

## **Issue Statements for Crescent Creek Claims #13 and #14 Environmental Assessment**

### **1. Impacts to Wilderness Characteristics**

The existence of a road in a currently unroaded drainage; the design of the road, with 10-foot wide roadbed, numerous cut-and-fill slopes, ditches, and culverts; use of the road by 4-wheel drive trucks and other heavy equipment; noise from the suction dredge, bulldozer, and backhoes; litter; exposed denuded sites; and an increased number of recreationists, including those using vehicles would change the Crescent Creek drainage from its current naturally appearing condition. The current characteristics of the valley generally appears to have been affected primarily by forces of nature except for the trail itself, with the imprint of contemporary man's activities substantially unnoticeable, and which has outstanding opportunities for solitude and a primitive or confined type of recreation. These are the characteristics of wilderness as defined in the Wilderness Act.

The 1974 Chugach National Forest Land Management Plan objective for Crescent Lake and the surrounding watershed is to "maintain the unit in a near-natural state and study it for possible classification as a National Scenic Area."

The RARE II Final EIS is consistent with the 1974 Plan as it recognizes the undeveloped character of the area. Crescent Valley has been designated as a "Further Planning Area" under RARE II to be allocated as wilderness or non-wilderness: "Roadless areas allocated to further planning will be considered for all uses, including wilderness, during the land and resource management planning for specific project planning process conducted at the local forest level. Insofar as possible, wilderness quality will be retained in roadless areas allocated to further planning, and certain incompatible management activities such as timber harvest and associated road construction will be prohibited."

Nineteen placer claims on Crescent Creek and eight on Hargood Creek cover almost the entire length of both drainages. An additional 10 claims are adjacent to the creek claims or run up a main tributary to the south. The claims are owned by eight individuals or groups. Of these eight mining interests, one has currently expressed an interest in road use, should one be developed.

Because Crescent Creek valley is being considered for recommendation for a Natural Scenic Area, the wilderness characteristics must be retained until the Forest makes the decision, using the Forest Planning Process, whether to recommend that the area be allocated to protected status. The listed activities, which would also be associated with the development of the other claims along Crescent Creek, may foreclose the Forest's option of recommending this portion of the Further Planning Area for Scenic Area designation.

### **2. Impacts to Scenic Values**

The Chugach National Forest Plan visual quality objective for the Crescent Lake area is the "Visual Quality Objective of retention," meaning that management activities should not be noticed by the average forest visitor and indicating that the area continues to have significant visual value. Many people and organizations who submitted letters and phone

comments on the proposal felt the undeveloped and scenic qualities of the area would be ruined by the road. The primary impact would be a change from an undeveloped setting to a drainage in which limited vehicle access would occur and recreational opportunities for those desiring a backcountry experience severely damaged.

The existence of a road into a currently unroaded drainage; the design of the road, with 10-foot wide roadbed, numerous cut-and-fill slopes, ditches, and culverts; use of the road by 4-wheel drive trucks and other heavy equipment; litter; exposed denuded sites; the same conditions potentially created at other claims along the Crescent Creek drainage using the road; and an increased number of recreationists, including those using vehicles, would change the Crescent Creek drainage from its current naturally appearing and wilderness-type condition. These actions and the resulting changes in the conditions would dominate the characteristic landscape to a major degree, changing the Visual Quality Objective to either Modification or Maximum Modification, particularly if the road induces other miners to develop their claims in the Crescent Creek Valley.

### **3. Impacts to Recreation**

Crescent Creek Valley offers the public a variety of backcountry recreational opportunities in a primitive undeveloped setting, including hiking, camping, sightseeing, hunting and fishing. Because of its low gradient, it also provides a backcountry experience for those who cannot hike steep trails, which is unique in the Anchorage area. For these reasons, Crescent Creek Valley has received a high amount of recreational use by a wide variety of user groups. Recreation Information Management (RIM) data indicates that approximately 3,100 people travel the Crescent Creek Trail each year. On a per-mile basis, this rate of use equals that of the Resurrection Pass Trail system, which is generally considered to be the second most heavily used trail in Alaska. During the last decade, recreation use has been estimated to have increased at an annual rate of 10%. Trail use is the highest during the months of June, July, and Augusts, with July having the highest use.

Nearly one-third of the use occurring on the Crescent Creek Trail is estimated to be day use. This generally includes fishermen, small game hunters, and hikers. Crescent Lake is generally the destination point for day and overnight use. The bulk of the trail use is by backpackers hiking to the public use cabin located at the end of the trail at the lake. In 1981, this year-round cabin had 195 reservations for 280 days of use, and accommodated 357 people.

The existence of a 10-foot wide road going from the trailhead to within 1.5 miles of Crescent Lake, suitable for 4-wheel drive vehicles; the use of the road by large vehicles and heavy equipment for at least one set of claims, and probably at least one more; noise from the heavy equipment, added to that that can be heard from other active claims in the valley below; an increase in litter; an increase in the number of recreationists, many of whom would be using motorized equipment; would substantially change the type of recreational experience from a pristine backcountry experience to a developed, probably motorized vehicle-focused form of recreation.

The outdoor recreationists who do not like the change will attempt to find similar conditions within a partial day's drive from Anchorage, which would be very difficult. If

such an area is found, it would already have a substantial number of recreationists using it, potentially creating an overuse situation there.

Recreationists continuing to use the trail would be in conflict with vehicles, and could also experience safety concerns interacting with 4-wheel drive vehicles and heavy equipment.

#### **4. Impacts to Water Quality and Salmon and Associated Fishing**

The clear water of Crescent Creek flows from Crescent Lake above the upper claim at a gradient of 1%. A major portion of the valley bottom soils consists of alluvial outwash of gravels and cobbles intermixed with angular avalanche debris, overlaid with a thin layer of organic matter. These soils are unconsolidated and highly vulnerable to erosion once exposed to the high levels of both rain and snow runoff precipitation in the area. The Crescent Creek Trail, which would provide the basis for the road, crosses Crescent Creek in several places, and closely parallels the creek for several hundred feet.

Road construction activities; use of the road by trucks and heavy equipment for at least one set of mining claims, raising dust during dry periods and causing rutting and increased runoff during wet conditions; use of the road by motorized recreationists, resulting in the same problems caused by mining vehicles; dredging in the creek; and soil exposed to rain and runoff on the roadbed and within the mining areas would substantially increase the amount of sediment entering Crescent Creek, changing the appearance of the water from clear and pristine to muddy.

This sediment could possibly approach the State water-quality standard for sediment, potentially violating the Clean Water Act.

This sediment could settle in salmon and trout spawning beds 5 miles downstream from the mining site (salmon spawn from May to June; trout spawn from August to September), reducing the number of eggs that could successfully hatch due to smothering the eggs, which need clear flowing water for the oxygen to develop. These conditions could also make it difficult for any fry to emerge from the sediment and/or find food once emerged.

If the number of fish returning to spawn or living in the creek is substantially reduced, the number of persons fishing in the area will decrease as well. The area is currently known in the Anchorage area for the quality of the fishing experience because of the large fish population as well as the scenic quality of the drainage.