



American Rivers

Thriving By Nature

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2009

#8 Beaver Creek

Alaska

Threat: Oil and gas development

SUMMARY

Wild and Scenic Beaver Creek is a wilderness gem, home to abundant salmon and other wildlife, and a spectacular destination for anglers, boaters, skiers, and hunters who seek its solitude. But Beaver Creek's wild character may soon be traded for oil and gas development by the very agency mandated to protect it—the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Although the creek is enveloped within three national conservation areas, a secretly-negotiated deal to transfer protected lands into corporate hands initiated under the Bush Administration could result in the proliferation of hundreds of miles of roads, pipelines, airstrips, and drilling wells that would cause irreparable harm to the creek and threaten the Yukon River downstream. The USFWS, under new leadership, must halt this misguided project and protect the people and businesses that depend on a healthy Beaver Creek.

THE RIVER

Beaver Creek flows through pristine wildlands for 303 miles before joining the mighty Yukon River. The creek runs through two national conservation areas, the White Mountains National Recreation Area and the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge. Just 50 miles as the raven flies from Fairbanks, Alaska, the Beaver Creek watershed hosts abundant and diverse wildlife including caribou, Dall sheep, moose, wolf, wolverine, lynx, river otter, marten, beaver, waterfowl, raptors, arctic grayling, and brown and black bear. Beaver Creek provides spawning and rearing habitat for Chinook and chum salmon, and supports other significant fisheries. It is an important tributary to the Yukon River upon which the Fort Yukon and other tribes in dozens of Alaska Native communities depend for subsistence hunting and fishing.

The creek is a popular destination for Alaskans as well as other U.S. and international visitors seeking its clear water, solitude, midnight sun, and northern lights. Wild, natural Beaver Creek attracts recreational river floating, fishing, hunting, cross country skiing, dog sledding, and snowmobiling. These outstanding natural qualities led Congress to include it in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System by designating the upper 127 miles of Beaver Creek as a National Wild River in 1980.

Healthy Alaska ecosystems generate more than \$33 billion in economic value for the state. Fisheries, tourism, and associated commercial activity produce nearly \$2.6 billion in income to workers annually and account for 26 percent of all Alaska jobs -- twice as many as those in oil, mining, and construction combined.

THE THREAT

The USFWS is considering transferring 200,000 protected acres in the Yukon Flats Refuge to Doyon Ltd., a private corporation, for oil and gas development. To get around the incompatibility of oil and gas development within protected areas, this transfer would move conservation lands into private hands and out of refuge protection. In addition to the harm this project would cause, it would also set a terrible precedent for resource development schemes on other protected lands in Alaska.

The proposed oil and gas development project would require construction of at least 600 miles of roads and pipelines, airstrips, satellite fields, drilling pads, gravel mines, and development wells straddling Beaver Creek. An industrial road and oil and gas pipelines would cross Beaver Creek and run adjacent to the Wild and Scenic River section. Expected oil industry impacts include 300 crude oil and other spills, according to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). Of critical concern is the possibility of oil spills into Beaver Creek and downstream into the Yukon River, potentially damaging international salmon runs shared by the U.S. and Canada.

Vast amounts of water would be required from local sources, including the Beaver Creek watershed. The USFWS estimates more than 275 million gallons of surface water would be required for exploratory wells and development wells. The hydrology of the Yukon Flats region is complex and not well studied, but regional groundwater flow is likely recharged in uplands where the land exchange would occur. The DEIS notes that a significant summer oil spill in Beaver Creek would travel 148 miles to the Yukon River in two days, contaminating soils and vegetation much of the way. The agency downplays the effects of crude oil to fish by referencing old information on crude oil toxicity and omitting crucial long-term scientific studies on the Exxon Valdez spill.

Recent evidence suggests that global warming is already causing rapid drying of Yukon Flats lakes and wetlands. The DEIS admits this drying trend could be exacerbated by construction activities that alter drainage patterns or disturb the permafrost layer. Since the 1950s, more than 10 percent of lakes in the Yukon Flats Refuge have disappeared entirely and the total surface area of lakes and ponds has decreased by 18 percent. Oil drilling would compound impacts already underway from climate change, including disturbance of animal migrations, increased forest fires and insect outbreaks, and disruption of local hunting patterns and Alaska Native cultural activities.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The Yukon Flats land swap was hatched in secret negotiations between USFWS and Doyon Ltd. The Bush Administration's Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne directed an expedited EIS process and USFWS released the draft EIS in January 2008 to overwhelming opposition

from the Native Village of Fort Yukon and other tribes. The land appraisals and final EIS are underway with release expected in August 2009. If the USFWS Alaska Regional Director decides to proceed, a 30-day review of the final exchange agreement will be solicited from Congress following approval of the USFWS National Director. Oil and gas exploration and drilling could commence within a year or two.

The USFWS and/or the Obama Administration's Interior Secretary, Ken Salazar, must halt any further progress on the final EIS and land exchange agreement. If the agreement is approved and sent for final review, Congress must deny it. In addition to permanently harming pristine lands, this swap would also set a dangerous precedent as a back-door means to obtain development rights within other national conservation areas in Alaska and make a mockery of the intent by which Congress established them.

CONTACT INFO

Pamela Miller, Northern Alaska Environmental Center, 907-452-5021 ext. 24,

pam@northern.org

Caitlin Jennings, American Rivers, 202-347-7550, cjennings@americanrivers.org,