

**Chugach National Forest, Glacier and Seward Ranger Districts**  
**Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail Hut-to-Hut System**

A proposal by the Alaska Mountain and Wilderness Huts Association

September 2004

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*This revised proposal was created by the Alaska Huts Association. Special thanks to Jeff Schively for geographic information system expertise and HDR Alaska, Inc., and map plotting services.*

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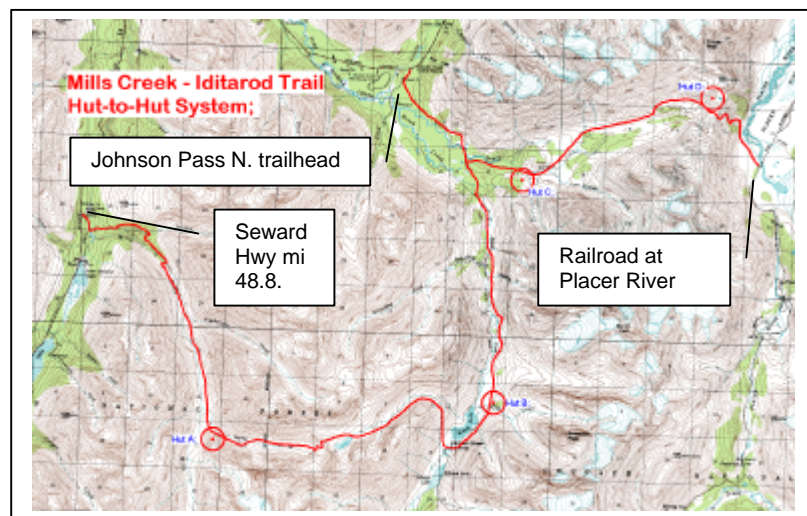
## 1. Introduction

### Proposal Overview

The Alaska Mountain and Wilderness Huts Association proposes a system of multiparty backcountry huts in the Seward and Glacier Ranger Districts of Chugach National Forest (see map, below, and larger map, attached). This proposal serves as an application for a long-term special use permit to construct and operate this system.

These huts will be open to the general public and linked by foot trail through the spectacular backcountry of three parallel valleys—Mills Creek, Bench Creek, and Placer River—connected

via passes at the head of Stormy Creek and Center Creek. Trailheads will be located on the Seward Highway Scenic Byway at two locations approximately halfway between Anchorage and Seward. A third trailhead will be located on the Alaska Railroad near its crossing of Placer River. Design, construction, and operation of this trail and hut system is proposed via a partnership between the Huts Association,



an Alaska non-profit corporation and 501(c)3 educational entity, and the USDA Forest Service as a mutual project in the public interest. Sections 2 and 3 describe the proposed system in greater detail. Attached tables provide a summary of some features of hut operations and summary of authorizations requested.

### Statement of Need

Backcountry hut-to-hut hiking and skiing systems, where foot travelers can find not only shelter but also companionship, inspiration, and—in, many cases, food and education—exist in virtually all mountain regions of the world. These include the Alps, Scandinavia, New Zealand, the Himalayas, the Appalachian Mountains, and the Rocky Mountains. No such hut system is available in Alaska.

- Individual public use cabins are popular in Alaska; they are booked six months ahead, heavily used, and often unavailable. More options are needed.
- Huts are a traditional experience of the Alaska backcountry. Native Alaskans and, more recently, hunters, trappers, prospectors, and dog team freight haulers used linked cabins as a way of traveling for many days across the state. There is a need and opportunity to continue that traditional manner of connected cabins and shelter along the way.
- A hut-to-hut system provides an accessible model of a simple lifestyle and connects people to the land, providing a venue for outdoor education and an opportunity for firsthand experience—especially important for those who would otherwise not experience the natural world.
- Huts would provide a model of sustainable recreation and tourism in a state where tourism is an important and growing element of the economy.
- The 2002 Forest Plan revision for Chugach National Forest includes allowances specifically for special use hut-to-hut, for cabins like those proposed. The plan prescriptions in the proposed area allow for this special use.

The following paragraphs further explain the opportunity and need for such a system.

### **Philosophy/Mission/Vision**

The mission of the Huts Association explains the organization’s values.

***Our Mission: Include Alaska’s backcountry in a worldwide tradition of places in which hikers and skiers can travel hut to hut, and provide warm comfortable huts in inspiring settings to foster camaraderie and promote wilderness education and stewardship.***

#### Worldwide Tradition:

There are mountain huts all over the world—the European Alps, Scandinavia, New Zealand, the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. The Himalaya Mountains of Nepal and surrounding countries have developed a system of teahouses that are much the same as huts. All are very popular. Alaska, with its own traditions of linked cabins and dogsled roadhouses, exploration, and mountaineering, as well as its popularity as a visitor destination, should become part of this huts tradition.

***“The hut should be comfortable, but not too comfortable; everybody should be a little dependent on everybody else there.”***

-Bob Butera  
*Huts Association Member  
Design Group Representative  
Civil Engineer  
Mountain Runner and Skier*

#### Hikers and Skiers:

Huts elsewhere were developed for the foot traveler, summer and winter. Huts specifically were meant to serve foot travelers, who have the ability to carry only minimal supplies. In Alaska, there once were roadhouses along early trails

such as the Iditarod Trail. While there are now backcountry motorized vehicles, it is still the person moving under his or her own power in the backcountry who is most in need of shelter along the way.

Travel Hut to Hut:

Moving through the backcountry for several days constitutes a real journey, and the ability to travel from one hut to another in the backcountry is what Alaska lacks most. This is a key ingredient in backcountry huts in other parts of the world.

Warm Comfortable Huts:

Huts can provide minimalist, even crude, shelter. Huts can provide lavish, lodge-like accommodation. “Warm” and “comfortable” are meant to place our huts between these extremes and invoke an important part of our vision—the creation of atmosphere that is conducive to personal growth and education.

<b>H</b> ospitality
<b>U</b> nderstanding
<b>T</b> rails
<b>S</b> tewardship

Inspiring Settings:

The “mountain and wilderness” in the association’s name imply settings that truly inspire an emotional response from people who use the huts. We believe the huts should be placed where there is geographical variety—forests, glaciers, water, wildlife, peaks, and valleys equal to people’s vision of Alaska and equal to the inspiring settings found in the Rockies, the Alps, and the Himalayas. Settings that inspire are an essential part of creating an atmosphere for wilderness education and, ultimately, stewardship of the land.

Camaraderie:

With inspiring settings, warm and comfortable huts, physical outdoor effort, and shared experiences, the ingredients are in place to foster good relationships between people. Promoting good relationships and fostering camaraderie and discussion are keys to our vision for the huts.

Wilderness Education and Stewardship:

Finally, education about the natural environment is the key to ensuring an on-going balance between development and conservation. We believe that there is a great deal of pressure for resource extraction, to meet human physical needs (and wants), that is not adequately balanced by recognition of human dependency upon a healthy global ecosystem. Creating an atmosphere for learning and positive social interaction, we intend to foster in hut users a strong sense of personal responsibility for natural systems and wild lands.

**Huts Association History**

The Huts Association began to form in February 1998 and officially incorporated August 29, 1998, as a nonprofit corporation under the laws of the State of Alaska. The organization requested non-profit status as a tax-exempt nonprofit organization under Internal Revenue Code and was granted 501(c)3 provisional status in 1999 and final status in 2004. The Huts Association received an initial, seed-money grant for hut materials through the National Park Service Cooperative Cost Share Program in late 2000 and began accepting members in

December 2000. Examining topography and land management for a first hut site has been the primary aim of the organization to date.

Key early successes included garnering the general support of the State of Alaska Commissioner of Natural Resources; the Director of the Division of Mining, Land, and Water; and the Director of the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, as well as superintendents of Mat-Su/Copper River Area state parks and Chugach State Park. Also, the Governor's TRAAK<sup>1</sup> Citizen's Advisory Board passed a resolution in support of the hut-to-hut concept.

As the Huts Association was forming, more than 60 locations within a 100-mile radius of Anchorage were examined by map study, aerial reconnaissance, and on foot. An alternatives analysis, printed separately and submitted in January 2004, provides more detail. The Huts Association board of directors and volunteers have looked carefully at several sites and worked with various land managers to introduce the huts concept:

- Initial examination of routes, including aerial and on-the-ground reconnaissance, took place before and after official founding of the Huts Association. A key success in 1998-2000 was Huts Association work with and comment on Kenai Peninsula land use plans. The adopted Kenai Area Plan for state lands specifically notes certain lands, including those near Ptarmigan Creek, as favorable for a hut-to-hut trail system. The Forest Plan Revision for Chugach National Forest includes a new designation specifically for "special use: hut-to-hut" for up to 25 people. The Kenai Peninsula Borough, in its adopted Kenai Peninsula Trails Plan, acknowledges hut-to-hut trail plans on the Kenai Peninsula.
- The first formal Huts Association proposal was renovation of an old homesteader's cabin on a 700-acre Chugach State Park inholding. The Conservation Fund brokered a deal to transfer the land to the park. In 1999-2000, the Huts Association performed substantial area reconnaissance and building evaluation. Ultimately, The Conservation Fund decided the cabin should not remain on the land and had it removed before completing the transfer to Chugach State Park.
- The Huts Association turned its attention to a site for a first hut at Goodhope Creek in the Talkeetna Mountains, on land managed in part by State Parks. In 2000-2001, the Huts Association made a formal proposal and received resolutions of support from the Mat-Su State Parks advisory board, the Mat-Su Borough parks and trails advisory board, the Mountaineering Club of Alaska, and the Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association for this site. However, management concerns about access to this area, in conjunction with a State Parks' desire to identify a full hut-to-hut route, re-focused attention to the upper reaches of the Little Susitna River and Moose Creek.
- On-the-ground and aerial reconnaissance trips in summer 2001 of every pass from the upper Little Susitna to Moose Creek failed to turn up a reasonable passage between these valleys.
- The Huts Association's attention returned to the Kenai Peninsula and Paradise Valley Trail as the primary focus when the Talkeetna Mountains concepts appeared to be not feasible and when the Forest Plan was approved. In June 2002, the initial version of this proposal was submitted. The Forest Service requested further information in a letter dated September 12, 2002 and indicated that, if sufficiently answered, the proposal would be considered an

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<sup>1</sup> Trails and Recreation Access for Alaska (TRAAK)

application. The last of those questions was addressed and a reply submitted March 8, 2003. The Kenai Peninsula Borough passed a resolution in support of the concept in 2003.

- In meetings in summer 2003, the Forest Service requested submittal of another revised proposal, a market analysis/feasibility study, and consideration of other possible locations. An “Alaska Hut-to-Hut System: Feasibility Assessment” (Agnew::Beck Consulting 2003) was submitted in December 2003. A revised proposal was submitted in January 2004 for the Paradise Valley area, along with an “Alaska Huts Association Alternatives Analysis.”
- Public concern over the Paradise Valley area was growing. With this reality, the Forest Service response to the 2004 proposal was a suggestion to reexamine alternative locations. Alaska Huts participated jointly with the Forest Service in an evaluation process. This proposal reflects the outcome of that process and the desires of the Alaska Huts board of directors to respect the Moose Pass and Seward local wishes to the extent possible.

## **2. The Proposed Hut-to-Hut System**

We envision a hut-to-hut system extending an existing mining trail in Mills Creek to the existing Johnson Pass/Iditarod Trail and ultimately to the Alaska Railroad at Placer River. Stormy Creek Pass and Center Creek Pass would provide the connections between these valleys. This system would make use of about four miles of existing trail in Mills Creek and 9.5 miles on the Johnson Pass/Iditarod Trail. New trail in alpine areas and upper elevation forests would complete a total of about 34 trail miles, including a 21-mile sub-route from the western trailhead (Mills Creek) to the north trailhead (Johnson Pass/Iditarod Trail), and a sub-route of about 12.5 miles from the north trailhead over Center Creek Pass to the east trailhead at the Alaska Railroad. The route is laid out on the attached map and in a table, below, under the “Hut Placement” heading.

**The Landscape.** The Mills Creek, Center Creek, and Bench Creek drainages are headwater tributaries of Sixmile Creek, which drains into Turnagain Arm near Hope. Placer River drains into the head of Turnagain Arm near Portage. The valleys are steep-sided and range in elevation from 150 feet at Placer River to 3,750 feet at Stormy Creek Pass. The Johnson Pass north trailhead is at about elevation 700 feet, while the Mills Creek trailhead is at about 1,200 feet. The lower elevations, to about 1,500 feet, are forested, principally with spruce and hemlock, with patches of mountain hemlock to about 2,200 feet. There are a few patches of open cottonwood stands, and extensive intermixed alder patches and grass/wildflower meadows. Large glaciers feed the Placer drainage, and small hanging glaciers and persistent snowfields feed Mills, Bench, and Center Creeks. Bench Lake and Johnson Lake are the largest lakes along the proposed route, and a large lake at the toe of Spencer Glacier would be visible on the east side of Center Creek Pass. A smaller lake sits at Stormy Creek Pass, and mountain tarns dot Center Creek. The valleys are dramatic, with hanging glaciers in high mountain bowls, rock glaciers, avalanche paths, cliffs and rocky summits, and dramatic waterfalls on streams including Bench Creek and Ohio Creek. The general landscape meets the Huts Association’s goals of “inspiring settings” and satisfies a key benchmark pointed out in the “Feasibility Assessment”—that, to succeed, the huts system must be placed in a setting of world class scenic attraction.

**Land Status.** The proposed route is almost entirely on Chugach National Forest lands. Most of the area is managed by the Seward Ranger District. The eastern end of the trail and eastern

trailhead area is managed by the Glacier Ranger District (the dividing line runs along the top of Center Creek Pass and generally westward down Center Creek itself, so that the proposed route goes back and forth between the districts several times). The Forest land throughout the entire proposed trail system is managed under a Backcountry prescription. "Special use hut-to-hut" is not allowed in some prescriptions on the Forest, but is allowed without special conditions in this entire area. Summer motorized use of the land in these areas is not allowed under the Forest Plan. Winter motorized access is not allowed in the Mills Creek and Stormy Creek drainages, except on Lower Mills Creek by miners who have a permit. Also, winter motorized use is not allowed in the Center Creek and Divide Creek drainages. However, winter motorized use is allowed along Bench Creek (Johnson Pass/Iditarod Trail) and in the Placer River valley. Winter use of the Johnson Pass Trail is "not recommended" by the Forest Service. As State waters located within the National Forest, floatplanes are allowed to land on Bench Lake and Johnson Lakes.

The Alaska Railroad right-of-way traverses the eastern end of the proposed trail system, and the trail would terminate on Railroad property. The Seward Highway right-of-way traverses the western edge of the project area, and the trail would terminate on State of Alaska highway property. In lower Mills Creek, there are several unpatented mining claims and a portion of State land, through which there is a Forest Service trail right-of-way.

**Other Known Human Uses.** The Johnson Pass/Iditarod Trail is a popular trail of about 23 miles, connecting points on the Seward Highway. The route is used for hiking and mountain biking in summer and, at a much reduced level, for cross country skiing and snowmobiling in winter. The Mills Creek mining trail is used by mining claim owners using four-wheel-drive and small all-terrain vehicles (four wheelers), and on foot. Occasional hikers, mountain bikers, and skiers also use the route, but it is not well known. There is no evidence of human use upstream of the Timberline Creek confluence area. Occasional hiking and perhaps hunting use has developed a small informal trail onto a ridge dividing Center Creek from Bench Creek, but Center Creek sees very little summer use and minimal winter use, because of dense forest at the lower end of the valley. Johnson and Bench Lakes are used via floatplane, primarily for fishing. Airplanes come and go over Johnson Pass steadily in the summer for flightseeing aircraft and as a transportation route between Anchorage and Seward or Prince William Sound. Helicopter skiing has been proposed for north-facing upper portions of the Center Creek watershed in winter. At the eastern end of the proposed route, the Alaska Railroad runs two to three round trip passenger trains daily in summer and freight trains year round (one to two per day). The Forest Service and Railroad are cooperating on a project to provide further backcountry recreation opportunities from the railroad, including designated loading areas, backcountry campgrounds, and trails. The Railroad, in cooperation with a river rafting company, currently drops off and picks up passengers in the Spencer area for a float of the Placer River, and for sightseeing.

**Proposed Hut Placement.** This system would ultimately include four huts, as listed below and shown on the attached map. Huts are spaced to provide a relatively easy day's walk between sites, even in unfavorable conditions, and no more than 5-8 miles apart. Each hut site is to be placed on a spur off the through-route, wherever possible, and the huts are intended to be inconspicuous at a distance. The Center Creek Valley hut is close enough to the northern trailhead for reasonable summer day use, to accommodate users with less time or stamina, and to

*Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail Hut-to-Hut System Proposal*

provide a reasonable destination in winter, when trail breaking may be a reality. The Center Creek Pass hut is located near the eastern trailhead (but with nearly 2000 feet of elevation change). We believe these close placements are important to ensure that the education program reaches the day-use and less-experienced groups. The Mills Creek and Ohio Creek huts may be somewhat smaller, because there may not be as much day use at these locations, and they may have somewhat less overnight demand. These two huts likely would not be heavily used in winter, because they would require greater avalanche awareness and expertise, and Alaska Huts would ensure this was well known. The proposal also includes a small shelter at Stormy Creek Pass, for additional safety in summer inclement weather, but only if further field experience proves it warranted. The routes over Stormy Creek Pass, and from the crest of Center Creek Pass down its east face to Placer River, are not anticipated for any winter use, and they may be officially closed in winter.

Hut	Likely Hut Locations* and Trail Features
<b>West Trailhead</b>	
Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail Mile 0: Seward Highway mile 48 or mile 48.8,** elev. about 1,200 ft.	
<b>A</b>	<b>Mills Creek.</b> Mile 6.5 (low ridge between Stormy and Mills Creeks, near confluence—elev. 2,200 ft).
	Potential Shelter at Stormy Creek Pass: Mile 9.5 (Stormy Creek Pass, elev. 3,700 ft)
<b>B</b>	<b>Ohio Creek.</b> Mile 15 (overlooking Ohio Creek falls and Bench Creek, elevation 1,650 ft).
	Center Creek Fork: Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail mile 21. (Northwest trail fork goes to North Trailhead. East trail fork goes to Center Creek and East Trailhead.)
<b>North Trailhead</b>	
Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail mile 23.5: Seward Highway mile 63.5, elevation 700 feet This is 3 miles from Center Cr. Fork, 21 trail mi. from W. Trailhead, and 15 hwy. mi. from W. Trailhead.	
<b>C</b>	<b>Center Creek Valley.</b> Mile 22.5 (1.5 mi east of Johnson Pass/Iditarod Trail, elev. 850 ft).
<b>D</b>	<b>Center Creek Pass.</b> Mile 27.5 (Center Creek Pass, elev 2,150 ft).
<b>East Trailhead</b>	
Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail Mile 31.5: Alaska Railroad at Placer River Bridge, RR mile 51, elev. 150 ft.	
*Locations may change slightly based on further field study, including avalanche assessment.	
**Two alternative locations are possible. Mi. 48 is an existing pullout. Mi. 48.8 is an existing gravel pit.	

**Hut Construction.** Because the attraction of the system is, in large part, the hut-to-hut character of the proposal, hut construction is proposed to be as rapid as possible. Three huts would open in the first two seasons and one more soon thereafter. It is possible seasonal wall-tents or yurts would be used for sleeping quarters permanently or until hard shell sleeping quarters could be built. The kitchen, common area, permanent storage, and composting toilet at each hut site are proposed as a hard shell building from the outset. One or more huts likely would be constructed partially or entirely of native log harvested on the Forest and flown to the hut site. Other huts likely would be constructed off-site in a road-accessible area where carpenters and volunteers could easily reach the site. These huts then would be dismantled and flown to the site for final construction. The huts are proposed to be simple and rustic yet designed to last, with aesthetic

quality, a sense of permanence, and attention to the applicable guidelines in the Forest Service's "Built Environment Image Guide."

Standard pit toilets will be installed at hut sites where possible. Bedrock at shallow depths likely precludes pits at some of the proposed hut sites (e.g. at Center Creek Pass). Composting toilets are anticipated to be installed at each hut site. These will require supplementary heat (a propane "pilot light") most of the year to aid the composting process. The toilets may be allowed to freeze without damage in winter when use is low, with composting to resume in spring when use levels rise.

**Trail Construction.** The Huts Association envisions the trail to be well-thought-out to present maximum views and variety of both visual and terrain features. It is highly likely the trail would qualify as a National Recreation Trail. As envisioned, it would be designed to simple foot-traffic-only standards with relatively minor development (Forest Service National Trail Management Class 2-3). The summer trail would be obvious and easy to follow but with narrow tread and suspended cable or other narrow bridges, or fords of minor streams. The existing Johnson Pass Trail is maintained to Class 3 standard, generally suitable for snowmobiles in winter and mountain bikes in summer. Because the proposed new segments of trail would traverse areas closed to winter motorized use, and because the huts would be spaced and designed for foot travelers, it is important that the portions of new trail construction not invite snowmobile use. It is the Alaska Huts strong preference that the new trail segments be designed for use by foot travelers. Mountain bikes and horse use would continue to be accommodated on the Johnson Pass/Iditarod Trail.

New trail construction likely would be phased, with clearing of brush the primary early work to allow passage. This would be followed by bridge placement and tread refinement, likely over two or more construction seasons as funds became available. Alaska Huts intends to request special funding through Congress for the Forest Service to build the trail, although the Forest Service may request some funding through its normal capital improvement process. Alaska Huts would provide volunteer labor to assist with construction and on-going day-to-day maintenance (brushing, blowdowns, and routine drainage work) to minimize the additional maintenance burden on the Forest staff once the trail was in operation.

The winter route would depart somewhat from the summer trail in some areas. In Mills Creek, Bench Creek, and Center Creek Valleys, the winter route would follow the middle of the valleys and not traverse avalanche slopes, as portions of it may in summer. As a "route," it would only work in winter when marshy ground and water bodies were frozen. Winter trail is proposed to be marked where needed. Mostly, however, winter use of the hut system would require a greater level of self reliance and backcountry skill than summer use.

It is currently anticipated that the following new bridges will be required:

1. Juneau Creek (low priority—could remain a ford)
2. Mills Creek A (near the current ford site)
3. Mills Creek B (just upstream of the Timberline Creek confluence)
4. Stormy Creek A (just upstream of the confluence with Mills Creek)

5. Stormy Creek B (at the toe of a rock glacier partway up the valley)
6. Center Creek (just below the confluence with Divide Creek)

Each of these bridges is anticipated to be in the range of 40-feet to 60-feet long, similar to bridges along the northern half of Johnson Pass Trail, except the Stormy Creek B bridge, which likely would be 20 feet long or less.

No crossing of Placer River is currently envisioned. Discussion with the Alaska Railroad indicated that the Railroad had considered decking its existing Placer River bridge and locating a pedestrian crossing safely beneath this deck but that the Railroad's preliminary preference is to avoid any crossing of the railroad bridge by pedestrians at this time. Therefore, this proposal would terminate the trail on the western side of the tracks without any crossing Placer River. This would require a minimal platform area to safely keep passengers off the tracks and provide an identifiable train stop. A phased approach to this trail terminus area is possible, with an initial trailhead located west of the tracks, later connecting across the river and east of the tracks as the Forest Service advances further rail-based backcountry opportunities in that area. The best approach will be determined in partnership with the Railroad and Forest Service, with pedestrian safety and hiker safety education in the vicinity of the tracks and railroad bridge a paramount concern for Alaska Huts as well as the Railroad and Forest Service.

**Capacity.** The guideline for working hut capacity is as follows. Each hut would operate with 20 bunk spaces. Approximately eight of these spaces would be separate bunks in small, private spaces. The remainder of the spaces would be in a common sleeping area. There would be separate space for seasonal hut keepers. The common area would be available to accommodate larger education groups and for lower-cost accommodation. Although this proposal requests that the special use permit authorize full use of 20 bunks per hut, for maximum operational flexibility, it is anticipated that Alaska Huts may voluntarily reduce the number of summer season reservations accepted to minimize the number of people on the trail and around the huts during the most popular times. For example, once a minimum number of the spaces were filled, reservations could be halted. This would not apply to education groups, which might fill the entire hut.

Enclosed, heated floor space on each site for the basic hut—community living space, kitchen, heated storage—is expected to total approximately 800 square feet. Unheated summer sleeping and storage is expected to total another 500 square feet of enclosed space. For their success, it is important that each site have special amenities that set these huts apart as a different experience than public use cabins. Each site may have a small sauna or a screened porch, for example. Covered firewood storage is necessary. Depending on the nature of each site, the layout could be one building or a central building with outbuildings. The intention is a tidy site with few outbuildings, not a proliferation of buildings.

**Operations.** There is a spectrum of acceptable operations modes that would serve the mission of the Huts Association. The "Alaska Hut System: Feasibility Assessment" produced by Agnew::Beck Consulting (December 10, 2003) indicates two different operations modes at either end of the spectrum that would succeed. This proposal is for a long-term 25- to 50-year permit from the Forest Service. To allow for flexibility as actual demand for different styles of

operation becomes evident, this proposal requests that the permit allow the full spectrum of operating styles described below. The “most likely” operational scenario is between the two ends of the spectrum.

Self-Serve Operation. All huts would be stocked with pots and pans, cooking utensils, propane cooking burners, an oven, propane lights, composting toilet, minimal food items (e.g. spices and tea), and bunks with mattresses. Hut users would carry their own food and sleeping bags and prepare food themselves. Guided trips and education trips would be available under this model, but the huts would operate in the same fashion. Huts would be well-kept and visited regularly by paid and volunteer roving maintenance staff for upkeep. Resupply with fixed wing aircraft on skis or with helicopter would occur principally in late winter. The main resupply items would be fuel—both propane and firewood—and maintenance supplies.

Hut Keeper Operation. All the huts would operate in Self-Serve mode (as above) part of the year but would be staffed during more popular times (for example all summer, during spring skiing season, during holiday weeks in winter, and any other time demand warranted). Basic breakfast and dinner meals and beverages and trail lunches would be available to the public when hut keepers were present. Two hut keepers would be on duty during meal times to cook and answer questions. The menu would be simple, hearty, served family-style, and based on nonperishable foods. Special items would be fresh baked goods (rather than fresh salads, for example). Dried and canned ingredients, as well as limited amounts of cheese, hearty root crops, and so on, would make up the pantry. Major re-stocking is anticipated to be by fixed wing aircraft on skis or helicopter in winter, including most of the summer season food and all fuel and maintenance items. In summer, small amounts of supplementary food would be delivered by four-wheel-drive or all-terrain vehicle and 3.5-mile backpack to Hut A, by floatplane and half-mile backpack to Hut B (three days summer); by bike/foot to Hut C; and by railroad and 3-mile backpack to Hut D. These small resupply efforts currently are anticipated at approximately once per month in summer.

Most Likely Operation. While this proposal requests that the Forest Service special use permit authorize Hut Keeper Operation, as described above, the most likely operation is a hybrid of Self Serve and Hut Keeper Operation. This could take several forms, but a most likely example is as follows:

Some weeks during the summer would be Self Serve Operation, with the majority as Hut Keeper Operation. During summer periods in Hut Keeper Operation, reservations would be taken in advance for those carrying no food and sleeping in a private space (the higher-service, higher-cost option). Late bookings would be taken to fill unreserved spaces at a lower cost for those who would cook their own meals and sleep in the common area. During Spring Skiing Season, Self Serve Operation would be in place for a portion of each week, and the balance of each week would be Hut Keeper Operation. Except for winter holidays, winter would otherwise function under Self-Serve Operation. This type of scenario would allow the broadest spectrum of users access to the huts, serving the Lower 48 and world traveler, who may be somewhat older and looking for a trip with less weight, and the local and younger backpacker groups that have greater ability to carry a full pack and desire a lower cost experience. Guided/educational trips

would be offered by Alaska Huts and by others under both Self-Serve and Hut Keeper Operations.

Under Self-Serve, Hut Keeper Operation, or Most-Likely scenarios described above, a reservations system operated by the Huts Association will help structure use of the system to protect the experience for all and ensure orderly use of the huts (for example, there may be limits on length of stay or a suggested sequence of hut use). Winter use likely will be by reservation but without the restrictions of the summer “high season.” Hut operations include education (see Section 3). The total trip length would be 31.5 miles, and the two Seward Highway trailheads are approximately 15 miles apart by road. A shuttle service would be operated between west and north trailheads and a rail stop at Portage. This shuttle could be operated out of Summit Lake Lodge or the Portage area, or by existing Kenai Peninsula bus lines (e.g. Seward Bus Lines) as a separate operation or a Huts Association operation.

Other Operations Issues. To reduce the likelihood for conflict between user groups and to help ensure success of the huts, each hut is proposed to have established around it a “bubble” as part of site approval. This bubble around each hut would define a shared-use zone with a 2,000-foot radius (but defined by terrain features where necessary). The Huts Association and Forest Service would define this shared-use zone on a site-by-site basis. In the shared-use zones, use by people with dogs, pack animals, mountain bikes, firearms, meat or trophies from hunting, and so on would be spelled out. This zone is proposed to ensure protection of clean snow for winter melt-water supply, protection of summer surface water supplies, hut user safety, and protection of the backcountry hut experience. Meat or other items that might attract bears would be controlled. Pack animals and dogs would be controlled to minimize waste and noise issues. Camping would be at designated sites only within this zone. Discharge of firearms would be restricted. At Hut B (Ohio Creek), where the area is open to winter motorized use, skier access and snowmobile access routes would be designated, a speed limit would be set within the zone, a snowmobile parking area would be defined, and skiers and their sleds would be managed to be out of the way of snowmobilers.

All scenarios require minimal resupply by aircraft. Based on cost, ski-equipped, fixed-wing aircraft would be preferred for the majority of resupply, but this is not likely possible due to terrain and forest for the Center Creek huts (C and D). Fixed-wing resupply to Huts A and B has good potential. It is possible that use of a helicopter for the Center Creek huts would make helicopter resupply of all four huts the most economical.

What is *Not* Proposed. This proposal is for simple huts modeling a simple lifestyle. Multiparty huts are larger than typical public use cabins and have greater amenities, but they are suited to backcountry locations. They do not have electricity or plumbing in the standard sense. Water at some huts may need to be hauled and treated by those using the huts, or water may be stored in a rainwater or gravity-fed tank. Any hot water will be heated on a stove. Huts will be quiet; there will be no generator running as part of their usual operation. While there may be a combination of shared bunk rooms and private sleeping spaces, the huts will not offer private rooms as a bed and breakfast or hotel would. Private sleeping spaces might be tents, might be common space divided by partitions, or might be very small compartments. Hut users will not sleep in fresh linens but will sleep in their own sleeping bags or in a sewn sheet that they carry. “Food service”

and “staff” discussed above should imply only good facilities maintenance, someone to help multiple parties share a space, and basic, good food that the public may not have to carry themselves.

### **Other Huts and Other Land Managers**

This proposal is centered around a proposed core operation on Chugach National Forest involving four huts. At approximately the same time, however, the Huts Association intends to pursue two other hut operations involving other land managers. These are mentioned in this proposal, because the management of these other huts provides economies of scale that affect this proposal. Operating two other huts would provide greater revenue with very little additional overhead cost (the director salary, reservation system, marketing, and office rents, for example, would not increase). Alaska Huts proposes to operate and maintain two huts that have been discussed as mutually beneficial projects:

- Chugach State Park’s Serenity Falls Huts at Eklutna Lake, as a stand-alone hut.
- A hut in the Notch Peak/Winner Creek area on Municipality of Anchorage Heritage Land Bank or State of Alaska land.

In addition, the Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail itself involves land managers besides the U.S. Forest Service. These include the Alaska Railroad Corporation, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, and the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities:

Alaska Railroad Corporation. As mentioned above, the Huts Association proposes a cooperative effort with the Alaska Railroad Corporation to provide a trail experience accessible from the railroad as well as the highway, enhancing passenger rail service in the process. A trail accessible from the railroad, and a hut (Hut D) overlooking the railroad, serve as a prime education venue for raising awareness of backcountry travelers and pedestrians in general about railroad dangers and safety. Because safety of hut and trail users is of high importance to both the Huts Association and the Alaska Railroad, careful attention will need to be paid to operation of the train stop near the tracks. Alaska Huts has discussed this proposal with the Alaska Railroad, and the Railroad appears amenable to the concept, as long as safety issues are adequately addressed. Further discussions are planned.

Department of Natural Resources. The Alaska Department of Natural Resources owns land near the Mills Creek (western) trailhead. The existing Mills Creek mining trail is on a Forest Service right-of-way through this State land. Use of this trail should not affect State land.

Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. The state transportation department is likely to be involved for the establishment of the western trailhead. There is already a driveway leading to a gravel pit and then, over 0.7 mile, to the Gold Prospectors Association of America claim and the mining trail to Mills Creek. There is no formal trailhead or parking area at this time, although the gravel pit is used as a parking, camping, and trailhead area. The Huts Association may pursue funding of this trailhead at a scenic pullout at mile 48 through federal transportation enhancement funds administered by the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities.

### 3. Education

Two broad groups are expected to make up the huts constituency—those who are actively involved in outdoor recreation, and those for whom a backcountry experience is a relatively new experience. It is anticipated that the split might be those involved in the outdoors at 80 percent and those relatively uninvolved and attracted because of the relative psychological and physical comfort of huts at 20 percent. We propose a passive and active education program at the huts and along the trail that reaches them all, with special emphasis on the 20 percent who may not otherwise get off the road system. Hut themes will help focus the education effort.

#### **Putting our beliefs into action:**

- Modeling a simple lifestyle.
- Teaching appreciation of the natural world.
- Offering opportunities for contemplation and quiet.
- Emphasizing an atmosphere that encourages friendship, team skills, and service to others.
- Encouraging people to be active.
- Building an inclusive community.
- Modeling appropriate ecotourism for Alaska.

Education and stewardship are the primary reasons the Huts Association organization exists. Association bylaws state the following education purpose:

*Planning, organizing, and developing educational courses for remote on-site study of wilderness, the natural environment, and the relationship of human culture to the natural world.*

The main services provided to accomplish these aims are intended to be:

- (1) Providing a fully functional education venue for formal groups, especially those groups participating in the themes of “fostering stewardship” or educating about “the relationship of human culture to the natural world,” and actively working with such groups to develop programs suitable for a hut-to-hut format.
- (2) Providing an avenue to the backcountry for individuals and informal groups, especially those who otherwise would not get into the backcountry.

The paragraphs below describe these in more detail. For both of these broad services, there are a host of specific services (e.g. shelter and lodging, a working kitchen and toilet facilities, meeting space, educational materials, and potentially food) the Huts Association intends to provide. All huts would provide information and good modeling of clean camping techniques. The “Leave No Trace” ethic and formal Leave No Trace education materials would be used and available throughout the system, in cooperation with the Forest Service.

**Education Venue for Groups.** The Huts Association intends to create a unique venue designed to accommodate small- and moderate-sized groups of up to 20, providing for the physical needs of people so that they can attend to the business their group has before them. Established groups of many kinds seek venues for their programs and currently use conference rooms, school or university classrooms, government facilities such as the BLM Campbell Creek Science Center in

Anchorage, non-profit venues such as the Seward Sea-Life Center, and private facilities such as Camp Kushtaka on Kenai Lake. The primary focus would be on groups that reflect the themes we have identified—that is, groups that work to instill a sense of stewardship for the natural environment and that explore the relationship of human culture and the natural world. Groups that already conduct such programs might include:

- Kenai Peninsula Borough, Prince William Sound, and Anchorage School District groups, with emphasis on local Seward-Moose Pass-Cooper Landing-Hope-Girdwood schools.
- University and community schools (e.g. natural sciences, geography, writing and literature, Alaska Native studies, fine art, philosophy and ethics)
- Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, Camp Fire, Boys Club, Girls Club
- Trailside Discovery Camp and similar camps
- Alaska Earth Institute
- Alaska Society of Outdoor and Nature Photographers
- Elderhostel / Sierra Club Trips / REI Adventures
- Alaska Watercolor Society
- Alaska Youth for Environmental Action
- Conservation organizations (retreats, meetings, workshops)

While the Huts Association may actively seek use by groups like those above that have the most compatible missions, it is likely that other groups would be attracted to the experience and setting. Such groups might include:

- Agency retreats (including Forest Service and other land management agencies)
- Corporate and non-profit team building
- Military recreation and outdoor education
- Alaska Avalanche School / Nordic Ski Patrol
- Commercial guides and outdoor skills educators
- Strictly social groups (friends, family, weddings) wishing to reserve the huts in their entirety
- Nordic Ski Clubs / Mountaineering Club of Alaska

The hut venue and services would be available for these groups, and their members would benefit from Huts Association education programs through the experience itself, hut keeper contact, and on-site activities.

**Avenue to the Outdoors.** Many people do not have adequate opportunity to experience the natural world. Principal reasons may be the following:

- Financial inability to travel out of town, travel to a place like Alaska, or pay fees for a guide or teacher.
- Lack of experience and avoidance of the backcountry because they do not know where to start, they fear the unknown, or feel they are not fit enough.
- Belonging to a culture, subculture, or family that does not typically partake of the backcountry or camping and that may be far removed from natural processes.

- Family responsibilities and the inability to carry small children along with the necessary gear for backcountry camping, even among those who once were very active in the outdoors.
- Age and reduced physical ability that actively discourage or make it physically impossible to carry a heavy backpack or sleep on the ground.

For these people, especially, the Huts Association aims to provide an avenue to the outdoors. The simple experience of several days in the backcountry, confronting and overcoming the physical challenges inherent in mountain travel on foot, absorbing the vastness of wild valleys and the views from high points, and experiencing the weather, terrain, wildlife, and vegetation changes as they move across the landscape will be ample education. The huts will allow those with limited equipment or limited carrying ability to take a multi-day trip. Coupled with the knowledge of hut keepers and on-site and on-the-trail participatory activities, the hut experience is intended to inspire the uninitiated about the wild backcountry and spur their appreciation and knowledge of such lands worldwide, and ultimately their sense of stewardship for wild land.

Even those who are experienced backpackers, mountaineers, or naturalists will find in the huts a new avenue for their enjoyment of the outdoors and a way to gently introduce their families and friends to the backcountry they already love. The ability to house educational tools that campers normally do not pack with them, such as telescopes, weather instruments, microscopes, scales, nets, and books, will allow even seasoned veterans of the backcountry to experience the land in a new way. And, for most, any experience of alternative “off-the-grid” operating systems (photovoltaic lighting, superinsulation, high-efficiency woodstoves, composting toilets) will be a new and enlightening experience.

**Hut Themes.** To encourage education on many levels and include the natural environment and history of our state in the hut-to-hut experience, the Huts Association proposes to have a theme for each hut. Example themes:

- Hut A lies in Mills Creek Valley, where prospecting and working of mining claims has continued from the late 1800s to the present day. Because the route follows a mining road and passes old mining equipment and small-scale modern operations, it is fitting that this hut would, in part, explain the important mining history of the Mills Creek/Canyon Creek area, with an emphasis on the effects on the natural environment of resource extraction—expanding from mining to other resources, including recreation and tourism (and huts) that “extract” quiet and habitat to a certain degree to provide for people’s needs. The habitat issue lends itself to exploration of Kenai Peninsula mountain wildlife
- Hut B, near Johnson Pass summit and along the designated route of the Iditarod National Historic Trail, is proposed as an “Iditarod roadhouse” that would function as a sort of living transportation museum interpreting the history of human movement through the area, from the original Native peoples, to the miners and sled-dog drivers hauling gold from the Iditarod District to Seward, the present day recreational use. Here, the challenges the environment imposes upon those who would create trails, roads, and railroad would be explored.

- Hut C is within the upper reaches of the Kenai Peninsula Borough coastal management boundary, in the headwaters of Sixmile Creek, a major whitewater recreation stream and salmon spawning stream. This hut is proposed with a “Headwaters Hut” theme. Its focus would be water, watersheds, water pollution, wildlife, and human dependency on healthy headwaters and watersheds and explaining why a coastal management boundary extends so far into the mountains and away from the coast.
- Hut D perches on the crest of a pass overlooking two glacial valleys and the large and spectacular Spencer Glacier. The landscape lends itself to interpretation of glacial geomorphology, landscape analysis, and an understanding of how natural forces shape the world. The retreat of glaciers and climatic shifts that cause glaciers to form and recede also would be pertinent here.

These example themes might be used by guided groups for formal education talks. For people who are on their own and see their trip as “recreation,” these would be subtle themes around which the hut’s library and self-serve activities and interpretive materials would revolve, to be used at a self-selected level appropriate to each party.

#### **4. Technical and Financial Capability**

The Alaska Mountain and Wilderness Huts Association is a “grass-roots” 501(c)3 non-profit corporation. It is a mostly volunteer organization. The magnitude of the project and projected operation will require that the Association hire professional staff as project approvals approach. With \$350,000 appropriated by Congress to the Huts Association for the project in 2004, \$16,600 granted by Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service, and interest expressed by the Rasmuson Foundation and others in funding portions of the project, the capability of accomplishing the task is at hand. The Huts Association has persevered for several years to see the project to fruition. The board of directors, advisors, and other volunteers have the requisite background to carry out the project.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Board of Directors</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Kevin Lynch</b>, President</li><li>• <b>Bev Lewanski</b>, Vice President for Organization, Membership, and Education</li><li>• <b>Ray Burger</b>, Vice President for Facilities and Trails</li><li>• <b>W. Dwayne Adams</b>, Secretary</li><li>• <b>Andre Kaeppele</b>, Treasurer</li><li>• <b>Gar Carothers</b></li><li>• <b>Christie Kearney</b></li><li>• <b>Roger Shaw</b></li></ul> <p><i>John Wolfe, Project Director/Exec. Dir.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>More information on each board member is provided below in the main text</i></p>
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#### **Huts Association Management**

##### **Kevin Lynch (President)**

High school teacher (Advanced Placement biology); former small business owner as construction contractor building in urban and bush Alaska locations, frame and log building construction; lived in an isolated cabin for three years.

**Bev Lewanski (Vice President for Organization, Membership, and Education)**

Elementary school teacher with 32 years of experience, including parent education, child care, adult education, infant learning in rural Alaska, and Anchorage School District teaching. Past president of Alaska's Council for the Division of Exceptional Children. Coordinated children's fairs in McGrath and Anchorage through the Alaska Early Childhood Association. Hiker, cross-country skier; marathon runner.

**Ray Burger (Vice President, Facilities and Trails)**

Manager for Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Mining, Land and Water; practicing EMT and firefighter, as well as treasurer, for the Chugiak Volunteer Fire Department; former kayak guide; skier, hiker, paddler.

**Wm. Dwayne Adams, Jr., FASLA (Secretary)**

Principal, Land Design North. Consulting landscape architect experienced with business management, design of recreation sites and trails, Forest Service standards, visual analysis, and environmental impact assessment. Skier and hiker.

**Gar Carothers (Forest Service liaison)**

Manager, environmental engineer for CH2M Hill. Project manager for environmental impact assessment, soils assessment, and hazardous materials cleanup. Has expertise regarding hazards and toxins in building materials. Hiker, fisherman.

**Christie Kearney (board member)**

Environmental permits analyst for the Alaska Railroad Corporation (permitting, wetlands, biology, Geographic Information Systems specialist); civil engineering master's student. Trail construction and avalanche awareness training. Hiker, hunter.

**John Wolfe Jr. (Executive Director/Project Director and ex officio board member)**

Part-time environmental planner, HDR Alaska. Experienced in coordinating and writing National Environmental Policy Act documents; co-author *55 Ways to the Wilderness in Southcentral Alaska*. Has built three log cabins in remote areas. Former Denali guide and children's camp program director. Hiker and skier. Huts Association founder.

**Financial Management**

**Roger Shaw (Board Member, Finance Committee Chair)**

Self-employed accountant for business, individuals, and non-profit organizations; business consultant. Longtime participant and chair of Municipality of Anchorage Budget Advisory Committee. Community Council president.

**Andre Kaeppele (Board Treasurer)**

Natural sciences student, University of Alaska Anchorage. Former trail crew leader for Alaska Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, including construction of public use cabin; National ski patrol candidate.

**Verena Kaeppele**

Self-employed accountant with 40 years of experience in accounting for non-profit and for-profit organizations. Provides in-kind accounting services and accounting advice for the treasurer and board.

**Steve Colt, Ph.D.**

University of Alaska Anchorage, Professor of Economics and Environmental Studies; Institute of Social and Economic Research; Director of Environmental Studies; former Appalachian Mountain Club hut staff. Huts Association advisor.

**Teresa Bailey, CPA,**

Accountant specializing in non-profit organizations. Huts Association advisor.

**Alan Mitchell**

GCI Director of Economic Analysis. Degrees in Electrical Engineering and Energy and Resource Planning. Formerly with the UAA Institute of Social and Economic Research.

**Other Advisors**

The Huts Association has a wealth of technical expertise in its advisors. While these individuals are skilled in many areas and have complementary and overlapping skills, they are listed above and below by their primary expertise.

**Legal**

**Dan Fitzgerald** of Atkinson Conway and Gagnon provides *pro bono* legal counsel.

**Fundraising/ Non-profits**

**Deborah Williams**, Alaska Conservation Foundation, executive director.

**Sandy Adams**, Executive director of Anchorage Concert Chorus, Certified Fundraising Executive, former development director for Catholic Social Services and executive director for Alaska Health Fair.

**The Foraker Group**, specializing in training and support for Alaska non-profits.

**Education**

**Dorn Van Dommelen, Ph.D.** (advisor)

University of Alaska Anchorage Professor History and Geography, Director of Canadian Studies; Huts Association founding board member and founding Vice President for Education.

**Steve Colt, Ph.D.** (advisor)

See biographical information under “Financial Management,” above.

**Hut Operations, Huts Associations, Huts Permitting**

**Walter Graff**, Vice President, Appalachian Mountain Club, New Hampshire.

**Mike Zobbe**, Operations Manager, Summit Huts Association, Colorado.

**Ben Dodge**, Executive Director, 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division Hut Association, Colorado.

**Rebecca Oreskes**, Backcountry Recreation Specialist (huts permitting), White Mountains National Forest, New Hampshire.

**Paul Semmer**, Recreation Planner (huts permitting), White River National Forest, Colorado.

### **Local Knowledge**

The Huts Association has contacted experts in local outdoor and trail issues. We expect to draw on the knowledge of these and others in the Seward-Cooper Landing-Hope area:

- **George Peck**, magistrate, state court, Seward; outdoorsman.
- **Lyman Nichols**, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (retired), pilot; Cooper Landing.

### **Other Expertise**

**Kevin Keeler**, National Park Service, Rivers Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, provides technical assistance.

**Thomas Hunt, M.D.**, (emergency and medical preparedness) Medical Director, Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center; mountaineer; former Huts Association board member.

**Pat Pourchot**, (land issues) former Commissioner, Alaska Department of Natural Resources.

**Ken Flynn**, (marketing) principal, Walsh Sheppard Flynn advertising.

**Rod Hancock**, (business/food-beverage) owner, Moose's Tooth Pub & Pizzeria and Bear Tooth Theater Pub.

**Jonathon Campabello**, (business/food-beverage) owner, Middle Way Café.

**Shawn Lyons**, (on-the-ground experience) *Walkabout Guides to Alaska* author, long-distance hiker, classical musician.

**Design Group:** In addition to these decision makers and advisors, a design group comprised of association members and specialists from the community has been convened and is waiting for a site on which to develop a hut. Primary among this group are the following architects and engineers registered in Alaska:

- **Tom Livingston**, Principal, Livingston-Slone Architects
- **John McCool**, Principal, McCool-Carlson-Green Architects
- **Brad Richie**, National Park Service architect
- **Grant Crosby**, National Park Service historical architect
- **Michael Thompson**, ECI Hyer Architects (and Alaska Mountain Rescue Group)
- **Bob Butera, P.E.**, civil engineer, HDR Alaska, Inc.
- **Ron Daily, P.E.**, structural engineer

### **Capital Costs, Startup Costs, and Funding**

Each hut is expected to cost approximately \$225,000, approximately the same as it would cost to build a modest sized home in road-accessible locations of Southcentral Alaska. Four huts therefore are expected to cost \$900,000 total. These costs assume insulated buildings for year-round use, with functional kitchens and the ability accommodate up to 20 hikers, plus hut keepers. Alaska Huts would strive to construct buildings for the lowest cost possible, but this is the current estimate based on a combination of paid and volunteer labor. The cost of a normal

*Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail Hut-to-Hut System Proposal*

suburban residence would be reduced by “rustic” finishing (e.g. more raw wood, less trim, paint, and fixtures), lack of normal electrical and plumbing systems, and so on, and by use of some volunteer labor and donated material. Normal costs would be increased, however, by the remote location. Timing of hut construction is related to trail construction; see discussion under “Trail Construction,” above in Section 2.

There is a substantial startup operating cost of approximately \$50,000 over the first two years of operations as the huts are built and opened and the public gets to know the system. An amount of at least \$50,000 is likely during the current planning phase to pay for required studies, plans, and permitting before operations begin. The total cost to the Huts Association for startup, then, is expected to be approximately \$1 million.

Congress has approved, and the Alaska Huts has received, an “earmark” grant of \$350,000, approximately one-third of this anticipated startup total. This grant is direct funding to the Alaska Huts Association for planning and for hut design and construction. Congress also included funding for the Forest Service to complete a required environmental analysis. It is possible that Congress will fund further huts, and it is likely the Forest Service will budget funds for trail construction, should the results of the environmental analysis indicate proceeding with the project (a portion of the trail dovetails with Forest Service plans to create a trail connection the railroad corridor to Johnson Pass/Iditarod Trail). Further funding for capital and startup operating costs will be by donations from a combination of private individuals, corporations, foundations, and other government sources. This follows the successful recent model of the Summit Huts Association and 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division Hut Association, both non-profit corporations operating on National Forests in Colorado. Some of the startup costs possibly also could be covered with loans guaranteed by credit-worthy supporters of the hut project. Federal assistance on the part of the Forest Service is requested for this proposal, particularly for trail construction, as part of the Alaska Huts-Chugach National Forest partnership.

In addition to the Congressional funding, the Huts Association has successfully gained a seed grant for hut construction from the National Park Service Challenge Cost Share Program for \$16,600 (matching an equal value of volunteer effort). The association has secured substantial in-kind donations and cash donation, such as the recent costs of the \$16,000 “Feasibility Assessment,” with donated services by Agnew::Beck Associates and donated cash from philanthropist Ed Rasmuson. We expect to leverage these kinds of grants for further fundraising. The Huts Association has also successfully secured smaller donations of airline tickets, reconnaissance overflights, food, outdoor gear, meeting space, and other items and expects to continue to do so. The Huts Association successfully managed an intern in summer 2000. A standout Alaska foundation is the Rasmuson Foundation, which has expressed interest in the project.

From Congress—already on hand:	\$350,000
Rasmuson Foundation anticipated request:	\$500,000
Special Fundraising—Individuals:	\$50,000
Other foundations, individuals, government sources:	<u>\$100,000</u>
Total	\$1 million

Creative funding sources include potential use of Federal Highway Administration transportation enhancement funds for Iditarod Roadhouse as a living transportation museum at hut site (B). (trailheads and transportation museums are qualified transportation enhancement projects. There are many potential corporate and foundation sources of funds for construction and for environmental education.

### **Self-Supporting Operations**

Operation of the huts is designed to be self-sustaining, as indicated in the “Alaska Hut-to-Hut System: Feasibility Assessment” (submitted January 2004, with an update submitted concurrently with this proposal). Once more than two sites are in operation, the economies of scale are expected to result in a positive cash flow that will enable completion of the system and expansion of the education mission. As indicated in the Feasibility Assessment, a grand location with world class Alaska scenery and a top-notch trail experience is critical to creating the revenue that will make the system self-sustaining for the Huts Association and Forest Service. A self-supporting operation means that, once the system is in place, no further outside support is required. Fundraising for special programs and “scholarships” are anticipated, but it is a goal of the Huts Association to require no general operating funds.

## **5. Environmental Considerations**

A Huts Association guiding principle states that huts are to be more part of the solution than they are part of the problem of environmental or cultural degradation. Nevertheless, impacts of the proposed hut system are anticipated to be both positive and adverse. The Huts Association will work with Forest biologists, ecologists, landscape architects, and planners, along with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and others, to minimize impact.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires a thorough examination of effects to the natural and social environment for construction on Federal land. Several board members make their livings working on environmental issues, NEPA, and project permitting. The Huts Association welcomes the NEPA process. Acknowledgement of adverse impacts and on-going observation of hut users’ impact is meant to be a conscious and on-going part of the huts education program. Below are some of the preliminary issues we anticipate to be addressed in the NEPA process.

### **Social Environment**

There may be some small increase in traffic on the Seward Highway. Because the Seward Highway and the Kenai Peninsula in general is such a popular tourist route, the minor increase in traffic should not be noticeable. There may be a slight increase in business at Summit Lake Lodge, near the western trailhead, and at other locations nearby (Cooper Landing, Moose Pass, Hope, Girdwood), especially those businesses that have showers, convenience items that hikers may want before or after a trek along the trail, and first-night/last-night accommodations, if there is a relationship established between certain businesses and the Huts Association. The Huts Association may employ local staff and purchase supplies and services (e.g. propane, carpentry

services, air service) on the Kenai Peninsula. Increases in business would likely be small compared to the large number of tourists that travel along this highway but would benefit individual residents and businesses.

Mills Creek, the Stormy Creek Pass area, and Center Creek are thought to receive relatively little foot traffic. Some existing users of the area may feel the huts are an intrusion on a more pure wilderness opportunity. Hunters and other wilderness backpackers may also feel the huts system changes the status quo; some may welcome the change and others not. There may be conflict between backcountry snowmachine users accessing the Johnson Pass/Iditarod Trail and non-motorized users of the huts and trail. Winter motorized use of the trail area is thought to be growing.

### **Natural Environment**

**Air quality.** Air resources will be directly affected in small but continual quantities of emissions from wood stoves and propane combustion for heat, cooking, and lights. Impacts include the increased emissions due to the increase in traffic at the trailheads. This impact will be negligible, because the Kenai Peninsula is a major tourist area and the increase in traffic to the area will be comparatively small. Cumulative impacts could occur when these emissions are added to the local emissions and pollutants are carried elsewhere.

**Visual impacts.** There will be visual impacts with the addition of buildings in the landscape. The huts will be built to blend into the environment as much as possible, using colors and forms that are found at the hut sites. Portions of the trails may be visible from a distance. Trailhead parking areas may be visually impacting, although trailheads are anticipated to be in existing trailhead or highway-corridor settings. Trailhead development will allow potential users to identify the location of the trailheads for use. All visual impacts can be reduced with the proper siting of the facilities.

**Surface and ground water.** The preferred location for the huts would be near a clean water source for use in operations. The quantity of water used is not expected to be significant. Surface water is expected to be used in the huts for cooking, cleaning, and drinking. Gray water will be disposed of at a minimum of 200 feet from natural water bodies and likely will require a filtration system. Huts will not be located in or within 200 feet of wetlands or riparian habitat.

There will be some degradation of water quality due to the construction of new trail. If the trail is next to a water body, there is potential for introduction of fine material into the water. There will be a number of water crossings, including potential fords of small waterways. Proper design of water crossings and trails can minimize degradation of the water sources at these locations. Restriction of use to foot traffic only will minimize soil disturbance.

There is expected to be no substantial structural change of any stream as a result of the construction of huts or trails. Controls may be required at stream crossings or when streams run immediately adjacent to the trail to keep the trail from being eroded or washed out. Keeping the trail a sufficient distance from waterways should minimize these impacts.

**Noise.** There will be a slight increase in the existing noise levels due to the increase in the number of people in both the backcountry and trailhead areas. There will be an increase in vehicles coming into the area to access the trails, which will increase the noise levels. However, the trailhead areas are already frequented by vehicles. Increased noise levels in the backcountry should not be readily identifiable because the increased use will be by non-motorized entities. There will be identifiable increases around the huts where people accumulate and during construction, re-supply, and trail maintenance when mechanized equipment is likely to be used.

**Vegetation, soil, and soil stability.** The trails should follow existing trails to the extent possible to avoid erosion of undisturbed areas. The surface of the land will be altered due to the construction of the trails. Soil erosion and soil trampling will also impact vegetation growth in a narrow band defined by the trail and around the huts.

Impacts to both soils and vegetation are possible from hikers who get off the trails and cut their own paths. This will especially become an issue in areas with sensitive tundra vegetation. There will be educational material at each hut teaching “Leave No Trace” philosophies to help alleviate these actions. The vegetation will need to be cleared along the trail corridor. These activities will be minimized to avoid clearing more vegetation than is necessary for the trail.

**Fish, wildlife, and plant life, including threatened and endangered species.** The proposed action will impact plant life and wildlife. There are not expected to be threatened or endangered species in the project vicinity and therefore no impact to threatened or endangered species.

According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) fish distribution maps, the lower ends of Center Creek and Bench Creek, near their confluence, are anadromous fish (salmon) streams. Placer River also is an anadromous fish stream. Johnson and Bench Lakes support grayling and perhaps other species. No impact to fish is likely.

In the project vicinity are likely to be black bear, brown bear, moose, mountain goat, Dall sheep, ground squirrel, snowshoe hare, beaver, wolf, wolverine, porcupine, river otter, ermine, and other mammals. Wetlands may provide good habitat for waterfowl. The relatively isolated Kenai Peninsula brown bear population and their movement corridors are known to be an issue in the broader area. Goat habitat and goat disturbance may also be a terrestrial mammal issue, although goats and sheep frequent elevations higher than the proposed trail (observed on the peaks above Stormy Creek Pass and likely in the greater Bench peak area). A few animals that use the forested area may be temporarily displaced during the construction of the huts system, and there may be minor long-term displacement or disturbance to existing use patterns. Because use will be on foot and by small groups, the impact likely will not be great. The trail will be routed around important habitat locations (denning, calving, nesting) whenever possible. Proper hut design and housekeeping will ensure safe storage of food and protection from bear and rodent problems.

**Fuel Handling.** The Huts Association proposes to use propane fuel for cooking, possibly lighting, and some heating, and is likely to transport full propane tanks by air. Propane is a gas at atmospheric pressure, and any leak will disperse in the air rather than endanger soil and water resources. Minor amounts of gasoline and oil for two-cycle engines (for example chainsaw) are

likely to be stored on-site. Approved storage containers, facilities, and use procedures will be followed to avoid impact to lands and water. All flammable and explosive fuel and other items, including bear protection materials, will be handled in accordance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, and Forest Service requirements for the safety of hut users, handlers of the materials, and the surrounding environment.

## **6. Permits and Authorizations**

Possible permits and authorizations anticipated at this time include the following:

- Chugach National Forest term Special Use Permit for use of Forest lands.
- Alaska Railroad and Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities authorizations for using small portions of right-of-way.
- Corps of Engineers Section 404 permit for fill in wetlands (possible for trail).
- Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Office of Project Management and Permitting, Coastal Zone Consistency Determination (Center creek and Placer River are within the Kenai Peninsula coastal zone management boundary).
- Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Office of Habitat Management and Permitting, Fish Habitat Permit (possible for bridging Center Creek).
- Alaska State Historic Preservation Office authorization under the Section 106, for the Iditarod National Historic Trail and other potential sites.
- Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation Section 401 Water Quality Certification.
- Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation General Permit for Remote Camps and Lodges, for solid waste, drinking water, human waste, and kitchen sanitation.
- Alaska Alcoholic Beverage Control Board “Restaurant or Eating Place” license.

### Alaska Huts Seasons of Operation

“Season” of Use	Days	Staffing	Bedding Status	Food status	Solid waste status	Education Status	Other
<b>Notes Pertaining to All Seasons →</b>			Sleeping pads always available	Staple dried/canned foods always available to hut keepers and maint volunteers. These could be available to the public when hut keeper present.	Guests always pack out what they pack in or consume, except as noted below.	Interpretive signs, minimal library, and simple self-serve activities always available.	Reservations necessary virtually always.
<b>Spring Skiing</b> 2/10-4/10  may not include all huts	<b>60 days</b>	Resident hut keeper on duty 3 nights/week. Roving vol. maint. crew to resupply for summer, mark trail, heavier hut cleaning.	Bring own sleeping bag	Food offered on days hut keeper is on duty. Beer, wine, juice available for sale when on duty. Otherwise, self serve/no food or beverage available.	May burn paper and compost vegetable food waste. Large items (e.g. jars) not burnable are flown out at resupply time.	All self serve interp items & activities available. Active solicitation of educ. groups to use huts.	
<b>Summer</b> (Approx 6/1-9/20)  all huts	<b>110 days</b>	Resident hut keepers. Roving vol. hut & trail maint/cleaning crews. Roving staff to guide & educate as demanded.	Bring own sleeping bag or sleeping bag liner. Blankets (but not sheets) available .	Food offered. Beer, wine, juice available for sale. Late reservations for bunkroom sleeping and independent cooking available.	May burn paper and compost vegetable food waste. Large items not burnable are flown out at resupply (backhaul).	All self serve interp items & activities available. Active solicitation of educ. groups to use huts, especially mid-week.	
<b>Winter Holiday</b> (approx 12/20-1/4)  select huts	<b>15 days</b>	Roving maint. team; Hut keeper for groups by special arrangement.	Bring own sleeping bag	No food available except spices. Food stores locked up. But food may be available by special arrangement.	May burn paper. No composting.	No active solicitation of educ. groups to use huts, but they may use huts.	

*Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail Hut-to-Hut System Proposal*

<p><b>Winter/Shoulder</b> (all late fall/winter/ spring times not noted elsewhere),  select huts</p>	<p><b>120 days</b>, or 33% of year</p>	<p>Roving vol. to check huts, mark trails, and do light cleaning. Hut keeper available for groups by special arrangement.</p>	<p>Bring own sleeping bag</p>	<p>No food available except spices. Food stores locked up.</p>	<p>May burn paper. No composting.</p>	<p>No active solicitation of educ. groups to use huts, but they may use huts.</p>	<p>Assume very low income for this period. Any special group would meet its own expenses.</p>
<p><b>'Tween Seasons</b> Approx. 4/10 to 5/20 and approx. 10/15- 11/5.  all huts; timing may vary by hut.</p>	<p><b>60 days</b></p>	<p>No hut keeper. Maintenance team may use this time, and a hut could be closed to the public for maint.</p>	<p>Bring own sleeping bag</p>	<p>No food available except spices. Food stores locked up.</p>	<p>May burn paper. No composting.</p>	<p>No active solicitation of education groups, but they may use huts by special arrangement.</p>	<p>Assume no income</p>

**Alaska Mountain and Wilderness Huts Association  
Summary of Proposed Permit Conditions**

	<b>Proposed most likely use</b>	<b>Proposed maximum allowed by permit</b>
Seasonal Operations	Winter: Self-serve “equipped cabins.” No hut keepers on site. Summer: Hut keepers at all huts with food offered most of the summer. Some self-serve periods without hut keepers on duty. Actual combination of self-serve “equipped cabin” operations and food service cabins would likely be adjusted over time.	Authorization for paid or volunteer hut keepers and food service at all sites at any time.
Hut Sleeping Capacity	20 bunks in each hut. Voluntary restrictions on numbers at the most popular times, when minimums are met.	Flexibility to have more than 20 physical bunk spaces to allow configuration for family/group users or single hut users, with no more than 20 hut reservations accepted. Overflow sleeping allowed (i.e. in tents at designated locations).
Reservations/ Overflow Policy	In summer and spring skiing seasons, early reservations will be taken for periods when hut keepers are on duty. Late reservations will be taken to fill excess capacity with users desiring lower service level and lower cost. In winter, open reservations.	Food service authorized at all times for all hut users.
Food /Beverage	All huts offer food in summer and spring skiing seasons. Guided trips, with and without explicit educational themes, will be offered several times per year, and these parties will have use of food stocked at the huts. Juice, beer, wine offered in limited quantity at times hut keeper is present.	Authorization to prepare three meals per day for all hut users at any time. Juice, beer, wine offered at times hut keeper is present.
Water	Summer: Haul to small cistern, or gravity feed to small cistern from stream or roof collection. Drinking water treated by staff and by people using their own backpacking filters. Washing water not necessarily treated. Winter: Snowmelt, unless individual hut sites allow for hole in the ice or other liquid water for hauling.	Same delivery. Treatment of drinking water at all huts by hut keepers.
Re-supply (propane, firewood, cleaning & maintenance supplies, food)	Up to three regularly scheduled fly-in resupply events each snow season to each hut. Motorized resupply support one time per summer month (3 times per year) by four-wheeler or 4WD to Mills Creek bridge (for Hut A) and by floatplane to Bench Lake (Hut B). Unlimited railroad resupply support for Hut D.	Fly-in resupply events up to one per month to each hut year round. Motorized resupply support twice per summer month for Huts A and B as indicated to the left.
Human waste	Composting toilets. Auxiliary pit toilets where soils allow.	Same. Authorization to restrict use to paid hut users only, so as not to overwhelm system

Solid waste	<p>By permit from DEC:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Minimize packaging going in.</li> <li>-Burn paper / cardboard / wood.</li> <li>-Hut users carry out their own garbage during self-serve periods, and at any time they</li> <li>-Hut keepers using huts with groups and preparing food rinse jars and cans, flatten cans, store for recycling backhaul during winter resupply.</li> <li>-Vegetable food waste to composting toilet during staffed periods.</li> <li>-Other garbage and trash packed out by staff and/or hut users (e.g. for reduction in fee) or stored by backhaul during winter resupply.</li> </ul>	Same
Shared Use Zone	Area of approximately 2,000 foot radius around each hut defined as shared use zone as part of approval of each hut site, to maintain safety, clean drinking water, and aesthetics of site (see proposal text).	Same
Other sales	Sale of educational items, outdoor needs (bug spray, 1 <sup>st</sup> aid supplies, etc.), memento items and rental of outdoor gear at huts.	Sale or rental of anything related to the mission of the organization authorized at huts.