Media Contact: Office of the Secretary
For Immediate Release: October 25, 1978
Print PDF

Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus today released a draft supplement to the 1974 final environmental impact statement covering Executive Branch alternatives for protecting Alaska National Interest Lands until Congress can take final action.

Andrus said he was "obligated" to examine ways to provide interim protection for federal wildlands in Alaska when Congress adjourned without meeting its own deadline. The so-called "d-2" withdrawals expire on December 18. The 28 volume Environmental Impact Statement on Alaska lands issued in 1974 did not cover Executive Branch alternatives. Comments on the draft supplement are due by November 20.

"Although Congress has struggled with this issue for seven years, many roadblocks were thrown up along the way. Congress did a tremendous job of documenting the need for ambitious conservation action in Alaska," Andrus said, "and there is no question that Congress shares our desire to protect Alaska's natural crown jewels."

The draft supplement covers three major authorities available for protecting federal lands in Alaska:

The Antiquities Act of 1906 allows the President to proclaim National Monuments for the protection of "objects of historic or scientific interest."

Alaska's untouched natural communities and untouched geological paleontological and archaeological resources are just a few examples of the historic and scientific values of these lands.

In addition, the Secretary has temporary and permanent withdrawal authorities under Section 204 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (the Bureau of Land Management Organic Act). These authorities allow the Secretary to segregate or set aside land for up to two years or to withdraw it for up to 20 years. Such withdrawal could include transfer of management responsibilities to another agency such as the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Secretary may also transfer Bureau of Land Management land to National Wildlife Refuges to replace the values in existing refuge lands selected by Alaskan Native villages. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates the total of village selections in Refuges could be as high as three million acres. This authority is contained in Section 22 (e) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Finally, the Secretary is obligated under Section 603 of the FLPMA to study all road less tracts over 5,000 acres on the public lands for inclusion in the national wilderness system. Pending the study, the lands are to be managed in such a way as not to impair their wilderness characteristics. Congress has not appropriated any funds for such studies in Alaska, but that does not relieve the Secretary from the obligation to protect those lands until funds for the studies are available, Andrus said.

"The Chairman of the House Interior Committee, Congressman Udall, made it very clear that the requirement to carry out those studies before any development takes place on those lands was not extinguished by the failure to fund them this year," Andrus said.

The draft environmental supplement, the Secretary emphasized is a "decision - making tool. While we are determined to afford interim protection to Alaska National Interest Lands, I have not yet decided exactly which authority or combination of authorities I will recommend to the President to assure that protection. I will not preempt the process. No final decision on precise authorities will be made until comments are received on the supplement," Andrus said. Comments should be returned by November 20, 1978 to the following offices:

For comments from Alaska:

Special Assistant to the: Secretary

Attn: Regional Environmental Officer

U.S. Department of the Interior

Office of the Secretary Box 120

Anchorage, Alaska 99510

For comments from Continental U.S.:

Alaska Task Force (TWE)

National Park Service, Denver Service Center

P. 0. Box 25287

Denver, Colorado 80225