

Gulkana River Planning Update

May 25, 2006



Overview:

The Alaska Department of Natural Resources is currently in the process of developing a Special Use Land Designation for the Gulkana River and its tributaries that addresses a few specific issues that apply to the river's shorelands and waters. Most of the uplands are owned by the Bureau of Land Management, Ahtna Corporation and private landowners. Following is information that addresses some of the commonly asked questions about the area involved, the state and federal planning processes, and the issues the plans will address.

Description of Environment:

The Gulkana River is the largest clear water river in the Copper River System. Paxson Lake, the Gulkana River and its tributaries provide outstanding public recreation values including remote camping opportunities, scenic landscapes, fishing, and whitewater boating. These waters also provide important salmon spawning and rearing areas. Lands surrounding the Gulkana River and Paxson Lake are important habitat for wildlife and support large numbers of nesting Trumpeter Swans. Lands south of Paxson Lake between the Richardson Highway and the river are important caribou habitat.

History of use:

Commercial and non-commercial sport fishers, whitewater boaters, campers, and bank anglers use this river and lake system extensively. Powerboat use occurs primarily on the lower river and the Sourdough segment. Float use occurs in all segments of the river system and on Paxson Lake. Use levels for the lake and river peak during the king salmon run in mid-to late-June to mid-July and are relatively low prior to and after the king season. A more primitive experience is available to users who navigate the two major river tributaries (West Fork and Middle Fork) or the upper mainstem of the Gulkana River outside of the king salmon season. The majority of the use of the shorelands is private non-guided use.

Use numbers on the Gulkana River have been increasing since the 1980's. Current use of the Gulkana River is estimated at approximately 5,980 visitors per year. Use peaks at approximately 400 users per day during the king salmon season. Use levels fall to less than 100 users per day outside of the king salmon season. Winter use is estimated at less than 500 people.

What has occurred so far?

- *1980 Gulkana River Designated* – Congress designates the Gulkana River as a National Wild River through the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.
- *1983 Gulkana River Management Plan* – BLM plan provides management direction for the Gulkana River and corridor.
- *1985 Memorandum of Understanding* – Signed by BLM and the State, provides guidance on cooperative management and planning of lands within and adjacent to the Gulkana National Wild River corridor.
- *1989 Gulkana Decision* – In 1989 the 9th Circuit Court finds the Gulkana River navigable and therefore state owned. This decision affirmed the management authority of the State of Alaska for the shorelands and waters of the Gulkana River.
- *1990 Resource Values and Instream Flow Recommendations* – Report quantifies flow levels in the Gulkana River and tributaries in order to apply for State of Alaska instream flow reservation, water rights.
- *1998 Public scoping* – BLM contractor initiated public scoping meetings to determine issues and concerns related to the Gulkana River. Public meetings held in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Glennallen, and Gulkana.
- *1999 Public Scoping* – BLM contractor conducted a second round of public scoping meetings in an attempt to identify desired conditions for the Gulkana River. Meetings were held in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Glennallen, and Gulkana.

- *1999 River User Survey* – Study developed by BLM with input from the State and Ahtna. Study objectives were to describe current users, examine impacts that they experience on their trip, assess tolerance for experiencing those impacts, and to assess users’ acceptability of potential management actions.
- *2001 Plan Alternatives Development* – BLM and State develop a range of alternatives to present to the public using information collected during public scoping meetings and the river user survey.
- *2002 Public Meetings* – A range of preliminary alternatives were presented to the public for review and comment. Public meetings were held in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Glennallen and Gulkana. Some of the alternatives presented at these meetings included management actions to address management of State resources which are located on the state shorelands and waters of the river and its tributaries.
- *2004-2005 Winter* - BLM releases Draft Environmental Assessment to public for review and written comment.
- *2006 Spring* – BLM’s Final Environmental Assessment is pending and will be released concurrent with the final DNR Special Use Land Designation for the river.
- *2006 June (current step)* – DNR holds three public meetings and a written comment period on the Draft Special Use Land Designation. Comment period ends June 30.
- *2006 July* - After reviewing comments and making changes as appropriate, DNR adopts Special Use Land Designation and BLM issues Final Environmental Assessment.
- *2006 – summer and the future* - DNR and BLM implement plans and continue to work together to address issues of mutual concern.

What happens next?

The draft Special Use Land Designation has been issued for public review and comment. The Special Use Land Designation will not be finalized until comments and public input are first considered. BLM has largely completed the process for revising its 1983 River Management Plan and is ready to adopt it but is waiting for the state to complete its planning process. Management actions in both plans address issues raised during initial public scoping, the user survey, and three rounds of public meetings. Issues include: litter, human waste, fire rings, campsite impacts and off-road vehicles. Management actions addressed by the revised BLM plan apply to BLM-administered uplands only. Management actions proposed by the State through a Special Use Land Designation apply only to state-owned waters and shorelands.

What is “Special Use Land”?

“Special Use Land” is a designation given to state land identified as having special resource values needing protection. Areas can be designated as Special Use Land because of the outstanding public recreation and wildlife habitat values they provide. If enacted on the Gulkana River, this designation would place restrictions on some uses or require a permit for certain activities that would otherwise be “Generally Allowed” under 11 AAC 96.

How can I comment?

Three public open houses are scheduled that will present information on the proposal and provide an opportunity for the public to comment. Meetings are from 7-9 PM with a presentation at 7:30:

Fairbanks..... Thurs., June 1 – DNR Conference Room, 3700 Airport Way
 Anchorage.... Tues., June 6 - Atwood Building, 550 W. 7th Ave., Suite
 Glennallen.... Weds., June 7 – Caribou Lodge

For more information or to obtain a copy of the draft proposal, contact Bruce Talbot at 269-8536 or go to www.dnr.state.ak.us/mlw/planning/index.htm **Written comments must be submitted by 5 PM Friday June 30, 2006 to the address below.**

Who to contact?

Bruce Talbot
 Natural Resource Manager
 Department of Natural Resources
 550 West 7th Ave., Suite 1050
 Anchorage, Alaska 99501
 907-269-8536
bruce_talbot@dnr.state.ak.us