

# BELUGA SUBREGION



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## 1. SUBREGION OVERVIEW

The following section describes land use policy within the Beluga Subregion. It is divided into two parts. The first section is an overview of resources and their management for the subregion as a whole. The second section presents specific statements of management intent, land use designations, prohibited uses and management guidelines for each of the subregion's three management units. A map showing land ownership in the subregion and boundaries of management units and subunits is presented at the end of the second part.

### Background

The Beluga Subregion is bounded on the north and east by Beluga River and Lake, on the south by Cook Inlet, and on the west by the Chakachatna River and the edge of the Alaska Range (approximately the 1500' elevation contour). The line dividing the Kenai Peninsula Borough from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough roughly follows the path of the Beluga River — placing nearly all the Beluga Subregion within the Kenai Peninsula Borough.

The subregion encompasses approximately 415,000 acres. Land ownership (surface and subsurface) is divided roughly between the State of Alaska and the Native regional and village corporations. Additionally, the Kenai Peninsula Borough has surface ownership of approximately 8,500 acres. There are also a number of isolated parcels, primarily along the coast, owned by private individuals.

The large coal reserves of the Beluga Subregion suggest that this area faces a greater range of development possibilities than virtually any other subregion in the planning area. By the year 2000, the area could be a highly developed coal mining and export center, with a town of several thousand people and a road to the railbelt. On the other hand, the area could easily remain remote and largely undeveloped.

The area possesses a variety of existing and potential land uses in addition to coal. The subregion is the location of the Native village of Tyonek — a community that continues to depend on the area's rich reserves of salmon, moose and other food sources for its mix of subsistence and cash economy lifestyle. Until recently, the area has been the scene of large scale timber harvests and an export chipping operation. It is also the location of substantial offshore and some onshore oil and gas production. The majority of An-

chorage's electricity is generated within this subregion by gas-fired turbines located at a plant near the Beluga River.

The area possesses enormous coal resources. These reserves are presently the subject of multi-million dollar feasibility and pre-permit application environmental studies which could lead to coal mining and export by as early as 1990.

Although there is no year-round land access into the Beluga Subregion, there is an extensive road system within the area. These roads were built primarily as part of the previous timber harvests. The largest network of roads leads from logging areas west of Tyonek to the dock and former chip mill operation at the North Forelands. In addition to logging roads, there is a smaller private road system for local traffic on the Tyonek Native Corporation (TNC) lands. On the coast just north of the TNC lands there are also roads connecting an airstrip, the electrical generation plant, and several oil and gas wells and drilling sites. Regularly scheduled air taxi service runs between Anchorage and Beluga and the village of Tyonek.

### Management Summary

The major management objective for the Beluga Subregion is to manage the land in a way that best facilitates development of the area's coal resources. This will be achieved largely by retaining land with potential for coal development in public ownership and ensuring that public land is available for a townsite or work camp, processing and port facilities, and other uses that would accompany coal development. Other important management objectives are protection of fish and wildlife habitat, continued oil and gas development and commercial timber management. Secondary uses include mining and settlement other than what would be associated with coal, agriculture and public recreation.

### Settlement

In addition to the several sites identified as potential coal mining townsites, three areas of public land within this subregion are suitable candidates for land disposal. Two of these sites are borough owned; the other is state. Only the area owned by the state is designated for near term settlement. This area, surrounding Primo and Bishop Lakes and an unnamed lake to the northwest, includes a gross area of approximately 5,440 acres. Of this, a net area of approximately 1,400 acres will be offered for sale. The three lakes provide fly-in

access. This area is outside those portions of the subregion with moderate or high coal potential.

The two borough-owned areas may be considered for settlement in the long-term. These are an area owned by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough adjacent to the Beluga River and an area owned by the Kenai Peninsula Borough which stretches along the coast near Viapan Lake. These lands are designated borough land bank, which signifies they will be retained in borough ownership in the near-term and managed for present uses. In the long term, however, these lands may be sold for settlement. These lands include approximately 7,300 acres of which approximately 1,500 acres could be offered for sale. Access to these sites is via boat or plane.

The only other settlement proposed in this subregion is that necessary to support coal development, if and when it occurs. Coal mining is anticipated to last for a period of 30 — 50 years; thus it seems likely that a permanent townsite would be established rather than a “temporary” work camp. Four sites — Nikolai Ridge, Congahbuna Lake, Beluga and Three Mile — will be designated “reserved use” to preserve future townsite options.

Decisions on the most appropriate site will be made through the permit and regulatory process as coal development moves toward reality. In the interim, these sites will be managed as wildlife habitat and forestry.

### **Agriculture**

There are several pockets of publicly-owned cultivable soils in this subregion. At present, they are remote sites and competing wildlife, forestry, and coal values are considered higher value. There are also several large blocks of cultivable soils on native lands.

### **Forestry**

Forestry is a primary land use designation on approximately 32,000 acres where high and moderate forest values occur, typically along with wildlife habitat and coal. Timbered lands will be available for harvest up until the time of coal development. A management plan should be developed cooperatively with coal operators, the Divisions of Forestry and Minerals, and the Department of Fish and Game to allow maximum timber harvest before coal mining and to develop appropriate revegetation strategies. Areas may be identified for habitat enhancement to support moose and other species while their normal habitats are being disrupted.

### **Fish and Wildlife Habitat**

This subregion is an important moose harvest area for local residents and fly-in hunters. Substantial trapping and fishing also occurs. An important near-term management objective is to improve public access into the area so that increased hunting can help control the expected increase in the size of the moose population. Moose populations are predicted to grow as a result of the extensive recent timber harvests in the area.

If coal development occurs, management should focus on maintenance of animal populations, habitat enhancement and reclamation. To the extent practical, water quality should be protected in important salmon streams such as Chuitna, Nicolai and Beluga rivers. A comprehensive management plan to protect fish and wildlife resources will need to be completed as part of the detailed planning associated with coal development. In addition to direct impacts of coal development on habitat quality, such a plan should consider secondary impacts on fish and wildlife resources resulting from a large influx of people into the region.

### **Recreation**

Most of the current recreational activity in this subunit is wildlife-based hunting and fishing. These activities will be protected through public ownership of most of the area. In areas proposed for land sales, stream and trail corridors, some lakefront property and public access points will be identified and retained in public ownership. If coal is developed, an effort should be made to minimize the impact on these recreation opportunities. Post mining reclamation plans should consider ways to provide opportunities for public recreation (e.g., creation of lakes, improved access, etc.).

### **Subsurface Resources**

Coal mining is likely to be the dominant future use of this subregion. Over 90% (380,000 acres) of the subregion is judged to have high or moderate coal potential. Over 70,000 acres are currently under lease (9,240 acres are leased Native lands; the remainder are state leases). Most of the rest of the area will be offered for coal leasing in the future. If coal is developed, existing state and federal laws (Alaska Surface Coal Mining and Reclamation Act, Clean Water and Air Acts, etc.), will be used to maintain and protect fish and wildlife habitat, forestry and other important surface resource values.

Lands that currently are intended for coal-related uses may ultimately be used for a variety of other purposes. This will be possible either after areas are mined and

rehabilitated or after the areas are found not to have potential for commercial coal mining. Alternative surface land uses of these areas, including land sales, should be determined as part of the periodic review of the plan.

Public lands in this subregion will remain open for coal leasing except for those few sites offered for settlement (all of which have low or very low coal potential) and lands designated reserved use for a possible future coal related townsite. Once a coal townsite is selected, the remaining areas can be opened to coal mining or other uses.

This subregion lies within the Upper Cook Inlet and Susitna oil and gas basins. The Upper Cook Inlet Basin currently produces substantial amounts of oil and gas. There are several existing gas wells in the southern portion of the subregion. All state and borough land remains open to oil and gas leasing. Much of the infrastructure to develop and transport these resources is in place.

The potential for development of other minerals is believed to be low, but the area generally will remain open for locatable mineral entry. Mining operations in the area are likely to be placer mines.

### **Transportation and Public Facilities**

Two potential major transportation improvements have been discussed for this subregion: one is a coal transport and mining support transportation system from the coal fields to a potential port site at Granite Point; the second is a road or rail extension into this subregion from the east side of the Susitna River. The first of these routes has been protected with a 100-300' wide right-of-way for coal transportation from mine sites to Granite Point. A preliminary right of way R.O.W. for the road or rail link from the railbelt also has been reserved.

There are two principal candidates for the port site that would be used to export coal from this area: Granite Point and North Forelands. The state-owned uplands at Granite Point are designated as an industrial site and are currently under lease to a coal company; the latter area is on Native lands within the Tyonek Native reservation.

### **Chakachatna Hydroelectric Project**

A hydroelectric project has been proposed on a site just outside the study area on the Chakachatna drainage. If this project is constructed, state land may be needed for transportation of materials, workcamps, or other uses associated with the construction and maintenance of the project.