FY 19 Iditarod National Historic Trail Annual Report
BLM Anchorage Field Office, Alaska

Overview
The Iditarod Trail is the only winter trail in the National Trails System and the only Congressionally-designated National Historic Trail in Alaska. The Bureau of Land Management is the federal Trail Administrator of the entire Iditarod NHT system, with BLM’s Anchorage Field Office (AFO) handling this job since the Trail was designated by Congress in 1977.

Half of the historic Trail is located on State of Alaska public lands, another 30% on public easements crossing private Native lands, and 20% is located on federal Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service lands. (BLM lands are shown in orange on the map of the Trail system to the right.)

As the designated Trail Administrator, BLM facilitates efforts by volunteers and local, state, and federal agencies on behalf of the entire trail. Work is guided by an interagency comprehensive plan developed and adopted in the mid 1980’s.

Along with administering the system, BLM maintains about 200 miles of the Trail, including five public shelter cabins on the route. The portion of the main trail on BLM lands is managed as part of BLM’s National Conservation Lands.

(Left) BLM employee replaces a window sill removed by a bear from a BLM-managed public shelter cabin along the Trail.
For over 10 years, the Ceremonial Start of the Iditarod Sled Dog Race has concluded at BLM’s Campbell Tract in Anchorage. 2019 saw a field of 60 dog teams, hundreds of event volunteers, and thousands of spectators coming out for the one day spectacle. In preparation, BLM moved acres of snow for volunteer and dog team parking area, set up extensive traffic flow and pedestrian safety fencing, groomed and packed snow trails for dog teams and spectators, and provided free shuttle buses to the public.

BLM Joins Partners for 50th Anniversary Celebration of National Trails Act

BLM’s Iditarod National Historic Trail program joined other federal agency trail staff and trails partners to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the National Trails System Act, and to roll out a newly developed on-line series of training modules for BLM staff on the management of National Scenic and Historic Trails. BLM staff, including the Iditarod National Historic Trail Administrator, presented the individual modules throughout the gathering. A summary of BLM’s National Trails policies, on which the trainings are based, is available at https://www.ntc.blm.gov/krc/uploads/686/NSHTpolicy_BLMPresentation.mp4.
Winter & Summer Weather Extremes Whipsaws Iditarod Trail Users and Facilities

Below-average snowfall, a mid-Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race meltdown, and an absent icepack on Norton Sound were some of the abnormal winter conditions confronting participants in 2019 events on the National Historic Trail.

Following a traverse across sled-busting tussocks between Ophir and Iditarod (top photo left), many teams got soaked on the Yukon River when temperatures soared to above freezing, and snow turned to rain.

Sea ice was virtually non-existent between Unalakleet and Nome on Norton Sound this year (seen above north of Unalakleet). A century ago the historic winter trail passed over ice directly between Shaktoolik and Elim, but in 2019 mushers and intervillage travelers were forced to take a route closer-to or on-land. Over-snow and over-ice travel by snowmobile is the primary means of Alaskan intervillage surface transportation in the winter.
Historic high temperatures over much of summer combined with low snowfall, resulting in numerous wildfire threats to historic structures and public facilities along the Iditarod National Historic Trail.

Without active structural protection efforts of the State of Alaska Division of Forestry, the recently restored historic ARC Relief Cabin on the INHT (aka “Don’s Cabin”, shown above right) would have been consumed by the Hurst Creek Fire. BLM’s Iditarod NHT program provided real-time information to fire managers on site conditions and flammable building material quantities. The fire ultimately enveloped the site, but the structure was saved by sprinkler systems and brush clearing.

Wildfire nearly claimed the historic Rainy Pass Lodge, a checkpoint for the Iditarod Sled Dog Race, visible in the far side of the photo right, except for the intervention of a State Forestry smokejumper crew.

The Interior Alaska fire season finally ended with an ‘atmospheric river’ that dropped record amounts of rain in the Nome and Norton Sound area. Extensive flooding occurred along the Iditarod NHT, including at the historic railroad graveyard at the ghost town of Solomon. Wildfires continued burning in Southcentral Alaska until late September when heavy rains and decreasing daylight finally stifled fire growth.
Support for Iditarod Trail to Every Classroom! (ITREC!) and Iditarod Historic Trail Alliance Continues

In 2018, in celebration of its 10th year, the organizers of ITREC!, which includes the Iditarod Historic Trail Alliance, Chugach National Forest, BLM, and BLM’s Campbell Creek Science Center convened a weekend alumni gathering for the graduates of the program to share their experiences and lessons learned. In 2019, organizers resumed the 100 hour, year-long program in its previous format with over a dozen teachers from around Alaska.

Also in 2019, along with providing staff time, BLM continued financial grant assistance to the Trail Alliance. BLM and historic trail advocates formed the Alliance in 1999 to be the primary statewide non-profit supporting the Iditarod NHT.

BLM Completes Public Draft of Resource Management Plan (RMP) That Will Affect Trail

BLM completed the Bering Sea-Western Interior (BSWI) Resource Management Plan, which includes all segments of the Iditarod NHT managed as BLM National Conservation Lands (NCL’s). The plan includes a range of alternatives, with all alternatives aiming to maintain the character and setting of the Iditarod NHT and surrounding landscapes. The alternatives found in the plan are based on BLM’s policy guidance for the management of National Trails on BLM lands. Approval of the plan is pending.

Summer 2019 Observations From the Historic Town at the Center of the Iditarod Gold Rush

BLM staff working near the ghost town of Flat documented continued flooding of the hull of the historic Matheson dredge. The entire town, including the dredge, is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. On low water years the hull deck of the dredge, which is “grounded” on the bottom of a pond, is above water. In recent years the man-made pond has been dammed by beavers, with high water levels swamping the deck and base of the dredge superstructure. Continued flooding will ultimately result in the collapse of the superstructure. Co-located land ownership and mining claims by a variety of parties has prevented development of a strategy acceptable to all parties for stabilization of historic resources and maintenance of individual property rights.
Work Completed at INHT Bear Creek Public Shelter Cabin to Repair Damage From Three Animal Species

Significant work was accomplished at the remote INHT cabin located 30 miles south of the village of Nikolai, including rebuilding the bear-proof window shutter system that had been torn off the building by bears, squirrel-proofing walls and floors, coating wall logs with protective oil, stabilizing a porcupine-damaged privy, and brushing around the cabin. Project mobilization involved contracting and mobilizing a charter helicopter out of Palmer Alaska 175 miles to the southeast, as the site is not road accessible and can be accessed overland only in winter. The photos below show the cabin before and after work was completed.

Iditarod Trail-based Events Monitoring

Annually the Iditarod National Historic Trail is used as a venue for three long-distance winter overland competitive events, with segments on BLM lands authorized by Special Recreation Permits (SRP) from BLM. Event participants make use of the trail and BLM’s public shelter cabins, including the historic Rohn public shelter cabin, which is the oldest structure on the trail managed by BLM.

Each permit includes a number of stipulations designed to protect public lands and the historic resources of the Trail. Events monitoring by BLM included three remote site visits via a one-passenger ski-plane flown by a BLM ranger/pilot, multi-day overland snowmobile travel on BLM-segments of the trail in the Unalakleet area, and safety and maintenance checks of three of BLM’s public shelter cabins. Photo at right is of an on-the-trail chat with Austrian competitor Klaus Schweinberger in the 1,000 mile Knik-to-Nome Iditarod Invitational Ultramarathon. Mr. Schweinberger completed the journey in 34 days and 12 hours.

For more information on BLM’s Iditarod National Historic Trail program, see http://www.blm.gov/alaska/iditarod or contact the Trail Administrator, Kevin Keeler at (907) 267-1246 or kkeeler@blm.gov.