

Alaska Wilderness League and Trout Unlimited

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BLM Lifts Mineral Withdrawals for Bristol Bay Lands

Plan Revokes Protections for Lands Critical to World's Largest Sockeye Salmon Run

Anchorage, AK- Today, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released its final Bristol Bay Proposed Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). The BLM's recommendation to open over one million acres located along the Nushagak and Kvichak Rivers, two of the world's greatest salmon rivers, was met with harsh criticism from Alaska Natives, other local residents, conservation interests, and sport and commercial fishermen.

The final Bristol Bay Proposed RMP and FEIS address 2.5 million acres of BLM-managed lands in the Bristol Bay region of southwestern Alaska. Bristol Bay hosts the world's largest wild sockeye salmon run and provides critical habitat for caribou, bears, migratory birds and countless numbers of seals, whales, walrus and fish. Alaska Native communities depend heavily on the area for its subsistence resource values.

"These lands are located adjacent to village corporation lands along the Nushagak River. The member village corporations have met with Alaska BLM and met with the Alaska congressional delegation in Washington D.C. last January, but it looks like no one is listening to us," said Bobby Andrew, subsistence user and spokesman for Nunamta Aulukestai, "Caretakers of Our Lands."

Bristol Bay's rich salmon fishery is the largest commercial salmon fishery in the world, a world-class sportfishing destination, and the backbone of an economy heavily based on recreation and tourism. Pebble Mine, as well as future claims on the opened BLM lands, would threaten these natural resources and those who depend on them. The increased development activity in a predominantly untouched area will have untold consequences to the vitality of the systems and the economy that depends on it.

"Harvesting and processing of Bristol Bay fish generates nearly \$320 million a year and provides jobs for some 12,500 people," said Tim Bristol, Alaska Program Director for Trout Unlimited. "Sport fishermen spend nearly \$60 million a year to experience this world class fishing area. Anything that would jeopardize this valuable resource is short-sighted and irresponsible."

According to the final Bristol Bay RMP, the BLM intends to lift protective withdrawals that currently prohibit mining throughout the entire planning area. These lands were closed to mineral development in accordance with the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act to ensure that sensitive BLM lands were preserved until they could be assessed and proper

protections implemented. Throughout the planning process, many stakeholders voiced concerns about the impacts to the salmon fishery if mining and associated infrastructure were to occur in the BLM and nearby lands in the region. Despite concerns from local communities, Alaska Native organizations, recreational and sport users and conservation groups, the BLM plans to prioritize mining and mineral development over habitat protection.

“We are disappointed that the final plan does not reflect the recommendations of the public to maintain mineral withdrawals that provide protection of the valuable fish and wildlife resources of the region,” said Jeremiah Millen, BLM Wildlands Field Representative for Alaska Wilderness League.

Today’s Bristol Bay plan is one of four RMPs that the BLM is in the process of developing for over 20 million acres of Alaska public lands. RMPs evaluate resources in the planning area and identify future “multiple-use” management objectives such as subsistence and sport hunting, recreation, mineral and oil and gas development. The plans must also identify sensitive wildlife habitat, special cultural resources, and unique features in need of special protections and designation. After each final EIS is released, the public has thirty days to protest the decision before the Record of Decision is released.

“Not only has BLM favored resource development over protection of a world class sustainable salmon fishery,” said Millen, “but they’ve released the final plan right before the holidays. Given the time frame and the complexity of issues at hand, it will be difficult for stakeholders to contact the agency with questions or concerns during a significant portion of the 30-day protest period.”

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