

Chapter 6: The Human Environment



HISTORIC USE AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS

There are no known historic or prehistoric sites within the boundaries of the Recreation Area; however, there are remains of early travel and exploration along the Chena River.

Mammalian fossils have been found in the banks of the Chena River.

During the years 1902 through 1909 the area was surveyed and geologic maps from the survey indicated the presence of Chena Hot Springs and the Granite Tors. The first development at Chena Hot Springs occurred in 1915 with construction of a hotel, cabins and a log bathhouse containing wooden hot tubs. In those days, taking the 124-mile round trip by sleigh to enjoy the hot springs was not uncommon. Three roadhouses along the winter sled trail helped make the trip more pleasant: one at the junction of the Little Chena River, one at the junction of Colorado Creek and a third near the present highway Milepost 48 (Gregg's Roadhouse).

In the early 1920's there was limited gold mining on the upper reaches of the East Fork of the Chena River, outside the Recreation Area. By 1940, all mining operations of any significance had ceased. In 1980, placer mining activity was reestablished in this area and continues to this day.

Logging has occurred throughout the past 50 years and signs of this activity are still evident. Many of the structures in Fairbanks were built with Chena River timber.

Recreation use of the area grew slowly over the years since 1915. Primarily fishermen and hunters used the area, with access from the Chena Hot Springs Road.

On June 18, 1967 legislation established the Chena River State Recreation Area as a corridor along the river. In 1975, the Alaska Legislature expanded the Recreation Area to its present size.

POPULATION

Fairbanks is the second largest city in the state, with an estimated population of 29,670 in 2002. The Fairbanks North Star Borough, which includes the city of Fairbanks, encompasses 7,361 square miles and has an estimated population in 2002 of 84,791. The population of the borough is 13 percent of Alaska's overall population. During the construction of the Trans-Alaska Oil Pipeline in the 1970's the population in the region increased dramatically. The Fairbanks population increased to almost 27,000; the borough increased to 65,000. Since 1984, the population of Fairbanks has increased approximately 8% while the Fairbanks North Star Borough population has increased by approximately 23%.

Statistics from the Fairbanks North Star Borough indicate that the population of Fairbanks tends to be, on the average, slightly younger than national norms with the median age being 29.5. Approximately 20 percent of the population in 2002 was military personnel. The mean household income in 2002 was \$49,076.

LAND OWNERSHIP

Within the Recreation Area, there are eight blocks of land in private ownership; six former homesteads and two Open to Entry sites totaling approximately 300 acres. Also within the Recreation Area is one Public and Charitable Lease, for 80 acres, first issued to the University of Alaska Fairbanks Geophysical Institute in 1966. Land status within and around the Recreation Area is shown in Map 6-1.

The Chena Hot Springs Road right-of-way is managed and maintained by the State Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT/PF). Many improvements to the road's alignment, surface and other safety features have been made over the years. Recreation access, highway pull-offs, viewing areas and other recreation uses occur within the right-of-way and are managed by the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation. Measures to protect the road from flooding will continue. Sources of gravel and riprap from within the Recreation Area are utilized, under a park use permit, to maintain and protect the road within the Recreation Area.

When the State Legislature established the 1975 boundary of the Chena River State Recreation Area, 13,760 acres of the Fort Wainwright Yukon Training Area were included. These lands have been withdrawn for Army use since 1956. In 2001, the withdrawal was extended for another twenty-five years for military training. The United States Army will continue to use the lands adjacent to the Recreation Area (known as Beaver Creek-South Fork of the Chena area) in the Yukon Training Area. The Military Lands Withdrawal Act (Public Law 99-606) requires the Army to renew this withdrawal by November 2026 or the land reverts back to the Bureau of Land Management.

MAP 6-1: LAND STATUS

ECONOMIC GROWTH

The Fairbanks North Star Borough economy is based on three major components: government and civil service, military and private industry. Results from the 2000 U.S. Census indicate that employment is approximately 26% government and civil service, 15% military and the remaining 59% is through private industry.

The Alaska Department of Community and Economic Development reports the Fairbanks North Star Borough's economy as healthy and growing. Since 1995, the personal income of workers in the economic base has increase 29%, primarily due to increases in federal government, mining, tourism and manufacturing.

TOURISM

Tourism is a significant part of the borough's economy and its economic importance is growing. The Fairbanks International Airport receives about 750,000 passengers annually from scheduled flights for vacation and pleasure, while business travelers make up a small proportion of overall visitation. Just over half of the summer tourists are independent travelers not associated with packaged tours.

TRANSPORTATION

The Chena Hot Springs Road, which runs through the center of the Recreation Area and beyond it to Chena Hot Springs Resort, is the only paved road that accesses the Recreation Area. Two Revised Statute 2477 rights-of-way exist within the Recreation Area. One is the Chena Hot Springs Winter Trail (RST 278) and the other is a winter trail that runs east on the East Fork of the Chena River (RST 46). Both of these RS2477s are primarily used in the winter months.

There is no public transportation to the Recreation Area. However, guests at the Chena Hot Springs Resort are provided van service from Fairbanks.

VISITATION

The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation has been monitoring visitor counts since 1997 using mechanical roadway counters (see Figure 6-1). The total visitation to the Chena River State Recreation Area in fiscal year 1997 was 136,400 and in fiscal year 2004 was 163,900. Figure 6-2 shows the seasonality of visitation, indicating that the summer 5 months comprise an average of 75 percent of the annual visits to the Chena River SRA. Visitation can vary widely from year to year, depending on the price of vehicle fuel, the weather, world events and other volatile, unpredictable factors. For example in 2004, extensive wildfires in the area kept visitation lower than expected, due to smoky skies and concerns with threat of fire. That surprise event followed right after the summer of 2003 that reached the lowest visitor count in years, due to flooding from heavy rains in late July through September.

Under contract with the U.S. Air Force, the National Park Service Pacific Northwest Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Unit, conducted an extensive mail-back survey of 706 visitors to the Chena River SRA in 2001. The survey indicated that about 40 percent of respondents lived within a 100 mile radius of the park unit and about 40 percent of respondents were non-Alaskan U.S. residents. Non-local Alaskans comprised 14 percent of respondents and foreign residents 5 percent. Local Alaskans made on average 14.3 trips to the Chena River SRA in the previous three years compared to less than two trips for respondents who lived elsewhere. These findings indicate that some local residents make heavy use of the area. About two-thirds of respondents to a contact interview were male and the average age of respondents was 46. Thirty percent of respondents' parties had people under the age of 18.

Figure 6-1: Visit Counts by Fiscal Year 1996 - 2006

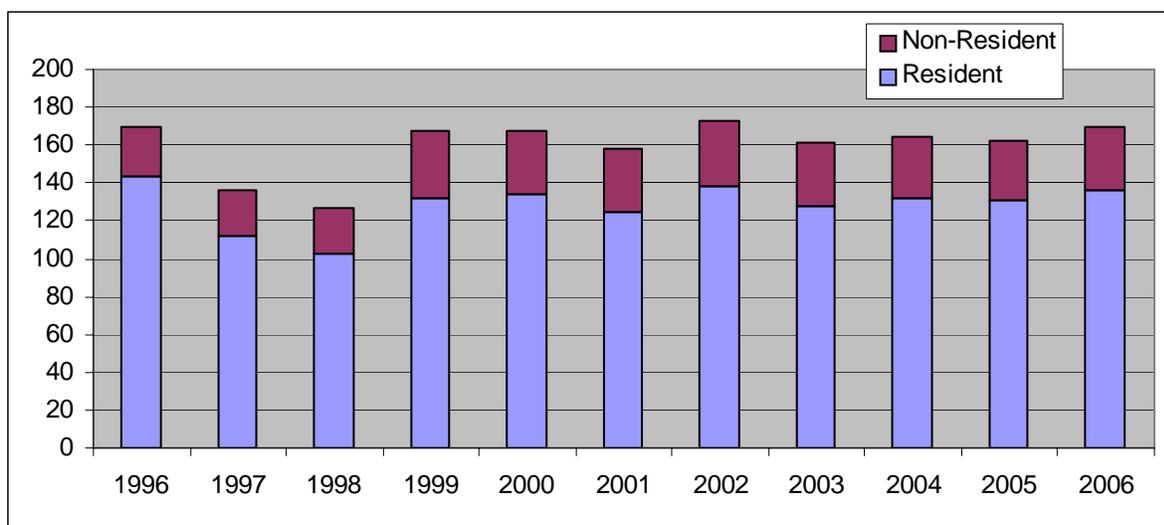
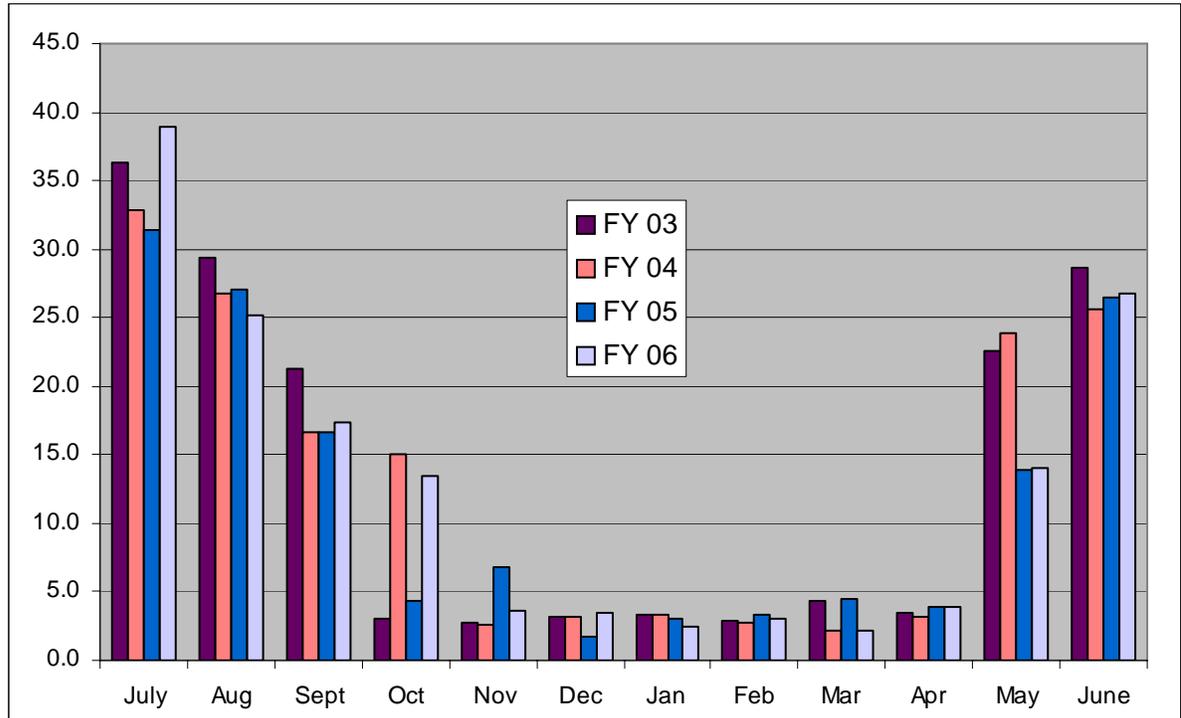


Figure 6-2: Visit Counts by Month, Fiscal Year 2003 - 2006

The most recent survey of Chena River SRA visitors was conducted by University of Alaska students in Outdoor Recreation Management in Spring of 2006. Under the direction of Dr. Peter Fix, they conducted a telephone survey of a representative sample of Fairbanks North Star Borough residents to determine why people visited the Recreation Area, which activities they participated in and factors that contributed to or detracted from their experience.

SERVICES AND UTILITIES

There are no public utilities, electricity, phone, water or sewer, available within the Recreation Area.

Cellular service is currently unreliable beyond Milepost 30 CHSR, except from highlands.

Private services are located at Angel Creek Lodge (Milepost 49.1).

Public services available within the Recreation Area include Emergency Medical Services, State Troopers and refuse pick-up.