



Chapter 3

Planning Issues

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CHAPTER 3

PLANNING ISSUES

3.0 Why Revise the Plan?

Since the plan was adopted in 1986, much has changed on the Kenai River. In addition to growing numbers of people using the river and the associated impacts, there is better information about the impacts on the river's fish habitat. Recreational use conflicts are increasing as more people use the river's recreational opportunities. It has also become evident that effective management of the Kenai River and its tributaries requires an integrated, coordinated ecosystem approach.

Listed below are the main issues that the Management Plan revision process has addressed. These issues were identified using input from the public, staff, and other agencies. Some issues raised are not listed because they were beyond the scope of this plan.

3.1 Fish and Wildlife Habitat

- ❖ We now know more about how different species utilize the river, and what habitat types are most important to them. New research has shown that near shore riparian habitat with overhanging vegetation, irregular banks, and slow water velocities is very important rearing habitat for juvenile salmon. Increased recreational use and land development have greatly increased the amount of bank trampling and vegetation loss, resulting in a significant loss of this rearing habitat.
- ❖ Except for the inventory of wetland areas in the National Wetlands Inventory prepared in the mid 1980s, relatively little is known about the role that wetlands play in maintaining the Kenai River ecosystem. There is not sufficient information to determine which wetlands are critical and which are not to the health of the river. However, government agencies are often required to make decisions on fills, roads, and other land uses which effect wetlands without adequate information.
- ❖ More is known now about the important role that tributaries, floodplains, and contiguous wetlands play in the rearing of juvenile fish. There is concern about the cumulative impacts from urbanization (land clearing, development of structures, roads, driveways, pollution introduction, etc.) on these habitat areas. There is concern that the US COE permitting process does not adequately address the cumulative impacts of wetlands development.
- ❖ Ongoing research is showing the importance of maintaining natural corridors for wildlife migration and feeding, and how recreational use and land development is affecting fragile populations near the river.

3.2. Recreation

- ❖ There has been increasing pressure from bank anglers, resulting in increased damage to riparian habitat from bank trampling, increased trespass incidence on private property, and a demand for more access areas. The quality of the recreational experience has also declined due to crowding and increased competition for space.
- ❖ Boat use has increased significantly, resulting in competition for fishing holes, conflicts between fishing methods, and between conflicts between guided and non-guided groups, and fishing and non-fishing groups. These problems are increased during the July king runs, and in August and September during coho runs, when boat overcrowding occurs at the principal fishing holes on the lower river. There is also concern that heavier boats are generating larger wakes that may impact riparian habitat. A recent study by the USGS indicated that boat use, under certain conditions of passenger loading, location of operation in river, and type of hull design, create varying levels of stream bank erosion. Jet-ski use on Kenai Lake is increasing and is becoming controversial.

- ❖ The number of commercial operators, primarily fishing guides, is at the highest level ever. There is increasing pressure to limit commercial use, and develop standards for commercial operators.
- ❖ Even with development of many new recreation facilities, peak demands for day use, access, bank fishing, and camping still cannot be accommodated. While constructing additional facilities would accommodate some of this use, there is concern that this would increase use of the river and increase many current problems.

3.3 Environment

- ❖ Development pressures caused by rapid growth have raised concerns about the impacts of development beyond the river corridor. The revised Management Plan should address a broader area, encompassing the entire Kenai River watershed. The Management Plan can directly address management of state lands within the watershed, and make recommendations for multi-agency coordination for management of other lands and resources within the watershed.
- ❖ The 1995 flood caused significant bed load movement and channel changes, and showed which bank protection measures were effective. The current re-evaluation of the 100-year floodplain in the Big Eddy area should be incorporated into the Flood Insurance Rate Maps.
- ❖ Recent water quality studies have documented water quality problems in the more developed sections of the river (i.e. presence of hydrocarbons, elevated coliform levels, loss of diversity of indicator species of invertebrates).
- ❖ Water quality is being impacted by wastewater discharge into the river, especially from storm drains, parking lots, and other industrial and commercial developments.
- ❖ Many on-site septic systems may be inadequate. Based upon research by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, most soils in the river corridor appear inadequate for septic tank absorption fields. Some of the septic tanks may be adversely affected by high ground water tables. There is also concern that discharge from the Soldotna sewage treatment plant impacts water quality.
- ❖ Smaller fuel storage tanks (fewer than 200 gallons) are not regulated and may pose a threat to water quality. Of particular concern are those tanks within the floodplain. KPB 21.18.050 regulates fuel storage tanks having a liquid volume of 200 gallons or more within the floodplain areas of the Kenai River and its tributaries.
- ❖ Along with increasing development, there are increasing demands on the groundwater supply. Adequate groundwater must be reserved to ensure that the river has enough water, especially during low flow periods.
- ❖ Impacts to the environment from recreational use are an increasing concern, especially littering, fuel spills from outboard motor use and refueling, inadequate RV dump stations, and inadequate sanitation facilities for anglers and highway travelers.
- ❖ There is increasing concern about the amount of hazardous materials being transported within the Kenai River corridor. A serious accident could possibly release toxic substances directly into the Kenai River.³⁻¹
- ❖ There are many mining claims in the Kenai River drainage, and if a significant portion of these are converted into active mining operations, this could pose a potential threat to the water quality of the Kenai River, especially if the current water quality standards are relaxed.

³⁻¹ The KPB notes that the registration of hazardous materials occurs under AS 18.70.130 and AS 29.35.500-560. KPB Code at Chapter 10.20 requires reporting and placarding for hazardous materials and explosives. The transportation of hazardous materials and explosives is regulated by the state under AS 28.05.011 and 13 AAC 05.010. In addition, the Borough has an agreement with the Alaska state troopers that requires the troopers to notify the KPB Office of Emergency Management providing relevant information regarding the transportation of hazardous materials.

3.4 Land Use

- ❖ Land ownership in the Kenai River Watershed has changed significantly since the original Management Plan was completed. Land has been transferred to the KPB, the Mental Health Trust, and Native corporations. The KPB Land Management Division has been aggressive in classifying municipal entitlement lands, and when appropriate, depositing parcels into the land bank for disposal. Also, Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Settlement funds are being used to purchase important parcels of land along the river. Additional state land is being considered for inclusion into KRSMA.
- ❖ Proper land development and use is critical to the health of the Kenai River and its tributaries. Extensive areas of vacant, privately owned land adjoin the lower and middle reaches of the Kenai River, and the potential for development—and therefore impact—is high. Almost 70 percent of the lower 50 miles of the Kenai River, where almost all of the king salmon are produced, is privately owned. Even with the expected EVOS purchases, over 60 percent of this portion of the Kenai River will remain in private ownership.
- ❖ The transportation network in the Kenai River watershed is expanding (Kenai Spur, Sterling-Soldotna rebuild, Juneau Creek alignment, Main Street Soldotna, Soldotna Bridge crossing, and Funny River Bridge). This new construction will probably result in significant changes to the way land is used and developed within the river's watershed. See the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities environment assessments of these projects for additional information.
- ❖ The increasing population of the KPB has increased the demand for river front lots and generally put higher development pressures on land in the river watershed. Especially of concern are the riparian habitat, wetland, and floodplain areas. Development within the 'central peninsula,' including much of the Kenai River watershed, has increased significantly during the last decade.
- ❖ Some section line easements along the river provide legal public access where increased use may be inappropriate (by encouraging trespass on adjacent lands, increasing habitat damage).
- ❖ There is an increasing awareness that management of the Kenai River and its adjacent lands must be coordinated among the various private and public landowners. Such coordination would not only serve to protect the river's resources, but would also increase efficiency in permitting.
- ❖ Other resource development activities within the Kenai River watershed, such as logging, oil and gas development, or mining, can have adverse impacts on the habitat, water quality, and recreation use if proper management practices are not followed.
- ❖ Large portions of the Kenai River watershed have been infested with the spruce bark beetle. Although timber harvest has been used as a means to manage the effects of beetle infestations, this practice has been viewed as controversial.

3.5 Enforcement, Education, and Funding

- ❖ There is growing concern that there is not enough enforcement presence along the Kenai River (i.e. enforcement of wetlands regulations, pollution, septic systems, fishing regulations, littering). It is probably true that most agencies (local, state, and federal) cannot provide the level of enforcement presence required for effective administration of current regulations and laws within the Plan Boundary.
- ❖ The public's awareness of the problems facing the Kenai River has been increasing. This trend should be encouraged through aggressive public education programs and additional research efforts.
- ❖ As federal, state, and local budgets grow tighter, government agencies are forced to cut back on educational, permitting, and enforcement programs. A stable funding source, such as user fees, should be developed for implementing such programs.

