

STATE OF ALASKA
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION OF FORESTRY & FIRE PROTECTION



FAIRBANKS-DELTA AREA FORESTRY
PRELIMINARY BEST INTEREST FINDING AND
DECISION FOR
Middle Chena Spruce TIMBER SALES
NC-1841-F, NC-2052-F, NC-1994-F, NC-1987-F

JULY 2024

Abbreviations

AAC	Alaska Administrative Code
ADEC	Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation
ADF&G	Alaska Department of Fish and Game
ADNR	Alaska Department of Natural Resources
AS	Alaska Statute
BIF	Best interest finding
CCF	100 cubic feet (timber volume)
DBH	Diameter at breast height (4.5 feet above ground)
DMLW	Division of Mining, Land and Water
DOF	Division of Forestry & Fire Protection
FLUP	Forest Land Use Plan
FRPA	Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act
FYSTS	Five-Year Schedule of Timber Sales
MBF	Thousand board feet
OHA	Office of History and Archeology
ROW	Right-of-way
TVSF	Tanana Valley State Forest

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I. PROPOSED ACTION

DOF is proposing to offer for sale approximately 111 acres of white spruce timber with a small component of birch fuel wood from state lands in the area along the Chena River, south of the community of Pleasant Valley. The volume to be offered totals approximately 1,078 MBF (2,764 CCF). DOF would sell the timber as a negotiated, competitive bid, or value-added timber sales for commercial use. For this timber sale, the PBIF and Draft FLUP are being issued for review at the same time. The land covered by this PBIF appeared in the 2024 Fairbanks-Delta Five Year Schedule of Timber Sales (FYSTS) as Chena Islands Spruce #1 (NC-1841-F) & #2 (NC-2052-F) and Pleasant Valley Spruce #1 (NC-1987-F) & #2 (NC-1994-F).

The management objectives for the proposed timber sales are

- Provide timber products for the industry and the state and local economy.
- Return the site to a young productive mixed stand forest to include balsam poplar, birch, aspen, and white spruce.
- Protect valuable non-timber resources by applying Best Management Practices for Timber Harvest Operations (BMPs) to all timber harvest activities.

II. STATUTORY AND REGULATORY AUTHORITY

The Division is taking this action under the authority of

- AS 38.05.035(e) Best Interest Finding;
- AS 38.05.110-120 and 11 AAC 71, Timber Sale Statutes and Regulations; and
- AS 41.17.010-950 and 11 AAC 95 Forest Resources and Practices Statutes and Regulations.

III. ADMINISTRATIVE RECORD

The Division will maintain an administrative record regarding the decision of whether or not to proceed with the action as proposed. This record will be maintained at the DOF's Fairbanks-Delta Area Office as Middle Chena Spruce Timber Sales

IV. SCOPE OF DECISION

This preliminary best interest finding (PBIF) is the first part of step three of a six-step process to design, sell, and administer timber sales. The following list summarizes the overall process:

Step 1: Regional planning. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) develops area plans and state forest management plans to designate appropriate uses for state land, classify the land accordingly, and establish management guidelines for multiple use. These plans determine where timber sales are an allowed use, and what other uses must be considered when designing and implementing sales. Subsequent land use decisions must be consistent with the area plans. The area in this PBIF is covered by the Tanana Valley State Forest Management Plan . The finding also considers the Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan and the Fairbanks North Star Borough Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan.

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Step 2: Five-year Schedule of Timber Sales (AS 38.05.113). DOF'S Fairbanks-Delta Area Office prepares a Five-year Schedule of Timber Sales every other year. The Schedule identifies proposed sales, including their location, volume, and main access routes. The Five-year Schedules are scoping documents that provide an opportunity for public, agency, and industry to identify potential issues and areas of interest for further consideration in the best interest finding and Forest Land Use Plan. A proposed timber sale must appear in at least one of the two Five-year Schedules preceding the sale.

Step 3: Best Interest Finding. A best interest finding is the decision document that:

- Ensures that the best interest of the State will be served by this proposed action,
- Establishes the overall area within which the timber sale may occur,
- Determines the amount of timber that will be offered for sale and the duration of the sale,
- Sets the overall harvest and reforestation strategy for the sale area,
- Determines whether the sale proposal complies with the Constitutional requirement to manage for sustained yield by evaluating the amount of timber in the sale and the annual allowable cut for the affected area,
- Selects the appropriate method of sale (i.e., competitive or negotiated sale), and
- Determines the appraisal method that will be used to determine the sale price.

The Preliminary Best Interest Finding (PBIF) is intended to provide sufficient information for reviewers to ensure that the best interest of the State will be served by the proposed action.

After public and agency review of the PBIF, DOF reviews comments, makes changes as appropriate, and issues a final best interest finding (BIF). DOF must adopt a final BIF before selling timber. An eligible person affected by this decision, and who provided timely written comment or public hearing testimony to the department, may appeal the decision to the DNR Commissioner per AS 44.37.011 and 11 AAC 02.

Step 4: Forest Land Use Plans (AS 38.05.112). Prior to authorizing harvest of timber on any area greater than 10 acres, the DOF must adopt a site-specific Forest Land Use Plan (FLUP) for the harvest area. DOF will prepare FLUP(s) within the overall sale area covered by this best interest finding. FLUPs specify the site, size, timing, and harvest methods for harvest unit within the sale area. FLUPs also address site-specific requirements for access construction and maintenance, reforestation, and multiple use management. Draft FLUPs will be based on additional field work, agency and community consultation, and site-specific analyses by the DOF, and will be subject to public and agency review.

Step 5: Timber sales and contracts. Following adoption of the final best interest finding, and completion of the FLUP, DOF will offer the timber for sale by auctioning competitive sales and/or negotiating some sales with purchasers. The Division will sign a contract with the winning bidder for each sale. The contract will include stipulations to ensure compliance with the best interest finding, FLUP, and statutory requirements.

Step 6: Sale administration. DOF administers timber sales and conducts field inspections to ensure compliance with the final best interest finding, FLUP, timber sale contract, and applicable

laws, including the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act and regulations (AS 41.17 and 11 AAC 95), and forest management statutes and regulations in AS 38.05 and 11 AAC 71.

V. PROJECT LOCATION, LAND STATUS, AND DESCRIPTION

A. Location

The Proposed sale area is located within Sections 1,2, and 11, Township 1 South Range 4 East, Fairbanks Meridian. The sale area is shown on the attached map and is within United States Geological Survey 1:63,360 Quadrangle map titled Fairbanks C-5. The general location can be accessed via Pleasant Valley Road from Chena Hot Springs Road Mile 23. Proceed south down Pleasant Valley Road roughly a mile. The route then continues 0.6 miles south as a winter-only trail referred to as Pleasant Valley Extension Road. The existing route ends at the Chena River, where proposed access would continue via an ice bridge and then along 0.6-miles of proposed winter road to the sale areas.

B. Title status

The acquisition for the land upon which the sales are proposed is based on MH 28, and patented to the State under PA 50-2009-0112. The land estate is Tentatively Approved; thus the State has management authority. There are no known title restrictions on the area.

C. Land use planning, classification, and management intent

The proposed area is within the Tanana Valley State Forest (TVSF) in Management Unit 6 Chena. The Unit will be managed for dispersed and developed recreation and commercial and personal use timber production. There are no specific restrictions on timber sales within the TVSF Management Plan.

The sale areas are open with respect to mining.

The Interagency Fire Management Plan includes both Pleasant Valley Spruce #1 & #2 in the “Critical” protection category. And Chena Islands Spruce #1 & #2 in the “Full” protection category.

This area falls under the Fairbanks Northstar Borough’s Regional Comprehensive Plan (2005), which supports forest development activities while aiming to minimize land use conflicts.

D. Current access and land use:

Access to the proposed sale is planned via an existing winter road north of the Chena River, which will only require snow plowing and no reconstruction. An ice road will be necessary to cross the Chena River, and a Fish Habitat Permit will be required for this crossing. Additionally, a segment of Pleasant Valley Road, used as primary access by private parcels and shared with residential users, will be utilized for access. All access routes will be

maintained according to the winter road standards outlined in the TVSF Management Plan. Upon completion of the sale, any roads utilized by logging traffic will be left in a condition equal to or better than they were before the sale.

E. Background and description of proposal

1. Background: According to the Tanana Valley State Forest Management Plan, Unit 6 shall be “managed for dispersed and developed recreation and commercial and personal-use timber production”. The Division of Forestry is offering these sales with the intent to maintain a productive working forest while continuing to provide opportunities for dispersed and developed recreation.

Recent harvest activity as well as the management objectives outlined in the TVSF management plan has led to continued interest in timber stands along the Chena River. To continue to supply the local industry here in Fairbanks, logs are being transported longer distances than they have in the past, with logs already being hauled as far away as Delta Junction and Nenana.

2. Timber volume and sustained yield: The Annual Allowable Cut (AAC) is the amount that can be harvested from forest land managed for forestry purposes in a year under sustained yield management. The AAC in the Fairbanks Area is outlined in the publication Timber Inventory of State Forest Lands in the Tanana Valley (Hanson, 2013). This sale complies with sustained yield/allowable cut principles outlined in the Fairbanks Area Five-Year Schedule of Timber Sales for FY 2024-2028. The AAC for the Fairbanks Management Area is approximately 4,606 acres, and these sales total 111 acres. This action alone and in combination with other timber sales that are sold will be within the allowable cut and comply with sustained yield requirements.
3. Harvest unit design: Harvest units were designed along natural timber type changes and other natural features, incorporating a minimum 100-foot timber retention buffer along the Chena River and active sloughs. The sale areas will be harvested by the clearcut silvicultural system. Patches of nonmerchantable advanced regeneration and significant snags important for wildlife habitat will be preserved as much as possible. Residual trees will be protected from damage during harvest operations although over mature birch may be used as bumper trees to protect patches of advanced spruce regeneration. Harvesting will be by the whole tree yarding system. Slash disposal at the landings will be by burning or by salvage for fuelwood use.
 - a. Reforestation and site preparation: The sale area will be reforested in compliance with the Forest Resources and Practices regulations (11 AAC 95.375-.390) Natural regeneration will be utilized initially for regeneration. Opening the site will cause a large vegetative release especially in the more productive sites closer to the watercourses. Residual and adjacent birch and spruce will provide a seed source. Under this harvesting system natural regeneration of spruce and hardwoods should be increased due to increased light and soil warmth. Further

inland where moss depths are thicker, hand planting of white spruce may be required. A regeneration survey will be conducted after any harvest. Inadequately stocked areas may need further management actions, such as planting spruce, to achieve proper stocking levels.

- b. Access design and construction: Access design, construction, and maintenance will comply with the Forest Resources and Practices regulations (11 AAC 95.285-.355). The general access point is located at mile post 23 on Chena Hot Springs Road, with access continuing south on Pleasant Valley Road for approximately one mile. From there, proceed approximately 0.6 miles south on Pleasant Valley Extension Road to reach the start of the proposed 0.6-mile winter road. These existing roads require only snow plowing and will not need reconstruction. Crossing the Chena River will necessitate an ice bridge and a Fish Habitat Permit. Access routes will adhere to the winter road standards outlined in the TVSF Management Plan.

Increased traffic on local roads used by loggers may be observed by residents. Road wear will be addressed through regular road maintenance conducted by logging operations, ensuring the road remains in comparable or improved condition at the close of the sale.

- c. Appraisal method: DOF will appraise the timber value in compliance with 11 AAC 71.092. Results from past auctions will provide a basis for the appraisal. DOF uses a transaction evidence appraisal system which will be used to determine base stumpage rates.

F. Resources and management

1. Timber.

- a. Timber stand composition and structure: This is a mixed species river bottom stand containing both white spruce and birch and widely scattered Balsam poplar. The spruce trees are exhibiting strong health and vitality, with robust growth patterns, healthy foliage, and minimal signs of disease or pest infestation.. Birch occupies less than 10% of the site and is mostly over mature although within some of the natural openings more vigorous birch of a younger age class is present. The understory vegetation in the logging area is moderately dense, including species such as alder, willow, high bush cranberry, and rose. These plants contribute to the biodiversity and ecological health of the site, supporting wildlife and aiding in the stability of the forest ecosystem. There is an estimated 10% defect in the white spruce with most of the defect in the form of broken tops, sweep and butt rot.
- b. Stand silvics: The common merchantable tree species in the Tanana Valley include white spruce, birch, aspen, and balsam poplar. Data and research on the regeneration and growth characteristics of these species are compiled in the

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Resource Analysis of the Tanana Valley State Forest (TVSF) Management Plan. This analysis also reviews and lists the harvest and reforestation systems available in Interior Alaska. The outcomes of public and agency discussions on harvest and reforestation are included in the TVSF Management Plan.

Silvicultural harvest systems that promote even-aged (natural) management are generally preferred. These systems mimic the ecological effects of wildfire and other disturbances, leading to the greatest increase in site productivity. Even-aged management is typically achieved through clear-cuts, patch cuts, and heavy partial cuts (such as seed tree or shelterwood systems), which open the site to maximum solar exposure. This approach results in the highest production of young hardwoods important for wildlife and spruce understory valuable for future timber. These techniques create young, vigorously growing stands next to older, undisturbed stands, optimizing natural seeding and enhancing the edge effect.

- c. Topography and Soils: The proposed sale will be designed and managed to prevent significant impairment of the land and water with respect to renewable resources (AS 41.17.060(c) (5)). The site is on a level ground within the flood plains of the Chena River. The elevation is approximately 570 feet. The area contains numerous terrace features, potholes, and abandoned slough channels. Soils in the sale area are classified as the Jarvis-Stratify and Jarvis-Salchaket Complex. Jarvis-Stratify soils are well-drained alluvial soils characterized by distinct layers of loamy material. These nearly level soils typically form on terraces from mixed alluvial sources, resulting in varying textures and compositions within the soil profile. Generally deep with moderate to high permeability, they are highly suitable for supporting forest vegetation and other plant communities. Found in areas with periodic flooding, these soils have a diverse structure that enhances productivity and ecological diversity. The Jarvis-Salchaket Complex combines Jarvis and Salchaket soils, often found on floodplains and terraces. Jarvis soils are well-drained and formed in loamy alluvium, supporting robust plant growth. In contrast, Salchaket soils are somewhat poorly drained, forming in fine-silty alluvium on nearly level bottomlands. They exhibit stratified silty and sandy material over water-deposited gravel and sand, with substratum depths ranging from less than a foot to over six feet. The productivity of Salchaket soils, combined with the diversity of the Jarvis soils, supports varied plant communities. This complex is prevalent in areas influenced by past and present watercourses, contributing to a mosaic of ecological conditions that enhance biodiversity and productivity in the landscape.
2. Agriculture: No known or anticipated future agricultural activity is expected in the proposed harvest areas.
3. Wildlife habitat and harvest. Wildlife typical of the Interior are found here, and during ground reconnaissance, signs of moose, fox, and beaver were observed. There are no known raptor nests within the proposed sale area. If an eagle nest tree is discovered in the sale area, it will be marked on the ground, and a 330-foot no-harvest

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radius will be established to protect the tree. Large portions of this unit offer excellent habitat for moose, black bear, and furbearing animals. Its accessibility from Fairbanks and nearby population centers has led to significant hunting, trapping, and wildlife viewing activities.

The proposed treatments for this stand are expected to enhance habitat conditions for ruffed grouse, moose, voles, hares, and, ultimately, lynx, marten, and fox. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation (ADFG), have historically recommended managing for as much diversity as possible when prescribing harvest unit size, shape, and position to mimic the results of wildfire or other stand replacement phases such as insect outbreaks or flood events. To achieve these objectives, snags will be retained to provide late-successional wildlife habitat for hole-nesting birds, woodpeckers, small mammals, and other species requiring perching habitat. The units will be laid out with uneven edges along and between timber types where possible, creating a varied edge effect beneficial to many wildlife species.

4. Fish Habitat, water resources, and water quality. The proposed sale will be designed and managed to protect fish habitat and water quality in compliance with the Forest Resources and Practices Act and regulations (AS 41.17 and 11 AAC 95). The Chena River is classified as a salmon-bearing stream ADF&G (Anadromous Waters Catalog # 334-40-11000-2490-3301). The Chena River is also classified as a Type III-A stream (non-glacial with resident fish, > 3 ft wide) under the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act (FRPA). FRPA allows for sustainable timber harvesting while ensuring the protection of its high-value resident fish habitats, particularly with winter access. The Chena River system provides critical spawning and rearing habitat for salmon and supports the most heavily used sport fishery in the Tanana Basin. A key requirement is maintaining a 100-foot buffer zone on each side of the river, which helps preserve water quality, provide shade, and stabilize banks to prevent erosion and sediment runoff.

Winter access to the timber sale area offers a significant advantage, as the frozen ground minimizes soil disturbance and erosion. Properly designed and maintained logging roads, equipped with drainage structures like culverts and water bars, will further reduce any potential environmental impact. Stream crossings can be constructed more effectively in winter conditions, ensuring minimal disturbance to banks and channels. Operating in winter allows logging activities to take place when fish spawning and rearing habitats are less active, reducing the risk of sedimentation and erosion. The frozen conditions provide a stable environment for machinery and transport, enhancing the efficiency and safety of logging operations.

5. Recreation, tourism, and scenic resources. This area is host to multiple recreational users. Activities such as fishing, snowmachining, trapping, personal firewood harvesting, and boating. The Chena River, which surrounds the site, is a frequent location for anglers and guided fishing tours, contributing to local tourism. Winter months see the area active with snowmachine enthusiasts, while trapping remains a

traditional and economically activity. The river's boat launches facilitate recreational boating, providing access for fishing and leisure. Additionally, local residents engage in personal firewood harvesting, relying on the forest for their heating needs during the cold months.

6. Cultural Resources. DOF works with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to identify and avoid known cultural, historic or prehistoric sites in planning the proposed access routes and harvest areas. If additional archaeological sites are identified, proposed harvest areas and road locations will be appropriately adjusted to avoid conflicts. If any historic or archaeological sites are encountered during road construction or harvest activities, DOF will immediately inform SHPO and take action to protect the findings.
7. Subsurface Resources. There are no known developed subsurface resources in the sale area. No adverse impacts are anticipated for these mining leases. All location or staking monuments found within the sale areas will be protected and preserved.

G. Costs and benefits

In addition to generating royalties for the State's general fund, the proposed sale will create economic benefits for the Fairbanks North Star Borough and other locations in Alaska, including the Pleasant Valley and Two Rivers communities . The business community will directly benefit economically by providing support services for the operators, such as sales of fuel, food, housing, medical, and miscellaneous supplies. The sale is expected to boost the local economy by creating jobs, resulting in significant man-hours of work related to the harvest and transportation of wood products. Additionally, the public may benefit from access to additional personal-use fuelwood areas.

VI. PUBLIC REVIEW

The public and agencies are invited to comment on this Preliminary Best Interest Finding. Objections or comments pertaining to the proposed action must be received in writing by the DOF Fairbanks-Delta Area Office **by 4:30 PM AKDT Friday, August 23, 2024** in order to ensure consideration for review. Comments should be mailed to the State of Alaska, Division of Forestry & Fire Protection, 3700 Airport Way, Fairbanks, AK 99709 or by email to andrew.allaby@alaska.gov. For more information you may contact Andrew Allaby, Fairbanks-Delta Area Resource Forester, at 907-451-2603 or andrew.allaby@alaska.gov. To be eligible to appeal the final decision, a person must have provided written comment **by 4:30 PM AKDT Friday, August 23, 2024**.

VII. PUBLIC NOTICE

This PBIF will be publicly noticed in compliance with AS 38.05.945. Notice will be posted on the Alaska Online Public Notice System, and both physical and electronic notices will be mailed to previous timber sale bidders as well as any property owners or business interests known to the

Division in the proposed sale area. Notice will also be posted on the Division of Forestry public webpage.

VIII. ALTERNATIVES AND DISCUSSION

There are four possible alternatives to consider for this project area. A discussion of each of the alternatives follows. All alternatives are consistent with the area plan and applicable statutes and regulations.

A. Continue the sale(s) as proposed:

This alternative meets the objectives of the Five-Year Schedule of Timber Sales and DNR's constitutional mandate and is consistent with the land classification. It also meets the silvicultural objective of improving forest vigor, provides for a value-added end product and creates additional jobs in Alaska due to the combination logging and trucking. This alternative also complies with the management objectives of the TVSF Management Plan for Subunit 6.

B. Modify the sale(s) by making it smaller or larger:

The proposed sale units are a logical setting for typical commercial logging equipment in Interior Alaska. The size of the sale is designed to be large enough to be economically viable considering access development and mobilization costs and distance to processing facilities. Sales of this size are appropriately balanced to maintain other resource values as well as provide economic benefits to the Tanana Valley.

C. Defer the sale(s) to a later date:

Deferring the harvest would fail to meet many sale objectives. It would result in economic losses for the State and local timber industry and increase the risk of timber loss due to wildfire, insect infestations, wind-throw, and other natural processes affecting over-mature timber.

D. Take no action:

This alternative would result in not meeting any of the objectives outlined for this management action. Utilization of the forest resource would not be achieved. There would be no significant contribution to the State and local economies. This alternative would delay the management objectives planned for the area, deny making a source of raw materials available to the local wood products industry, and would delay the harvest of mature trees, prior to the onset of disease or insect infestation. Decay and senescence of mature trees results in the loss of economic value.

IX. RECOMMENDATION AND PRELIMINARY DECISION

After due consideration of all pertinent information and alternatives, the DNR has reached the following Preliminary Decision: To offer for sale approximately 111 acres of white spruce sawtimber and birch pole timber to provide sawtimber, fuelwood, and biomass while improving habitat as proposed in Alternative A and described in this PBIF. The DOF finds that this preliminary decision satisfies the objectives stated in this document and it is in the best interest of the State to proceed with this action under its authority of AS 38.05.035(e) (Powers and Duties of the Director) & AS 38.05.110-120; 11 AAC 71 (Timber Sale Statutes and Regulations); and AS 41.17.010-.950 and 11 AAC 95 (Forest Resources and Practices Statutes and Regulations).

To be eligible to participate in any appeal or request for reconsideration to the final finding, a person must be affected by the decision, and must have submitted comment to the preliminary finding and decision during the comment period.

If you have any questions, please contact Andrew Allaby, Fairbanks-Delta Resource Forester (907)-451-2603, andrew.allaby@alaska.gov.

X. SIGNATURE

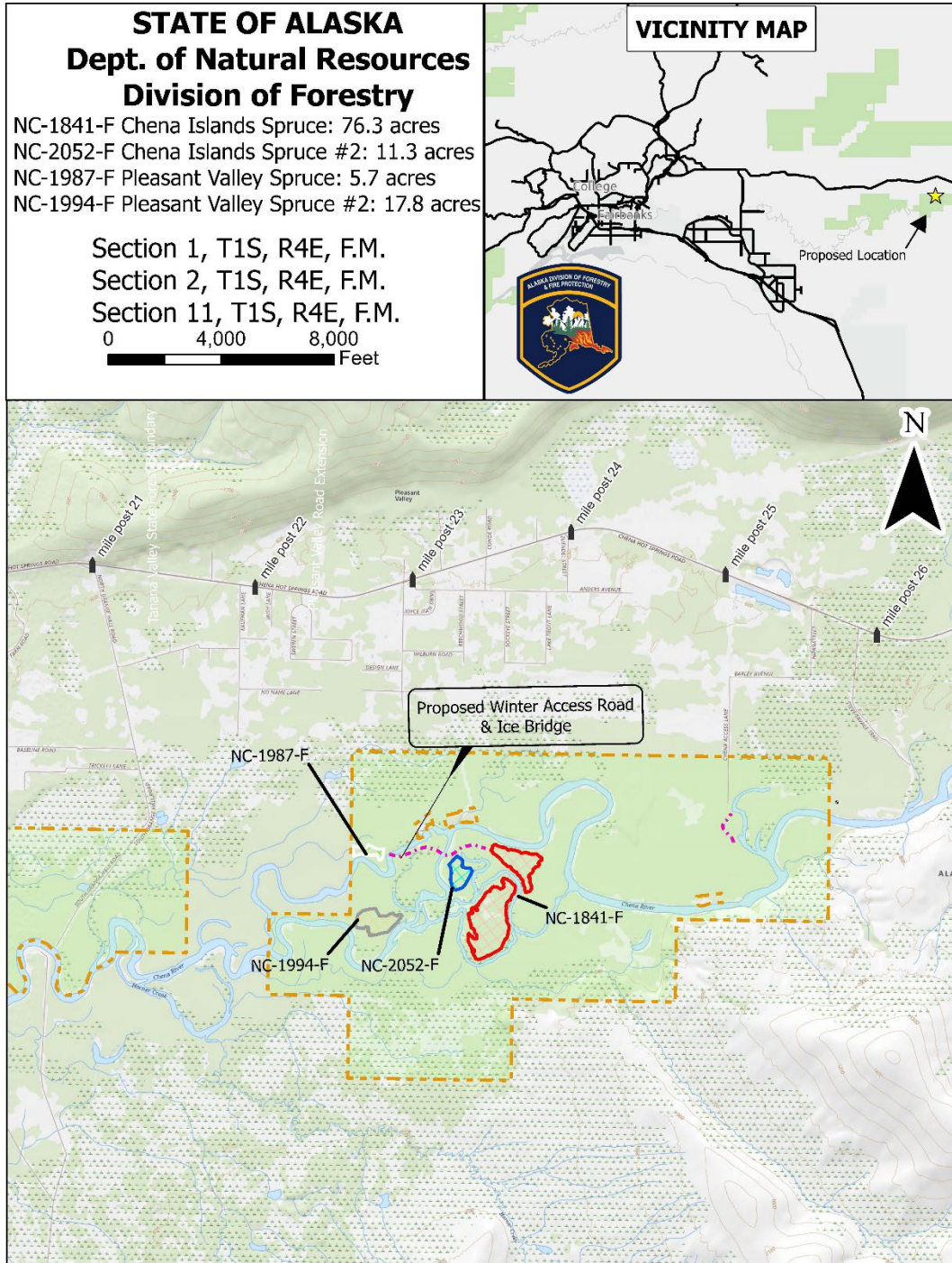
Kevin Meany
Northern Region Forester
Alaska Division of Forestry & Fire Protection

Date

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XI. ATTACHMENTS

Maps of the proposed project area follow.



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