

Huts Update

Alaska Mountain
and Wilderness
Huts Association



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We're on the
Web!

See us at:

alaskahuts.org

Forest Service Starts Environmental Review

In November Chugach National Forest accepted Alaska Hut's proposal as an application. This means that, after more than two years, the proposal has cleared its Forest Service first hurdle and immediately faces a higher hurdle—an environmental impact statement (EIS) evaluating the Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail Hut-to-Hut System.

On November 16th, Executive Director John Wolfe and committed huts volunteer Randy Steen participated in a day-long EIS kick-off session with the Forest Service at the Kenai Lake Work Center near Moose Pass. The meeting clarified the "proposed action" and resulted in a handful of follow-up questions for which the Alaska Huts board will provide further information.

Sometime early in 2005, the Forest Service and Alaska Huts will invite the public to learn more about the proposal and ask questions. These "scooping" meetings will help identify issues and define the scope of the study needed for the EIS.

The "Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail Hut-to-Hut System" proposal, along with a map and photographs, are available for easy viewing at www.alaskahuts.org.

Impressions Along the Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail

Huts member, Randy Steen has been on several reconnaissance trips that have brought him along the proposed Mills Creek-Iditarod Trail. He shares his impressions for readers of our newsletter. His first trek started near Lower Summit Lake near the Manitoba Cabin.

The route begins along a mining road and tapers to a trail. A history of mining is evident along this portion. After a few chilly crossings of Mills Creek you enter subalpine vegetation and eventually a game trail takes you across the alpine meadows. At Stormy Creek a ridge is sighted covered with scattered hemlock, a fine location for a hut. Expansive views are abundant, up and down Mills Creek and up Stormy Creek.

Along Stormy Creek there is a gain of elevation and dramatic, steep, rock-faced valley walls. At the pass, elevation 3700 feet, there's a thawing lake (this trek was in June) and the company of goats and their kids along the mountain walls. From the pass you descend the winding curve of a narrow valley towards Bench Lake. Eventually, from the outlet of Bench Lake, it is an easy walk to the Johnson Pass trail. The upper Mills-Stormy Creek area is wild and beautiful.

In mid-October Randy and a few other hutsters were flown to a pass at the headwaters of Center Creek. The task at hand was to assess the area for a trail and hut sites between Johnson Pass Trail and a trail terminus at the Alaska Railroad and Placer River. The crest of the pass is broad, with fragile alpine tundra and tiny ponds. Rolling terrain offers microclimates out of the wind, which were invitations for lunch stops. Glimpses of the Placer River and Spencer Glacier with ice chunks floating in the lake appear through swirling clouds. A special place!

A potential hut site overlooks a lake, and the area is reminiscent of the Lost Lake area near Seward. The hike down Center Creek offers a wonderful mosaic of hills covered with hemlock and alder surrounded by sedge wetlands drained by small winding streams. Several places along the creek near a butte in the lower valley are potential hut sites. Here the creek has carved a canyon of varying heights in the rock. Hemlock, spruce, and alder currently provide an impediment to all but the most dedicated hiker. Fortunately this group found a game trail.

In comparison to other hikes in Southcentral Alaska, says Randy, "I think this would be one of the best opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts. There is the length and challenge that some seek, yet there are moderate portions that would attract people with a wide variety of skill and endurance levels. Those who summit Center Creek Pass would come away with an impressed."

Holiday Huts, Visions of the Past and Future

We all have visions of how the holidays ought to be. With ads and crowds and traffic, sometimes the reality doesn't live up to the vision that dances in our heads. Composite memories of the best parts of many celebrations complete the image I see, and one standout memory is—as a teen—skiing 12 miles with a big pack one December from the Parks Highway into a cabin on the Tokositna River with my family and a family friend. The route included miles of pushing into a north breeze directly toward Denali. As the short day faded, it was great to see the log cabin, light a fire, and find some warmth and light. It was a first for me to decorate without strings of lights. We cut a small spruce and, with the creativity of many minds and hands, created a colorful tree full of origami, birch-bark curls, popcorn strings, alder-cone clusters, painted spruce cones, cutout snowflakes, and “ribbons” of red yarn. There was work in getting there and work in making the celebration from scratch, and it was the best kind of work. As solstice approaches and the light begins to return to the north land, we wish you happy holidays and look forward to the day your celebration might take place at a hut.

- John Wolfe, executive director

As Always, Thanks

A big thanks to the following people:

- ❖ Backcountry teams: **Randy Steen, Ray Burger, Ian Moore, and Jen Jollif.**
- ❖ **Roger Shaw** and **Bev Lewanski** for hosting portions of the fall Huts retreat.
- ❖ **Grant Crosby**, National Park Service historic architect, for leading the current conceptual hut design effort, and **Jae Shin**, Echo Architecture, for assisting.
- ❖ **Alan Mitchell, Phil Kaluza, Randy Steen, Ted Moore, and Bob Butera** for assistance on alternative energy; building insulation, heat, and ventilation; waste disposal; and other details of hut design.
- ❖ Out-going long-time board members **Christie Kearney** and **Gar Carothers.**
- ❖ Eagle River Nordic Ski Club and the Nordic Ski Club of Anchorage for hosting us at their meetings and offering support.
- ❖ **Dwayne Adams** for pursuing the Alaska Conservation Foundation grant.
- ❖ **Janet Sheldon**, who started attending meetings and jumped right in to making things happen.
- ❖ **Ian Moore**, AK Map Science, for working up a beautiful shaded relief map in GIS.

Conceptual Hut Design Underway

With a flurry of creative activity (not to mention emails), hut design ideas that have been floating in heads for several years are finding their way to paper. Grant Crosby, an historic architect with the National Park Service and renovator of his own early Anchorage house in downtown, volunteered to help and soon was leading the effort to develop a conceptual hut design.

This effort is primarily aimed at defining the size and cost of a hut and outbuildings, and it is expected to be used to gather input from members and the public based on their own cabin experiences. In these ways, it will be a springboard to final design of each individual hut once we know more about each site next summer.

Grant first created a bubble diagram based on brainstorming sessions and has been refining it as a formal spatial diagram. This, then, is being translated into a possible floor plan and side views.

As part of this effort, a cadre of technical supporters has come together to provide excellent guidance. Alan Mitchell has crunched numbers and run a ‘hut’ through the AK Warm software he wrote. This calculates fuel needs and helps specify superinsulation levels. He also has worked up a scheme for solar power system. Phil Kaluza, who has built and lived in several superinsulated homes from Nome to Anchorage and worked in rural Alaska housing, has been instrumental as well. Jae Shin, of Echo Architecture, who designed the Serenity Falls, is working on the design with Grant.

If you are a construction contractor or cost estimator and have an interest, or if you know of somebody with these skills, let us know. We need the talent for the construction cost estimate in January.

FALL RETREAT LOOKS TO 2005

The first weekend in October brought the Board of Directors together for a work session with Grant Crosby, architect with the National Park Service. Grant graciously gave his time and expertise during a brainstorm and planning session related to hut design concepts. Board members sketched their design concepts, and Grant led them through exercises to define the types of features of living, kitchen, entry, and sleeping spaces.

We also spent discussed and formulated draft emergency operation procedures. These notes will continue to be modified to match our needs and Forest Service requirements.

Finally, we laid out our 2005 plan of action regarding the variety of working committees, tasks, and budget considerations. 2005 will be a full year, and there is a strong need for volunteer help from our membership especially as it relates to fundraising, educational program planning, final hut site selection, and assisting with outreach and membership.

Our Mission:

Include Alaska's back country in a world-wide 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.

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Volunteers Needed

We are looking for someone with skills to assist with the layout and graphics of this quarterly newsletter. Please contact Bev Lewanski at 696-8754.

The Alaska Huts board just authorized expansion of the board to 11. There are seats to fill. Business or finance skill? Construction or design skill? Fundraising interest? Just plain interested? Give a jingle to John, 279-4663.

Thank you for your
on-going support.

Mid-Winter Huts Gathering Serves up Food Jan. 25

After work January 25, you are invited to Anchorage's Kincaid Chalet for hot food and good company at the Alaska Huts annual mid-wintering gathering, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. This year, to get you thinking about backcountry food, we will provide several sample entrees made from non-perishable ingredients. As you eat, you judge the entrees. Are they fit for a hut or not? Will it be gourmet pizza? A succulent stew? Look for something from Middle Way Café and perhaps other creative eateries. If you would like to whip something up, call Kevin at 243-1951. Also, in keeping with tradition, expect live music, along with new maps and new photos of the Mills Creek-Iditarod location, and conceptual hut design details on display. Prizes too! See you there.

Alaska Conservation Foundation Awards Grant

The Alaska Conservation Foundation (ACF), the state's premier funder of conservation and sustainable community-building efforts, has given Alaska Huts a \$1,000 grant to assist with huts related activities. Specifically, we had asked for assistance with outreach to other conservation groups and user groups in the project area so that we could clearly convey the proposal and learn from and adapt to the issues other groups have. Many thanks to ACF!

What Brought You On Board?



Sally Rothwell, Senior Environmental Coordinator with Conoco-Phillips, joined the board of directors in November. Sally learned of the Huts Association through our newsletter. Her passion for hiking and experience with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and permitting highlight her desire to be on the board. She recently completed her Masters in Business Administration, an addition to her Masters in Geology. Now she has time to give to "hut-to-hut" efforts. She already has shown us she is a go-getter willing to do any jobs that need to be done.

A big welcome to Sally!