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## **Little Susitna River Management Unit**

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# 1. Little Susitna River Management Unit

## BACKGROUND

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### MILES OF RIVER

This unit includes approximately 67 river miles of the Little Susitna River and 5.5 miles of Nancy Lake Creek. The management unit extends from the northern Susitna Flats Game Refuge boundary (RM 33.2) to the south boundary of the Hatcher Pass Management Area (RM 100).

### LAND OWNERSHIP

|                           |                     |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| State                     | 13,518 acres        |
| University of Alaska      | 80 acres            |
| Mental Health Trust       | 2,680 acres         |
| Matanuska-Susitna Borough | 1,680 acres         |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>18,218 acres</b> |

### RIVER CHARACTERISTICS

From the headwaters to the mouth, the Little Susitna River changes from a clear, rushing mountain stream to a slowly meandering muddy river draining marshy lowlands. Channel widths range from 75 to 200 feet. The ice-free season is generally from May through October. The average streamflow at the Fishhook Road crossing (RM 99.5) is 211 cubic feet per second (cfs.), with winter lows under 50 cfs., and summer high flows near 1,000 cfs. The estimated year-round flows at the Parks Highway and the Burma Road are 300 and 400 cfs, respectively. The 100-year floodplain ranges in width from 1,200 feet to 4,000 feet, and is of considerable width in the Houston area.

The terrain within the Little Susitna Recreation River ranges from steep hillsides on the upper river to flat and rolling lowlands on the lower river. Contiguous wetlands are the prevalent land feature in middle sections, particularly in the Nancy Lake Creek area.

Scenic values are highest on the upper river where the water is clear and there are views of the Talkeetna Mountains. The lower river is silty and slow-moving and visibility is reduced by rolling terrain and tall trees. In the middle reaches, near the Parks Highway, the visual quality is diminished by powerlines, bridges, and other structures.

### FISHERIES

#### *Species Present*

|                |               |
|----------------|---------------|
| Chum salmon    | Burbot        |
| Coho salmon    | Dolly Varden  |
| King salmon    | Rainbow trout |
| Pink salmon    | Whitefish     |
| Sockeye salmon |               |

King, coho, and chum salmon spawn throughout the management unit. Pink salmon are common below the Parks Highway. Sockeye salmon spawn in many lakes draining into the river, including Nancy Lake. They are not found in large numbers above Nancy Lake Creek. Burbot and whitefish are found in the lower river. Resident Dolly Varden are present in the upper reaches of the management unit. Small numbers of rainbow trout can be found throughout the ice-free season.

#### *Sport Fishing*

The Little Susitna River receives the highest angling effort of the six rivers because it is easily accessible and is closest to population centers in Southcentral Alaska. The peak recreation and fishing activities on the Little Susitna River correspond with the king and coho salmon runs. These are approximately May 21 to July 4, and July 4 to September 1. Sockeye salmon are also caught in large numbers, approximately July 15 to August 30. Rainbow trout are caught throughout the ice-free season.

The most popular fishing area on the river is adjacent to the Little Susitna Access Road. Although most of this use occurs on the Susitna Flats State Game Refuge, some extends into the lower part of Subunit 1a in the Recreation River. Fishing is also popular at the mouth of Nancy Lake Creek and adjacent to the Parks Highway Bridge. Above the Parks Highway, the river is closed to salmon fishing, so use by anglers is low. Visitor use is estimated to be growing about 9 percent per year on the Little Susitna River.

### *Special Regulations*

The Little Susitna River is closed to salmon fishing above the Parks Highway. Special regulations, which vary annually depending on salmon returns; also govern the fishery for coho salmon.

## **WILDLIFE**

### *Moose*

Because of their importance as game and for wildlife viewing, moose are the most economically important wildlife species in the planning area. They are particularly important in this management unit because the Little Susitna River is relatively accessible. The unit provides moose with food, forest cover, and water. Associated wetlands are critical for moose calving in the spring. Riparian habitat is critical to winter survival of moose and also provide travel corridors. Upland coniferous forests provide thermal cover and shallower snow depths.

### *Bear*

Because brown bear are less tolerant of human modifications to the environment, black bear are more common in this drainage than brown bear. Black bear begin to frequent the lowlands and river flats in early May. High spring densities can be found near the mouth of the river. During June and July, bear are attracted to the river by salmon. The river also provides travel corridors which are an important component of brown bear habitat.

### *Bald Eagles*

No known nesting sites are documented along the river. However eagles are known to feed on spawning salmon and perch in trees within the unit.

### *Trumpeter Swans*

Swans are not known to nest within the corridor. Lakes with suitable nesting habitat, however, occur adjacent to the unit.

### *Hunting*

The most heavily hunted areas are road-accessible areas, followed by off-road vehicle, boat, and aircraft-accessible areas. The Parks Highway and the Little Susitna River Access are the primary access points to the Little Susitna River. Moose and black bear are the primary species harvested. A significant amount of the black bear harvest Game Management Subunits 14A occurs along the Little Susitna River. Most of this harvest occurs in May, June, and September with June being the peak harvest period.

### *Trapping*

Recreational trapping for muskrat, mink and beaver occurs in the corridor during spring and winter open seasons.

## **CAMPING**

Recreational use of this unit is very high, because of good, accessible fishing. A 1989 survey estimated that 800 people per day use the Little Susitna River during the peak season in mid-June. Day use is more common than overnight use. There are two commercial campgrounds and one public campground in Houston. There are numerous undeveloped campsites along the river. Most are located at trail and creek junctions.

## **ACCESS**

The Little Susitna River is accessible by several roads. Boats are widely used on the Little Susitna River. Power boats and jet boats are common below the Parks Highway. Use of rafts and canoes is common below Schrock Road. Power boats gain access from the Little Susitna River Access, the Parks Highway access, or across Cook Inlet from Anchorage. Floaters often begin at the Parks Highway and float to the Nancy Lakes Recreation Area portage or to the Little Susitna River Access Road. Kayaks are common in the spring on the upper river above the Edgerton-Parks Road. Airboat use is infrequent.

## Management Guidelines for the Unit

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### BOATING RESTRICTIONS

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1. *Voluntary no-wake area* From the oxbow just below the rail road bridge to the Parks Highway Bridge (RM 67.5 - 0-69.6).  
Season: May 15 - August 20.  
Justification: The boat launch in this area is heavily used. The area is also heavily used by bank anglers. The voluntary no-wake area will reduce conflicts between powerboaters and bank anglers and reduce safety risks between powerboaters. The river segment is narrow and includes several blind bends. The upper and lower limits of the zone were designed to include the area where heavy powerboat and bank angling use overlap. Signs identifying the voluntary no-wake area shall be established on a one-year trial basis and their effectiveness shall be evaluated at the end of the trial period. If establishing no-wake signs is shown to be effective in protecting public safety, they may be posted during succeeding seasons.
2. *Non-motorized area* From the Plan Boundary above the Little Susitna Access Road (RM 33.1) to the rock one river-mile below Nancy Lake Creek (RM 60.4).  
Weekends: The first and third weekends of each month. (12:01 a.m. Saturday to midnight Sunday).  
Season: May 15 to August 20.  
*Power-boats-only area* River segment is the same as above non-motorized area.  
Weekends: The second and fourth weekends of each month (12:01 a.m. on Saturday to midnight Sunday).  
Justification: This area is popular with both powerboaters and floaters, particularly during the salmon runs. At these times, there are conflicts between the two groups. The "alternating weekends" will provide high quality float and powerboat opportunities regularly through the summer. The fifth weekend of each month and weekdays from May 15-August 20 have no restrictions.  
The restrictions end in mid-August when there are fewer boaters and fewer conflicts on the river.  
The upper limit of the non-motorized area is at a rock below Nancy Lake Creek which is a popular fishing hole. The non-motorized area does not constrain the area above the fishing hole that is traditionally used by powerboats from Houston and Miller's Reach.
3. *Voluntary no-wake area* Adjacent to proposed South Big Lake Road junction no-wake area (approximately one-half river mile above and below this road junction).  
Season: May 15 - August 20.  
Justification: The Matanuska-Susitna Borough is planning to extend the South Big Lake Road. The first phase of the project may end at the river or a short distance from the river. If the South Big Lake extension is developed, bank anglers are expected to use the area. A voluntary no-wake area will be designated when the road is completed to help reduce conflicts between powerboats and bank anglers and to avoid safety problems.