

The Kenai-Russian River Collaborative Public Process *Working Together to Reduce Human-Bear Conflicts*

Summary of Public Forums: October 25-27, 2011 Soldotna, Cooper Landing, Anchorage

The US Forest Service (USFS) and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), in collaboration with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and other members of the Russian River Interagency Coordination Group,¹ has invited the public to assist management agencies in developing an effective five-year action plan to reduce human-bear conflicts in the Kenai-Russian River area. A second series of evening public forums was held in Soldotna, Cooper Landing and Anchorage on October 25-27, 2011.² A total of 32 members of the public (not including agency staff) attended the forums.

Agencies presented information from a Discussion Guide, which presented information and asked the public questions regarding fish waste management, temporal (night-time) access closures, spatial access closures, bear management (behaviors and population), public education, regulations & enforcement, and infrastructure and trails & visibility. The Discussion Guide and a copy of the PowerPoint presentation can be found at the project web site, at: <https://projects.ecr.gov/kenai-russianriver/>

Public comments were collected during large group discussion, in open house format, and on written comment forms provided to attendees (attached). This document summarizes public input received at the three public forums.

October 25 – Soldotna Public Forum

Fish Waste Management

General

- Effectiveness of waste management depends in part on the fish limits, which affects the quantity of waste that must be addressed and also affects what people will do (may be willing to carry out three fish, but not six or 25).
- People only rarely carry out whole fish – beats up fish to hike out with them. Most fillet on the bank. Carrying out also spreads smell along trail.
- Look at lower cost options that do not require staffing – perhaps that actually generate income from the waste
- Hire a contractor to take on finding a solution to fish waste and implementing the project (open house comment)

¹ Additional members of the RRICG include: Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, Kenaitze Indian Tribe, and Cook Inlet Region, Inc.

² The first series of forums was held in Cooper Landing, Soldotna, Wasilla and Anchorage on April 17-21. Summary of the April forums can be found at: <https://projects.ecr.gov/kenai-russianriver/>

Marine Derived Nutrients

- Benefit to keeping MDN/fish waste going back into the river in the first run, to provide food for other fish? Is there a difference in MDN benefits in the first run vs. second run?
- Not in favor of off-site disposal; keep MDN in system.
- Grinding would change how long waste stays in the system and may affect MDN availability (concern MDN would flush out of system faster than larger pieces of waste)
- Traditionally, the Kenaitze Indian Tribe would return fish waste back to the river. Prefer onsite disposal that keeps fish waste and MDN going into the river.

On-Site Grinding & Disposal

- Consider mechanical (non-electric) grinder
- There is electricity at ferry; higher water flow at Sportsmans

Vendor Processing & Disposal

- Pulses of fish are caught; may not be economical business since not continual supply
- Is there potential to for an on-site vendor to offer to fillet and grind fish waste for other anglers, as a private business? (Speaker had been interested in offering this service in the past, but was dissuaded at that time.)
- If they give their fish to a processor, anglers want to know that the fish they receive back is the fish they caught (not equivalent amount from someone else's harvest).

Using Fish Waste for Another Product

- Fish head good food source – but needs to be cleaned the right way to use it. Could public be taught how to clean heads and then donate heads to elders, Head Start, etc. ?
- Dog mushers may be interested in fish heads (their previous source now uses waste for fish oil production, so they have lost this source). Single dog musher might use 5,000 pounds.
- Fish waste + sawdust = compost or fertilizer
- Look into Fish and Chips compost product option; virtually odorless
- Upper Russian – offer fish cleaning stations with waste containers. Collect the heads/waste to use in another product.

Temporal (Night-time) Closures

- Not concerned about night closure – don't fish at night
- Night-time fishing is a way to avoid crowds. Closure would increase angler numbers in the daytime – increase crowding.
- In favor of night closure – traditionally, the Kenaitze did not fish at night; gave bears time on river without people
- Instead of nighttime, think in terms of closing “fishing in the dark”

- Consider closing fishing in the dark and monitor bear behavior over time to see effects. Perhaps close area from confluence to Upper Russian, especially second run. (Stated that Board of Fisheries would have to consider and act on a proposal to close the fishery).
- Favor closure in second run.
- Former local Advisory Committee saw several proposals for night-time closure – Board of Fisheries did not approve as it would reduce fishing opportunity
- Personally, favor night closure
- Anchorage fishers drive down and fish at night

Spatial Closures

- ARM supports the spatial closure downstream of ferry (established in-season in 2010 and 2011)
- ARM should have authority to close areas when needed for safety
- Would be concerned with a spatial closure on the upper Russian. This is important rainbow fishing.
- Concern that spatial closures imply that “bears are taking precedence” over human use – edging out human users. Do not support closing an area just because a bear is using it too.

Bear Management

- Concern if bear population and numbers at KRRC increase, human access will be further restricted
- If bears don't get the fish waste as food, what would the change be in their behavior and distribution? They are not live fishing.
- Good to hear that there is some recent data regarding population size on Kenai Peninsula.
- Not in favor of increased hunting at KRRC – actually would prefer a larger no-hunting corridor (not to hear gunshots)
- Late 1970s, black bear problems at Kenai-Russian River. Over time, it has changed to brown bear issues. Seeing this same change elsewhere on Kenai Peninsula (e.g., Swanson River)
- Surprised only 39 bears in the DNA study – would have thought many more would be drawn to the KRRC salmon
- Intent of no-hunting corridor along the Russian River in June and July (Board of Fishery adopted regulation) was to move hunters away from the river, to separate hunters from anglers.
- Consider extending this closure through August, for public safety.
- Suggest do aerial reconnaissance in the Upper Russian – see large number of brown bears /adult males. Increase hunting in Upper Russian to remove boars, create more space for sows and cubs up there (suggest they are avoiding predation by coming down to KRRC)
- Need to consider the effect of begin hunted on bears and their relationship with people. May make them more defensive and more likely to be in a conflict.

Education

- Liked the progressive “Burma Shave” signs
- “Plain clothes” educators trained to share messages and watch impact. Observe peer-to-peer education.
- Laminated Visitor Guide available at centralized areas, kiosks/sign boards
- On-site interpreters
- Central one-stop-shop interagency website with official information
- Scheduled Ranger Walk provided by USFWS and USFS interpreters – guided visit to area for non-anglers
- Apps (smart phones) available for visitors
- “Quick response” (QR) matrix barcodes on trail with links to videos of appropriate bear behavior, etc.

Trails / Visibility

- Fix up trail on the south side of Kenai River (across from ferry) so it encourages people to use the trail; higher public use of trail would discourage unlawful camping, fires and incursions (open house comment)

Bear Viewing

- Non-fishing visitors – viewing and photos – seems to be growing activity. If bear activity changes (in response to changes in fish waste management), this will change viewing opportunities. Where will people go to view bears?
- Tourist (international visitors, etc) and resident draw to view bears, due to ease of road access and predictable presence of bears
- Family members (of anglers) interested in viewing—includes children.
- Safety concerns
- Uncontrolled situation
- People respond inappropriately to bears
- For safety – need a controlled experience with guide (e.g. Wolverine, Katmai)
- Perhaps set up a viewing platform – controlled access
- Need to be proactive, as this will likely grow
- Viewing may provide economic boost for locality
- Concern KRRC is not an appropriate place to encourage bear viewing
- Concern that you can not sufficiently educate people coming to view bears
- Opposed to eliminating attractants, since having bears in the area provides bear viewing opportunities (open house comment)

October 26 – Cooper Landing Public ForumFish Waste Management

General

- It is a human-created problem and it is our responsibility to solve it
- Experiment with solutions
- In June-July, fish waste is the primary food source for bears, not spawned carcasses (until mid-August)
- Bears are not live fishing

- Subsistence fishers fillet onsite and put carcasses in Russian River. Constricted; fish waste/carcasses hang up. However, hauling fish from this location is a chore.

Marine Derived Nutrients

- Need to consider the relative importance of MDN to the Russian River system, which is much smaller system than the Kenai

On-Site Grinding and Fish Waste Disposal

- Like idea of electric grinder, but it would need to be staffed
- Perhaps allow people to drop off waste for later grinding
- Especially favor hydro-powered/battery (no electricity required)
- Locate grinder(s) at locations with high angler use – Grayling? Pink Salmon?
- Need to think about where there is electricity
- Schooner Bend is an administrative site (offices) – this would not be a good location for visitor access (e.g. to access a grinder)
- Staff at grinder could have multiple purposes – education / enforcement; have them multi-task
- Consider having waste disposal in certain areas, where bears could go for food
- Chopping up or grinding the carcass will change what is available to bears in terms of preferred body parts (e.g. they like fatty head first)

Manual Removal of Accumulated Fish Waste

- Manual removal seems effective
- Puts staff in one-on-one contact with anglers – can educate them
- Keep this as an option as part of a fish waste management plan
- At Guardrail, seagulls drag fish waste (large pieces) to bank – later bears come in to feed

Off-Site Disposal of Fish Waste

- Oppose taking first run fish waste off of the river – especially eggs which are an important food source for rainbow trout
- Coordinate with City of Kenai or Kenai Peninsula Borough – they have fish waste issues at mouth of Kenai that need to be addressed and can partner with them on disposal solutions
- Look at Martin's campground (Diamond M Ranch) near mouth of Kenai River – they provide place for people to clean and vacuum-pack fish. Ask them where they dispose of waste. (Sport Fish staff believes they compost some, landfill some).

Temporal (Night-time) Closure

- Any temporal or spatial closure will increase congestion in other areas and at other times
- Potential to increase conflict among public and between public and guides
- Congestion and conflicts particularly an issue during first sockeye run, where there are few prime locations to fish
- First run, it is not really getting dark (dusky for two hours or so)

- If there is a night-time closure, MUST reopen by 4 am
- At opening time, there will be congestion at the ramp as people try to get into river
- Second run there is a lot more place to catch fish so less congestion and competition; it is also darker during the second run and night closure may make more sense
- Don't close at night – that is when I have time to fish; avoid crowds
- Locals fish Russian River at night to avoid crowds
- Every hole has people on it at night on the Russian River – perhaps 50 people per night
- Russian River is dangerous at that time of day, visibility down; OK for people with experience – but people who are not experienced can get into trouble
- Concern about human-human conflicts with people who have been fishing/partying at night. Concern about weapons. In favor of some sort of closure to discourage full night use/partying/behaviors that exacerbate conflicts – even if it is just a short time in middle of night
- Would have to increase enforcement – there will be a staffing cost
- Look at data about statewide human-bear conflicts – when during 24-hour cycle do most maulings occur? This would help substantiate need for nighttime closure.
- Assumes it would change hours that bears use the river; Tag/follow (GPS) bears to see any changes in behavior / visitation.
- If the temporal closure was over early (about 4am) including area below Sportsman's Landing down to Jim's Landing, guide would not have a problem with that (open house comment)

Spatial Closures

- Any temporal or spatial closure will increase congestion in other areas and at other times
- Make sure any spatial closures are clearly defined and understood by the public – make it a geographic area they can recognize on the ground

Bear Management

- Concern there will be an increase in aggressive bear behaviors if they are not getting food (e.g. at Guardrail; bears interested in food only, no conflicts).
- Aerial view of Upper Russian – see lots of big brown bears in that area; abundance of boars could be causing sows and cubs to more heavily utilize Kenai-Russian River area.

Education

- Still seeing human behaviors that don't make sense; harassing bears, trying to move them off of the spot they are using
- Staff need to be trained to give consistent messages; especially important for ARM staff and campground hosts; provide them consistent key talking points
- Van interpreters in the campground to talk with campers
- Instruct visitors on how to deal with human waste

Regulations & Enforcement

- Make sure regulations are coordinated and consistent on USFS and USFWS land to avoid public confusion
- Put more enforcement staff; multi-purpose staff (e.g., give person operating the grinder enforcement authority)
- Above 600 yd marker – anglers on bank – many are snagging

Infrastructure / Campground / Facilities

- Traffic pattern in campground is a problem – access problems for emergency responders
- People are cleaning fish in campground (they “take out whole” then bring it there to clean and dispose; consider need for processing and waste disposal center in campground)

Trails & Visibility

- Public use is increasing upstream of the angler trail. Trail reconditioning may be warranted, but also recognize that if the trail is improved, it will attract more use.
- Guide thinks that improving the trail on the opposite side of the Kenai River from the ferry would encourage more use, including camping, fires (open house comment)

October 27 – Anchorage Public ForumFish Waste Management

General

- People won't walk far to deal with their fish; must be convenient or won't work
- Parking congestion issues will be associated with centralized processing or waste disposal; people won't walk to do this
- Different options would be needed above access #32 / 600 yard marker / closer to falls – too far to bring fish
- Subsistence fishers take more fish per person – suggest use stop-chop-throw for subsistence fish, but ask them to chop into much smaller pieces; everyone who fishes that far up in the system fillets their fish onsite

On-Site Grinding & Disposal

- Favor on-site disposal of fish waste; concern removal of fish waste will sterilize the Russian River; need to keep nutrients in the Russian River as food source for rainbow trout
- Grinding might work as one element of processing/disposal; provide at convenient locations
- Like this option, with several stations (Grayling, Pink Salmon) – with electric grinder and discharge into RR (suggested pulse of discharge, e.g. at midnight) – puts waste back in river
- Grinders / processing areas would need to be bear proof / use electric fencing

Manual Removal of Accumulated Fish Waste

- Manual removal of fish waste worked well, kept shorelines clear
- Stop/chop/throw can work – especially if augmented by manual removal of fish waste accumulation from shoreline
- Use stream watch volunteers to do manual removal and talk to / educate anglers at the same time

Paying for fish processing and disposal

- Rather than charging a fee – offer an incentive (e.g. lower parking fee; free freezing/storage while camping)
- Willing to pay for disposal if it fish waste goes back to river (important to return to river)
- General public will not want to pay – another incentive might be to hand out heavy duty plastic bag for their fish
- Raise campground, parking and ferry fees to generate revenue to cover costs of fish waste disposal

Temporal (Night-time) Closure

- Any closure should be the exception, not the rule
- Anchorage residents fish late at night; would limit their access
- Night is the best time to get fish (outside of the sanctuary); fish do move up out of sanctuary at night (11pm-4-5am); a closure would reduce this opportunity
- Consider closing only areas farther upstream (e.g. Upper Russian)
- Complicated to enforce; what if people stop fishing at prescribed time at falls, but take two hours to walk out. Would they be cited?
- Had previously supported night-time closure, but now concerned not enforceable

Spatial closure

- Consider in-season closures at Cottonwood Hole and forested area downstream of ferry, as needed

Bear Management

- Adult boars upstream prevent sows and cubs from using that area, they move down to Kenai-Russian River area; increase harvest of boars in upper Russian area.³
- Should manage bears and keep them out of the area, rather than focus on managing human behaviors

³ Information provided by ADFG – Up to 50 permits for brown bear harvest are issued each year in Game Management Unit (GMU) 15, and up to 50 permits in GMU 7. In 2012, ADFG will issue 50 permits in GMU 15 with focus near populated areas.

Education

- ARM contact station is not providing current information about sightings of bears and other important information; need to improve this consistent communication (open house comment)
- “Person in uniform” told visitor not to approach any wildlife closer than 100 yards; this information was too broad, not specific instructions on how to react to bears who approach to closer distances (open house comment)

If you have comments/questions regarding this document, please contact: Jan Caulfield, project facilitator, 907-523-4610 (in Juneau) or at janc@gci.net