

Fortymile Region Travel Management Plan

Alaska Department of Natural Resources

Scoping Report • February 1, 2023

Introduction and purpose of scoping report

Over the past two decades, several State of Alaska programs have worked to expand public access to Alaska's lands and natural resources and improve the efficiency of state and federal processes for managing lands. Several rivers and trails in the Fortymile River basin have been identified as state-managed public lands because they are navigable waters or state-managed trails through federal or Native Corporation uplands (e.g., RS 2477 or other public trust trails). The State of Alaska intends to review management on these public lands and waters to better inform the public and stakeholders about where they are and how they can be used. The plan will also clarify similarities and differences between state lands and adjacent lands managed by Native Corporations or federal agencies.

The Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is preparing a Travel Management Plan (TMP) to describe long term guidelines and management goals for these rivers and trails. The planning area is within the boundary of the State's 2007 Upper Yukon Area Plan and the TMP will be consistent with the that area plan (which provides management intent for the larger region), but will focus on more specific management issues in these river and trail corridors.

This plan will be developed by spring 2023. It will:

1. Identify locations of state lands along rivers and trails;
2. Assess facility needs (e.g., staging areas, launches);
3. Provide guidance on specific uses and issues on these state lands;
4. Develop information about river and trail conditions and uses;
5. Consider ways to address any problems; and
6. Identify opportunities to improve access, conservation, or the quality of recreation experiences.

The plan is expected to sort through concerns and expectations the public has for the river and trail corridors. Developing plans is challenging because people may have differing ideas about how land and waters can best be used, and not all uses are compatible in the same place and time. The planning process is designed to encourage stakeholders and the public to provide information and express their preferences for management on these state lands. First during scoping, and second, during the review period for the draft plan.

Public involvement is essential to the process, and the first step included scoping meetings in Fall 2022 to assess users' and stakeholders' opinions about the area's conditions, use, and issues, as well as preferences for different management prescriptions. Scoping is essentially a review of which issues the plan will address; this report summarizes output from those meetings.

Scoping process

Notice of intent and public scoping

The Notice of Intent to conduct scoping for the plan was published on September 2, 2022 and sent to emails of known stakeholders and others with a possible interest in the plan. This included local miners, tourist operations, trail and river user groups, Native Corporations, and local, state, and federal agencies. Public meeting invitations were also publicized on the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources website and sent to local communities for posting in public places (e.g., libraries, banks, and supermarkets).

Public outreach

Public meetings in 2022

Public meetings were held in Chicken (September 13), Fairbanks (September 14), and Anchorage (October 11); with a virtual public meeting on October 19. The Upper Tanana Fortymile Fish and Game Advisory Committee requested an additional presentation on the planning effort, which occurred on November 9.

At the meetings, Don Perrin introduced the planning process and purpose of the meeting and staff from Confluence Research and Consulting (contractors for the State) presented a review of possible issues as prompts for comments. Notes from these public meetings are provided in Appendix A.

Website and comment prompts

DNR also publicized the planning effort on its webpage and encouraged public comment on the same array of issues through an online survey (provided in Appendix B, organized by topic).

Additional information

Confluence staff also collected and summarized plan-relevant information about fishing, hunting, and wildlife issues from Alaska Department of Fish and Game staff. The summary is available in Appendix C.

Confluence staff developed a similar summary about ATV/ORV vehicles and potential impacts in the area. This summary is provided in Appendix D.

Issue summary

Based on public comment, agency input, and related research into several topics, DNR has identified the following primary issues to consider in the planning process; no decisions have been made about how to address them at the present time. The plan will explore management options and alternatives, then present those ideas in the draft plan for further public comment.

Appropriate vehicles on trails

Some trails in the Fortymile Basin have seen increased impacts from vehicles; some are concerned that the number, use, weight, or width of vehicles is making conditions unacceptable, particularly in steep and wet areas. Public comment and research suggest there are common differences in weights and widths of vehicles between 1) four wheelers (sit-on-top ATVs); 2) side-by-side ATVs (aka UTVs); 3) full size 4x4 vehicles; 4) larger “moose buggies” and 5) tracked vehicles; or 6) even-larger heavy equipment such as bulldozers and excavators. The draft plan may review weights and widths of different classes of vehicles to compare with Generally Allowed Use (GAU) regulations on state lands, and whether additional clarification or regulation is needed to reduce impacts.

Trail conditions

People indicated there are areas with deteriorating trail conditions. The maps provided in the draft plan will show known trails. The TMP may consider a process for nominating trail locations or segments with problems such as multiple trails, wetland bogs, common winching locations, etc., and suggest options for trail improvements or redesign.

Jurisdictional permitting and access confusion

Public comment suggests some users have questions about which trails and river segments are on state lands versus those that are managed by the state versus federal or Native lands. TMP maps will work to clarify the status of any state land assertions and indicate how those may be adjudicated over time (e.g., some trails are involved in a Chicken Trails adjudication, while others are not). To avoid jurisdictional confusion, the TMP may consider a process for prioritizing specific trail or river segments for GIS or onsite identification as state lands or public use 17b easements (i.e., choose specific segments for additional on-the-ground location assessments for more detailed maps or GIS/GPS mapping applications). It may also identify areas for additional public education about jurisdictional issues.

Mining permitting, regulations, compliance/enforcement

Although stakeholders have questions and concerns about mining permitting, regulations, compliance, and enforcement, this plan is not intended to focus on such issues or consider changes. However, the plan may clarify different types of mining permits (e.g., pre-ANILCA federal claims vs. more recent state claims on submerged lands) and describe how the frequency and size of those claims affect transportation on trails or rivers.

Long-term camping and storage

Comments noted challenges with long-term camping and storage associated with mining permits on state submerged land along navigable river segments, particularly those classified Wild under the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) and managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The plan will consider such camping needs in cooperation with the BLM long-term camping program, which is in place on Scenic segment. Key issues will include fuel storage safety, screening from other river users, and minimizing the proliferation of long-term camps, all while providing reasonable access and long-term camping options for miners with valid state permits.

Appropriate craft on rivers

Current boaters use a wide range of craft on the navigable portions of the Fortymile River, including hovercraft, airboats, jetboats, outboards, rafts, canoes, kayaks, and pack rafts. The draft plan will describe existing boating uses.

Signs of use impacts and stewardship education

Public comments noted concerns with signs of use impacts (litter, human waste, or other impacts from hunting or mining camps) and the need for stewardship education to reduce their occurrence. The plan may consider mechanisms for identifying areas of concern or opportunities for Leave No Trace or etiquette education.

Commercial recreation uses including commercial recreation placer mining

Comments identified the presence of commercial hunting-based boating trips and mining-based commercial recreation and sightseeing; others noted the possibility of future seasonal lodges or camps. The plan may review such uses on state lands and consider whether existing permit stipulations for permitted commercial activities are sufficient.

Access facilities

Comments suggested opportunities for access improvements where the Taylor Highway intersects river or trail corridors. This may provide opportunities for access facilities (e.g., rest rooms, launch ramps, parking, OHV staging ramps, maps, stewardship education displays, etc.). DNR recognizes that such areas and facilities may be in the DOT right of way or on BLM uplands, thus requiring cooperative management initiatives that can be explored in the plan.

Historical / cultural resources

Comments noted many historical and cultural resources in the planning area, along with interest in protecting Native, exploration, and mining history. The draft plan may consider stewardship education opportunities toward this goal; it will not identify locations of important Native or historical cultural sites

(to avoid attracting use). The TMP may also consider ways to work with Doyon to improve information about public trails adjacent to or through Native lands to reduce trespass problems.

Sensitive wildlife or ecological resources

Comments noted a few sensitive species concerns in the basin, and the plan may consider ways of reducing unacceptable impacts. ADFG biologists have provided information on species, habitats, and management options (see Appendix C).

Mapping of trails

The TMP will provide maps with identified state trails in the basin, as well as navigable rivers.

Road design and other transportation issues

The State's Upper Yukon Area Plan covers how state transportation and road routes will handle culverts, bridges, wetlands construction, rehabbing stream beds, road pull-outs, scenic resources, minimizing stream crossings, and protecting streams. The Plan may expand discussion for areas where additional improvements/redesign efforts are expected (e.g., the high use Chicken Ridge trail or system of trails).

Appendices (separate document)

Appendix A: Notes from public meetings

Appendix B: Responses to web-based scoping issue prompts

Appendix C: Summary of information from ADF&G about wildlife and hunting issues

Appendix D: Summary of information about ATV/ORV vehicles and impacts