidents appreciate the staff’s devotion to the RDC mission. Without the staff’s knowledge and support of EPA, it is difficult to understand how the mine is being affected.

Echo Bay could result in a re-design of its proposal to reopen the mine.

EPA also noted in other provisions of this legislation, lands owned by Alaska Native entities and the State of Alaska shall be considered economic base lands, highlighting the importance of the social and economic needs of Alaska Natives and the citizens of Alaska and recognizing prior agreements under other federal laws.

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including construction of a rustic, modest-size visitor complex, extension of the area’s trail network, improvements to parking and utilities and the construction of a winter warming hut and public use cabins. The alternative allows existing uses to continue, including ski access, snowmobiling and commercial dog-mushing.

Some people are opposed to any development at Exit Glacier and the winter uses outlined in Alternative C, ignoring the fact that Exit Glacier is a frontcountry attraction. It is not a wilderness area and the less hardy access to the rugged high alpine and nearby ice fields. The Park Service has held a number of public scoping meetings on the park plan. Park Superintendent Castellina recently addressed a packed RDC Thursday breakfast meeting in Anchorage where she noted the Park Service has a responsibility to not only accommodate visitors, but to protect the park’s resources from significant impacts, which she said are likely to occur unless measures are adopted to control crowds.

Castellina is highly respected in Seward for her personal involvement in the community and her open-door policy to business and industry. Her RDC presentation was well-received by the pro-access crowd. Although a preferred alternative is not expected until next fall, Castellina said her agency is unlikely to choose Alternative A, the primitive alternative. In scoping meetings held last year, public comment ran in favor of improved access to the park, but on the other hand most people attending the meetings did not wish to see large-scale development near the glacier.

Castellina pointed out that the public tends to support a modest-size facility at Exit, on the scale of the Eagle River visitors center at Chugach State Park. As a result, planners are leaning more toward siting a larger visitor center, perhaps near the visitors center at Chugach State Park. Castellina is highly respected in Seward for her personal involvement in the community and her open-door policy to business and industry. Her RDC presentation was well-received by the pro-access crowd. Although a preferred alternative is not expected until next fall, Castellina said her agency is unlikely to choose Alternative A, the primitive alternative. In scoping meetings held last year, public comment ran in favor of improved access to the park, but on the other hand most people attending the meetings did not wish to see large-scale development near the glacier.

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EPA taken to task for A-J report

Echo Bay says it has addressed major issues raised by the EPA

(Continued from page 1)

EPA's Northwest technical Assistance Report (TAR), was prepared to assist the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in deciding whether to issue a federal Clean Water Act permit to Echo Bay for construction of a tailings pond at Sheep Creek Valley. Chuck Clarke, EPA's Northwest regional administrator in Seattle, said that as long as the A-J mine relies solely on the Sheep Creek impoundment for tailings disposal, state water quality standards for cyanide, arsenic and copper would likely be violated in Gastineau Channel during operation of the mine. The EPA review offered no solution for how the company might achieve a green light for its project.

The TAR is considered the most important regulatory review for the mine. The city's mine permit issued in 1993 is dependent on a favorable review by EPA. The report took more than two years to complete. The agency had promised to issue the TAR several times over the past 18 months, but did not meet its deadlines.

Mine developers plan to store waste rock from the mine behind a dam at Sheep Creek where water would be recycled within the complex, but because of the high rainfall in Southeast, excess water would build up in the tailings impoundment that is part of the mine design. Because the excess rainfall would be released, a Clean Water Act 402 permit is required from the EPA.

Echo Bay has proposed eliminating cyanide from its gold extraction process and ship out unprocessed ore for treatment elsewhere. Echo Bay eliminated cyanide from the process not only eliminates concern for the chemical, but for the other metals as well. Despite the two years the EPA took to finish its report, Echo Bay scientists and independent experts knowledgeable about this project are convinced the EPA failed in its task to scientifically analyze relevant data.

The company hotly disputes EPA's conclusion that there is no way to avoid harm to water quality or to offset the loss of wildlife from the reopening of the A-J. While the EPA said it could not "suggest any feasible, effective option that would give the Alaska-Juneau mine a green light," Echo Bay charged that the agency knew among other options the company has provided, the elimination of cyanide from the mining process --- a key concern --- is a feasible, effective option. After careful analysis of data, a number of the nation's top scientists and engineers in the mining and water treatment fields believe there will not be a problem with water being released from the mine's tailings pond into Gastineau Channel because of the size of the proposed treatment facility and the length of time the pond can hold water. In addition, Echo Bay has included a number of mitigation measures in its mine design that makes its site better than other existing treatment facilities.

One of those measures, which the EPA condemned in its recent review, included pumping tailings below 20 feet of clear, overlying water. The idea for the underwater tailings facility came from early discussions between the company, local officials and the EPA in the scoping process at the outset of the mine permitting process. The underwater tailings disposal option was seen as a solution to potential dust and water quality issues. The company hired top experts in the field to design an improved underwater tailings facility that would provide added safeguards and become an integral part of the mine design. Prior to that, Echo Bay had considered a subaerial tailings plan.

Now, more than five years later and after almost $80 million spent by the company --- much of it on numerous scientific and environmental studies --- the EPA has completely reversed its position in the TAR. The agency now is saying the EPA's work won't work despite what the company says is overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Echo Bay says its tailings facility design contains more safeguards than any sites already meeting all environmental quality standards. The company says its facility design is better because it calls for pumping tailings below the surface of the water, rather than at the surface where they have to settle to the bottom of the pond. The A-J tailings facility is also bigger, since there is a longer time available for holding water if a problem should develop. The company designed the facility so it could stop the process.

(Continued to page 6)

Park Service considers several options to manage Kenai crowds

(Continued from page 1)

The Park Service initiated its current planning efforts to address increases in visitation to the frontcountry of Kenai Fjords National Park. In that light, RDC said it would be ironic if the Park Service chose the second option as its preferred alternative since it does so little to address future needs.

Although billed as the "Higher Level of Development" option, the third option, Alternative C, is not an extreme development proposal when compared to the primitive nature of Alternative A.

If the current range of alternatives presented, RDC believes Alternative C is the logical choice, although it may fall short of meeting increased visitor demands. RDC supports the various elements comprising this alternative, and visitors would be required to hike from that point.

A second option, Alternative B, would provide for only minimum improvements, falling short of any meaningful steps to accommodate visitor increases. This option is basically a "no action alternative, one which would maintain the status quo.

Although billed as the "Higher Level of Development" option, the third option, Alternative C, is not an extreme development proposal when compared to the primitive nature of Alternative A.

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(Continued to page 7)