

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



TOK AREA FORESTRY

**PRELIMINARY BEST INTEREST FINDING AND
DECISION FOR
YOUNG NEGOTIATED
NC-1750-T**

5/10/2023

Abbreviations

ADEC	Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation
ADF&G	Alaska Department of Fish and Game
ADNR	Alaska Department of Natural Resources
BIF	Best interest finding
DMLW	Division of Mining, Land and Water
DOF	Division of Forestry & Fire Protection
FLUP	Forest Land Use Plan
FRPA	Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act
FYSTS	Five-Year Schedule of Timber Sales
MBF	Thousand board feet
OHA	Office of History and Archeology
ROW	Right-of-way

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I. PROPOSED ACTION

DOF is proposing to offer for sale approximately 1000 acres of mixed spruce saw timber and pole timber from state lands in the Tok River drainage and surrounding areas. The volume to be offered totals approximately 10,000 CCF. DOF would sell the timber as a ten-year, long term, high value-added negotiated timber sale for commercial use.

The management objectives for the proposed timber sales are:

- Provide the raw material for the industry to produce timber products providing benefits to the state and local economy through employment opportunities.
- Harvest the commercial sawtimber and fuelwood before a significant decrease in fire salvaged wood merchantability occurs and return the site to a young productive mixed stand forest.
- Create a mosaic of habitat conditions for game and non-game wildlife species.
- Provide firewood for the residential heating needs of Interior Alaska communities.
- Promote multiple use management that provides for the production, utilization, and replenishment of timber resources while perpetuating personal, commercial, and other beneficial non-timber uses of the forest resources.

II. STATUTORY AND REGULATORY AUTHORITY

The Division is taking this action under the authority of

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

III. ADMINISTRATIVE RECORD

The Division will maintain an administrative record regarding the decision of whether or not to proceed with the action as proposed. This record will be maintained at the DOF's Tok Office filed as NC-1750-T

IV. SCOPE OF DECISION

This preliminary best interest finding (PBIF) is the first part of step three of a six-step process to design, sell, and administer timber sales. This PBIF covers the sale of approximately 1000 acres of mixed spruce sawtimber and pole timber on state land within the perimeter of unit 14 of the Tanana Valley State Forest. The following list summarizes the overall process:

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

considers the Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan. The community of Tok has developed a Community Wildfire Protection Plan for this area. The proposed area is not within a municipality, therefore no municipal plans apply.

Step 2: Best Interest Finding. A best interest finding is the decision document that:

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

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

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

Step 3: Five-year Schedule of Timber Sales (AS 38.05.113). The Northern Region prepares a Five-year Schedule of Timber Sales every other year. The Schedule identifies proposed sales, including their location, volume, and main access routes. The Five-year Schedules is a scoping document that provides an opportunity for public, agency, and industry to identify potential issues and areas of interest for further consideration in the Forest Land Use Plan. Proposed timber sales within the area covered by this PBIF must appear in at least one of the two Five-year Schedules preceding the sale. Some of the units identified for this sale are included in the current FYSTS including NC-1163, NC-1162, NC-1164 and NC-1783. Future units that haven't been identified in a previously published FYSTS will be identified in future FYSTS.

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

Step 5: Timber sales and contracts. Following adoption of the final best interest finding, and completion of the FLUPs, DOF will offer the timber for sale by auctioning competitive sales and/or negotiating some sales with purchasers. The Division will sign a contract with the

winning bidder for each sale. The contract will include stipulations to ensure compliance with the best interest finding, FLUP, and statutory requirements.

Step 6: Sale administration. DOF administers timber sales and conducts field inspections to ensure compliance with the final best interest finding, FLUP, timber sale contract, and applicable laws, including the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act and regulations (AS 41.17 and 11 AAC 95), and forest management statutes and regulations in AS 38.05 and 11 AAC 71.

V. PROJECT LOCATION, LAND STATUS, AND DESCRIPTION

A. Location

The proposed sale area is located approximately 10 miles southwest of Tok Junction on the Tok Cutoff Highway. The sale area is generally in unit 14 of the Tanana Valley State Forest. The proposed sale units will be located within Township 15 North, Range 11 East; Township 16 North, Range 11 East; Township 16 North, Range 12 East; and Township 17 North, Range 12 East, Copper River Meridian. The general sale area is shown on the attached map and is within the United States Geological Survey 1:63,360 Quadrangle maps titled Tanacross A-5, B-5, and B-4. A mix of all-season and winter roads will lead to the units.

B. Title status

The acquisition for the land upon which the sale units are proposed is based on General Selection GS 882. The title was transferred by State Patent 5655. There are no title restrictions on the area. The primary land classification for the area is Forestry per Classification Order CL NC-10-004 and legislatively designated as a state forest under A.S. 41.17.400. The proposed sale area is within the Tanana Valley State Forest (TVSF).

C. Land use planning, classification, and management intent

The proposed area is within the Tanana Valley State Forest Management Plan in subunit 14. There are no specific restrictions stated in the TVSF management plan that are applicable to this proposed project. The sale area is open to mineral entry and leasing. The management intent is that subunit 14 “has high value for hunting, fishing, trapping, camping, scenery and timber harvest and will be managed to maintain those uses.” The proposed units will be designed to be consistent with the management intent of the plan.

The Interagency Fire Management Plan includes these lands in the full protection category.

D. Current access and land use:

The sale areas are accessed by the Tok Cutoff Highway. Existing access points into the state forest are located at Mileposts 102, 104, 105, 107, 109.5 and 116.5. Existing and inactive primary and secondary roads will require some level of re-establishment to support commercial harvest trucks and equipment.

The Tok River and adjacent logging roads are heavily used by recreationists, hunters and trappers. Activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, boating, Nordic skiing, dog mushing and many others are popular in this area.

E. Background and description of proposal

1. Background: This project is being proposed to meet the needs of the timber industry in the Tok area. Long-term sales are needed for high value-added processors to further invest in their businesses. A guarantee of timber supply is needed to show financing agencies the likelihood of the business's success. Additionally, the Tanana Valley State Forest management intent for this subunit is for the management of the timber resource. This negotiated sale will be within the annual allowable cut and comply with sustained yield requirements.
2. Timber volume and sustained yield: This sale will provide approximately 100 acres and 1000 CCF of a mix of sawtimber and fuelwood annually. Final harvest unit boundaries and timber volume estimates will be determined once DOF staff has completed all pre-sale field measurements. The Tok area Annual Allowable Cut is calculated at approximately 2370 acres. This action alone and in combination with other timber sales that are sold will be within the allowable cut and comply with sustained yield requirements.
3. Harvest unit design: All units will be designed to follow the topography of the area as well as minimize impacts to riparian areas and drainages through the use of retention buffers. The units will range in size from approximately 10 acres to 100 acres. These units will be heavy partial cuts where spruce and other species smaller than 6 inches will not be cut. Large snags valuable for wildlife habitat will be retained to the extent practical. The logging operations will follow all applicable Best Management Practices and residual trees will be protected from damage during harvest operations. Harvesting will be by the whole tree yarding system. Slash disposal at the landings will be by burning or by salvage for fuelwood use. Some large woody debris will be left throughout the unit to provide for small mammal habitat.
 - a. Reforestation and site preparation: The sale area will be reforested in compliance with the Forest Resources and Practices regulations (11 AAC 95.375-.390)

Natural regeneration will be utilized initially for regeneration in both units, with the goal of re-establishing white spruce. It is expected that the harvest method (heavy partial cut) will open sites and increase light and soil warmth. Adjacent spruce stands will provide seed to these units along with residual trees within the units. However, these units will be of sufficient size to supplement reforestation

with planting if needed. Reforestation will be assessed within five years post-harvest, and a regeneration survey will be conducted if regeneration appears marginal or patchy. If the survey indicates inadequately stocked areas, then hand planting of white spruce seedlings will be performed on non-stocked areas. The goal for regeneration is to achieve a minimum of 450 evenly distributed trees per acre at the end of the regeneration survey period (any commercial tree species).

- b. Access design and construction: Access design, construction, and maintenance will comply with the Forest Resources and Practices (FRPA) regulations (11 AAC 95.285-.355). The planned access to the units are through utilizing existing access points into the state forest off the Tok Cutoff Highway located at Mileposts 102, 104, 105, 107, 109.5 and 116.5. New roads will be constructed to geometric standards identified in the state forest management plan and will be compliant with road construction standards identified in Best Management Practices (BMP) document of the FRPA. Any units on the southeast side of the Tok River will be accessed by winter crossings or temporary bridges and will be compliant with FRPA BMP's. The existing roads will be maintained to the all-season secondary road standards set out in the FRPA and the DOF Road Standards. No other stream crossings will be required.
- c. Appraisal method: DOF will appraise the timber value in compliance with 11 AAC 71.092. Initial stumpage will be negotiated between the state and the operator and will be re-evaluated every 3 years of the contract.

F. Resources and management

1. Timber.

- a. Timber stand composition and structure: The timber stands of commercial value throughout this subunit of the state forest, including the proposed harvest units in this PBIF, consist primarily of sawtimber size class closed white spruce stands. These stands contain spruce predominantly between 10 and 14" DBH but the largest measured trees were 20" DBH. Ages of the larger diameter spruce have been measured as 120+ years old. Pockets of spruce regeneration and alder exist. The moss depth is relatively shallow and ranges between 0-6 inches. The grass component is moderate in this stand and is estimated to cover 10 - 20% of the area. There is an estimated 10% defect in the stand.

- b. Stand silvics: The normally merchantable species of trees on the TVSF are white spruce and birch. Data and research on regeneration and growth characteristics of these species are compiled within the Resource Analysis of the Tanana Valley State Forest (TVSF) Management Plan. The harvest and reforestation systems available in Interior Alaska are also reviewed and listed in the Resource Analysis. The results of the public and agency discussions for harvest and reforestation are discussed in the TVSF Management Plan. Silvicultural harvest systems that facilitate even-aged (natural) management are generally preferred. They mimic the ecological impact of wildfire and other disturbances and result in the greatest increase in site productivity. Even-aged management is normally accomplished through clear cuts, patch cuts and heavy partial cuts (such as seed tree or shelterwood systems), which open up the site to maximum solar gain. This results in the greatest production of both young hardwood that is important to wildlife and the spruce understory valuable years later as timber. Even-aged management techniques are utilized to provide young, vigorously growing stands in juxtaposition to older, undisturbed stands. Such placement of harvest units can optimize natural seeding and the edge effect. Regeneration of white spruce occurs only from seeds. White spruce trees generally produce some level of seed crop every three to five years and large seed crops every five to seven years. The proposed sale is a heavy partial cut to remove the spruce component of the stand and promote spruce regeneration.
 - c. Topography and Soils: The proposed sale will be designed and managed to prevent significant impairment of the land and water with respect to renewable resources (AS 41.17.060(c)(5)).
2. Agriculture. The proposed sale is not anticipated to have any impact on current or future agricultural activity in the area, and any effects of any timber sale operations for agricultural uses will be minimal.
3. Wildlife habitat and harvest. Wildlife typical of the Interior are found on this site. Signs of moose and squirrel are common. There are no known raptor nests within the proposed sale area. Should an eagle nest tree be discovered in the sale area, the nest tree will be marked on the ground and a 330-foot no-harvest radius will be established to protect the tree. No critical wildlife habitat has been identified for this area (TVSF Management Plan), nor has any become apparent during ground reconnaissance.
4. Fish Habitat, water resources, and water quality. The proposed sale will be designed and managed to protect fish habitat and water quality in compliance with the Forest Resources and Practices Act and regulations (AS 41.17 and 11 AAC 95). The Tok River is on the anadromous rivers catalogue. DOF will ensure Best Management Practices are being adhered to by requiring a complete logging plan prior to the start of any harvesting, conducting on-site inspections during logging operations and a final inspection prior to terminating the timber sale.

5. Recreation, tourism, and scenic resources. During the winter months mushing, snow-machining and many other activities are common. Trapping and hunting activities are also common. The logging road system provides an excellent infrastructure for recreationists to access trails and waterways. The proposed harvest units should be largely obscured by the Tok Cutoff Highway and the Tok River.
6. Cultural Resources. DOF works with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to identify and avoid known cultural, historic or prehistoric sites in planning the proposed access routes and harvest areas. If additional archaeological sites are identified, proposed harvest areas and road locations will be appropriately adjusted to avoid conflicts. If any historic or archaeological sites are encountered during road construction or harvest activities, DOF will immediately inform SHPO and take action to protect the findings.
7. Subsurface Resources. The proposed harvest area is open to mineral entry however there are no current mining claims in this area.

G. Costs and benefits

Local mill operators will benefit from the influx of raw timber into the market. In addition to generating royalties to the State's general fund, the proposed sales will create economic benefits to the community of Tok and to other locations in Alaska. The Tok business community will receive direct economic benefits from providing support services for the operators through sales of fuel, food, housing, medical and miscellaneous supplies.

The sales are also expected to benefit the local economy by providing jobs. It will have a positive impact on local employment by generating numerous man-hours of work associated with the harvest and transportation of wood products from this sale. Additionally, the public may benefit from access to additional personal use fuelwood areas. High fuelwood prices will also make merchandising the tops worthwhile. Home heating continues to be expensive in interior Alaska.

VI. PUBLIC REVIEW

The public and agencies are invited to comment on this Preliminary Best Interest Finding. Objections or comments pertaining to the proposed action must be received in writing by the DOF Northern Region Office **by 4:30 PM June 14th, 2023**, in order to ensure consideration for review. Comments should be mailed to the State of Alaska, Division of Forestry & Fire Protection, 3700 Airport Way, Fairbanks AK 99709 or by email to jeremy.douse@alaska.gov. For more information you may contact the Northern Region Office, Jeremy Douse Northern Region Forester (907) 451-2670. To be eligible to appeal the final decision, a person must have provided written comment by **4:30 PM June 14th, 2023**.

VII. PUBLIC NOTICE

This PBIF was publicly noticed in compliance with AS 38.05.945. Notice was posted on the Alaska Online Public Notice System, The State DOF public website and Electronic and physical mailing lists.

VIII. ALTERNATIVES AND DISCUSSION

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

1. Alternative One, sell the sale as a long term negotiated sale. The DOF could offer the sale as proposed in this PBIF. This would put more forest stands into management, provide raw material into the local market and provide more economic activity to the community of Tok. This would also meet the habitat objectives of the Tok River drainage. Additionally, DOF has already laid out a number of these units under the old SB180 sales that never sold. This alternative would allow the state to recoup the costs of laying out those units and meet the management intent set for that original sale.
2. Alternative Two, sell the units as individual competitive sales. The DOF could sell these units individually in 3-to-5-year contracts. These sales are referred to as .120 sales and have been a common way the division does business in other areas. This would not meet the needs of the local industry to be able to further invest in their business and may not meet the management intent of the state forest to provide material into the local market.
3. Alternative Three, No Action. This Alternative would not meet the needs of the local community, the industry nor the management intent of the Tanana Valley State Forest.

IX. RECOMMENDATION AND PRELIMINARY DECISION

After due consideration of all pertinent information and alternatives, the DNR has reached the following Preliminary Decision: To offer for sale approximately 1000 acres of white spruce saw and pole timber to provide sawtimber and fuelwood as well as improve habitat as proposed in Alternative one and described in this PBIF. The DOF finds that this preliminary decision satisfies the objectives stated in this document and it is in the best interest of the State to proceed with this action under its authority of AS 38.05.035(e) (Powers and Duties of the Director) & AS 38.05.110-120; 11 AAC 71 (Timber Sale Statutes and Regulations); and AS 41.17.010-.950 and 11 AAC 95 (Forest Resources and Practices Statutes and Regulations).

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

If you have any questions, please contact Jeremy Douse, Northern Region Forester, jeremy.douse@alaska.gov (907)451-2670.

X. SIGNATURE

Jeremy Douse
Northern Region Forester
Alaska Division of Forestry & Fire Protection
Alaska Department of Natural Resources

Date

XI. ATTACHMENTS

Maps of the proposed project area follow.

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

YOUNGS NEGOTIATED NC-1750-T

**BEST INTEREST FINDING
AREA MAP**



Tanacross

TOK



0 2.5 5 10 Miles

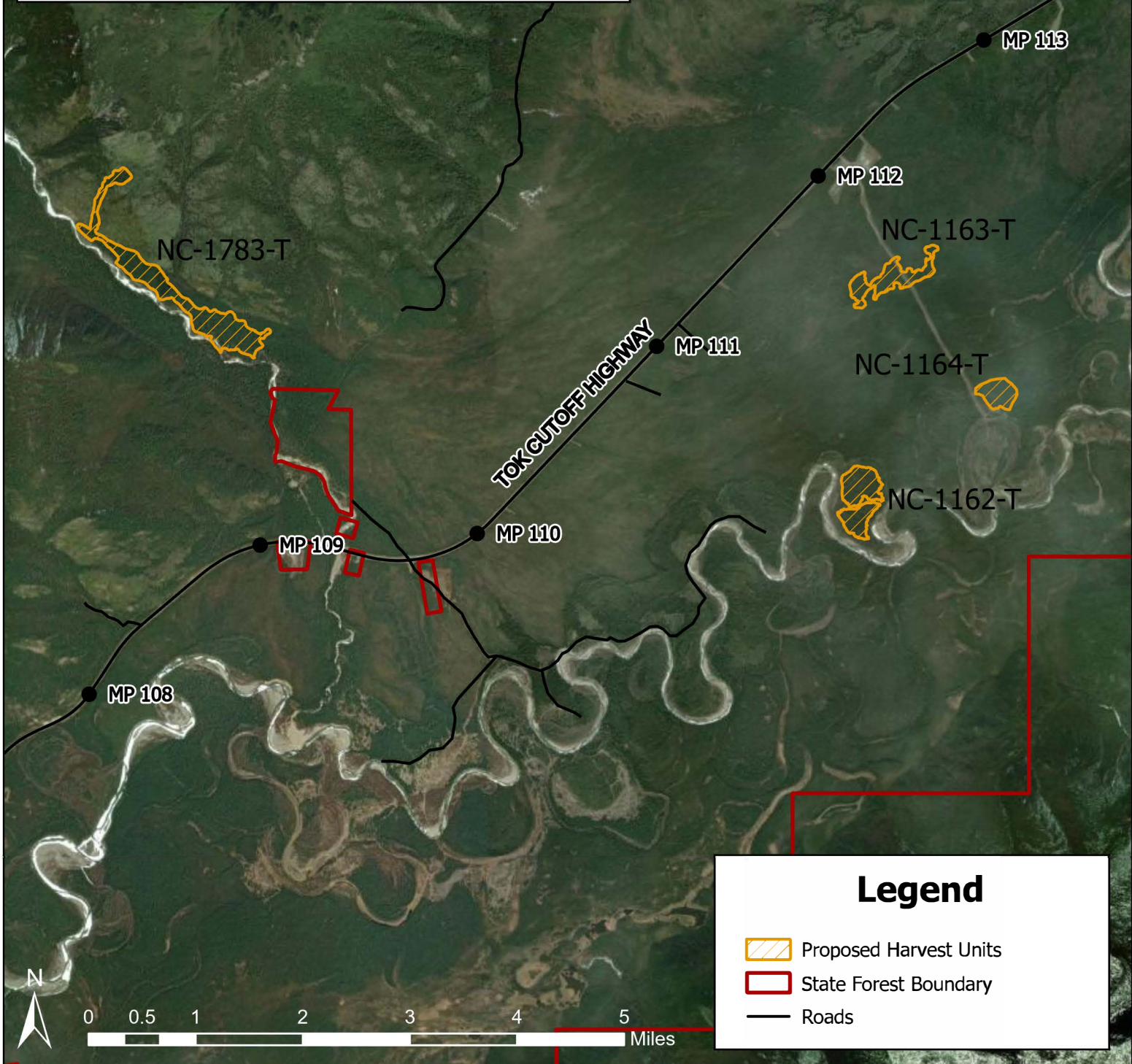
Legend

-  Tanana Valley State Forest Unit 14
-  Roads




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

YOUNGS NEGOTIATED NC-1750-T
NC-1162-T, NC-1163-T, NC-1164-T, NC-1783-T

YEAR 1 HARVEST UNITS



Legend

-  Proposed Harvest Units
-  State Forest Boundary
-  Roads