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

Summary of Public Forums: April 18-21, 2011
Cooper Landing, Soldotna, Wasilla, Anchorage

And Comments Received via Email through May 2011

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 action plan to reduce adverse human-bear conflicts in the Kenai-Russian River area. As first step in the collaborative public process, agencies hosted four evening public forums in Cooper Landing, Soldotna, Wasilla and Anchorage on April 18-21, 2011. A total of 55 members of the public (not including agency representatives or staff) attended the forums.

Comments were collected during small and large group discussions and on written comment forms provided to attendees (their option to complete and return). Public input received during the public forums and in subsequent emailed comments (received through May 31, 2011) are summarized in this document.

At the public forums, participants were asked to comment on two key questions:

- What are specific issues related to human-bear interactions at the Kenai-Russian River area you believe should be addressed through management actions and strategies?
- What management actions and strategies do you suggest agencies consider using to address these issues?

Over the summer, the management agencies will:

- Consider this public input as they evaluate possible management actions and strategies in more detail.
- Collect additional public input.
- Develop and evaluate more focused management scenarios to discuss with the public during meetings in the fall of 2011.

For more information about the Kenai Russian River Collaborative Public Process:

- Please go to: https://projects.ecr.gov/kenai-russianriver/
- Contact project facilitator: Jan Caulfield, janc@gci.net or at 907-523-4610 (in Juneau)

Email Comments to: comments-alaska-chugach-seward@fs.fed.us
Please put "Kenai-Russian River Comment" in the email's subject line

[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.

I. Issues Related to Human-Bear Interactions at Kenai Russian River Area

In small group discussions at the public forums, people talked about a range of issues related to human-bear interactions at the Kenai-Russian River area. The groups then generally moved quickly into discussions about management actions they would like to see the agencies consider using to address these issues (see Section II, below). Issues raised by the public included:

- Bear behavior – Bears at the Kenai-Russian River area have become increasingly food conditioned and habituated to the presence of people, leading to a higher concentration of bears, much different bear behavior, and more potential for human-bear interactions and conflicts than elsewhere on the Kenai Peninsula.
- Bear populations and management – Some members of the public commented that they believe there are now more brown bears on the Kenai Peninsula than in the past. There was general interest in having more data on brown bear populations on the Kenai, bear numbers at the Kenai-Russian River area, and analysis of how population levels and management of hunting affects brown bear numbers and behavior at the Kenai-Russian River.
- Bear conservation – Some meeting participants expressed concern about killing bears through defense of life and property (DLP) and/or management actions.
- Education – Education is key to avoiding human-bear conflicts and there are continually new users who need to be educated. There is strong public support for continuing education and recognition that the agencies are doing a good job with public outreach.
- Regulations – There is a range of views on regulations, from those who support regulations to manage human behavior (and may prefer regulations to voluntary measures), to those who desire no additional regulations (concerned that "anglers will be regulated off of the river").
- Enforcement – Enforcement of existing regulations may need to be increased, particularly at high public use times, including weekends and holidays.
- Fish waste – There is a continual need to manage fish cleaning and waste disposal, with a range of views on the most effective management solutions (see Section II).
- Other (non-fish waste) attractants – There is a continual need to manage human foods and other wildlife attractants, with a range of views on effective management solutions (see Section II).
- Public safety – Safety issues raised include concerns about the potential for conflicts between anglers and bears, potential mishaps when guns are used to deter bears, and the safety of Emergency Medical Services (EMS) responders responding to emergencies at night.

- Area capacity – Some people believe that there are too many people using the Kenai-Russian River area, making it more difficult to manage human behavior and address the interaction of people and bears.
- Management actions must be adaptive (for example, to respond to changes in river flow levels, human use levels, numbers of bears, etc).

II. Suggested Management Actions & Strategies

The following table summarizes comments regarding the types of management actions and strategies the public would like the agencies to consider using at the Kenai-Russian River area to reduce the potential for human-bear conflicts and address the issues raised in Section I.

These comments reflect a range of opinions regarding what actions different members of the public believe should be pursued – therefore, some of the points below conflict with others. All points will be considered during this public process.

The agencies will evaluate these recommendations in more depth as they begin to develop a new five-year action plan for management of the Kenai-Russian River area.

Topic	Comments re: Management Actions & Strategies
Management Goals	Comments related to management goals for the KRRC included: • Define management goals clearly and monitor whether the goals are being attained. • Set a management goal of maintaining a balance between human and bear use; want to have bears also using the area. • Set a management goal that gives more priority to human access/use for recreation; manage bears more intensively in favor of less restriction of human use. • Develop a management plan that is adaptive, so that appropriate and effective measures can be used each year, in response to changing environmental, human use, wildlife use, and other conditions. • Base management actions on realistic risk assessments, recognizing the importance of prudent management for public safety. • Focus on managing human and bear behaviors during the early sockeye run, as that tends to set the stage for human-bear interactions in the later run. • Revise the definition of "human-bear conflict" (presented at the April public forums) to include the term "aggressive" bear behavior instead of "predatory" behavior. • Research and adapt successful management actions and strategies from other areas with similar issues.

Topic	Comments re: Management Actions & Strategies
Fish Waste	Comments related to fish waste management included: • General – Fish waste management needs to be clearly addressed and the public well educated about what is required or recommended. • Grinder: Pursue mechanical grinder technology; install at location(s) that will be convenient to and used by anglers (e.g. at fish cleaning tables). • Vendor: Work with vendor/concessionaire to collect fish waste and reuse/dispose; may provide fish cleaning / freezing services; business may be able to use waste profitably and fund their services. • Facilities: Provide facilities to support fish cleaning and disposal (e.g. fish cleaning house @ campground); need water at these locations. • Fish cleaning tables: – Offer more cleaning tables at strategic locations. – Specifically, put tables back on the Russian River. – Keep tables off of the Russian River. – Adjust table locations as necessary for changing conditions (e.g. water flow). • Manual removal of carcasses: Support this, especially in low water years when carcasses accumulate; requires funding and/or volunteers. • Fish waste disposal: – Return waste to stream system; important nutrients for ecosystem (e.g. rainbow trout productivity). – Identify appropriate disposal locations and facilities or infrastructure; coordinate with other agencies and Borough. – Consider disposing of waste in-river away from high public use areas (either upstream or downstream), to attract bears away. • Stop/Chop/Throw: – Stop/Chop/Throw *is not* working, should reconsider – issues with waste size, increases bear interactions with human since bears cannot grab a whole carcass and retreat to forest cover. – Stop/Chop/Throw *is* working. • Take Out Whole: – Asking people to take fish out whole *is not* working – There is substantial non-compliance, which creates cleaning/disposal problems elsewhere. – Asking people to take fish out whole *is* working. • Monitoring of fish waste management strategies: It will be difficult to monitor the effectiveness of different fish waste management strategies; many variables (run size, water level).

Topic	Comments re: Management Actions & Strategies
Education	Comments related to public education at KRRC included: • General comments – General support to continue and increase education efforts, even if human-bear interactions and potential for conflicts seem to decline in a given year or two. There are constantly new visitors to educate. Specific ideas included the following. • One-on-one education is highly valued and thought to be most effective. Ideas suggested: – Increase Streamwatch presence as volunteer on-site educators (extended hours, increase numbers, emphasize positive interactions with area users, locate at key access points such as top of stairs) – Educate campers at the campground: ARM contact station, campground hosts – Increase angler-to-angler education; specifically ask them to spread the word to others on the river – More agency educators, that can also enforce if necessary • On-site orientation session(s) - Require attendance at a KRRC-specific education program (similar to Katmai NP "Bear School") or web-based video. • Partnerships for education - Provide education materials through partnerships / collaboration with: – Sportsman's organizations – Tourism businesses / lodging – Chambers of Commerce – Retailers / vendors • Web-based Information - Provide more information on the web; link with sportsman's organizations, tourism business, vendors and other websites • Publications - Magazines (Hunt Alaska; Fish Alaska; Alaska Airlines); newspaper inserts; format on-site publications as "pocket-size" • Signs – – Signs useful; like rhyming signs on stairs – Signs not useful – Post white-board(s) continually updated with wildlife sightings and status of wildlife activity • Other education ideas / comments: – Publicize Successes - "This is working; help us keep it going" – Evening campground programs – Concern that AM radio is not effective – Use videos / slide shows at high public use areas (e.g. ferry line)

Topic	Comments re: Management Actions & Strategies
Temporal Closures	Comments about temporal closures as a management tool to manage human-bear conflicts at KRRC included: • Support considering nighttime closures. The following points were raised by those suggesting that nighttime closures be considered: – Times: Consider closing access for human use at 11:00-12:00 pm and reopen between 4:00-6:00 am. – Areas: Most comments did not specify which area(s) to close to night access. Several suggested closure only on the Russian River; others suggested closing the south side of the river at night to correspond with the ferry closure. – Some comments addressed closing only nighttime fishing; others suggested closing all access during specified night hours. – Rationale supporting nighttime closure: Bears may change use patterns and reduce their day use of the KRRC; reduced risk of encounters at night when visibility is poorer; night-time compliance with regulations and suggestions for reducing attractants is lower; and fish would move farther upstream and reduce concentration (and angler congestion) at the confluence. • Oppose nighttime closures. • More data and analysis needed regarding potential effects of a night closure, and whether it would be feasible to establish and enforce. • Filling a three fish limit before midnight and a new limit just after midnight encourages nighttime fishing.
Spatial Closures	Comments regarded potential spatial closures to fishing, camping or other uses at KRRC included: • It is appropriate to close areas as needed to reduce human-bear conflicts or potential for conflicts. • Alaska Recreation Management (ARM) should be given authority to more readily close an area, if necessary to respond to potential conflict. • Concern about too-readily closing an area and denying angler/recreation access. • Media announcements about any closure must be very specific and clear to avoid a perception that entire KRRC area or fishery is closed. • Specific areas suggested for possible closure included: – Cottonwood Hole - heavy consistent bear use; concern that anglers do not manage attractants well at this location. – Upper Russian River, above upper power line - trail is poor and steep; heavy bear use; fish cleaned and disposed of here are an attractant. – Consider closing area between Sportsman's Landing and Jim's Landing to camping, to avoid people fishing right next to campsite. – Consider a designated area for the "catch and release" fishery.

Topic	Comments re: Management Actions & Strategies
Bear Management	The following comments were provided on bear management: • Displacement: – Use hazing to discourage bears from frequenting area used intensively by people; discourage daytime use (e.g. rubber bullets). – Any displacement should be done by experts; consider use of trained bear dogs. – Do not support, or question effectiveness of hazing. • Relocation and/or removal: – Relocate (if possible) and remove problem bears (when necessary). Manage the bears, not the people. – Do not favor killing bears as a management measure. • Hunting: Increase brown bear hunting on Kenai Peninsula; consider overlap in hunting and fishing season; increase hunting in Kenai Russian River corridor. • Deterrence: Discourage use of gunfire as deterrent; promote use of bear spray, bear flares; make preferred deterrents available on-site. • Bear Surveillance: USFS should track bear movements and warn people bears are in vicinity. • Information on brown bear population: The public would like to have more information about brown bear population abundance and trends on the Kenai Peninsula, and about the number of bears that utilize the Kenai Russian River area.
Regulations	Comments regarding existing regulations at the Kenai-Russian River area included: • Support the consistent food storage regulations. • Retained fish regulation is ridiculous; cannot move to land fish and also keep within 12' of stringer. • Do not over-regulate anglers. • Prefer education over more regulation. • Important to have consistency in regulations on different land ownerships. Suggested additional regulations included: • Require all backpacks be on backs (not on ground). • Do not allow coolers on the ferry or on the Russian River. • Limit the amount of "baggage" brought down to river. • Require bear-proof storage of any salmon not under directly physical control of a responsible person. • Require bear-proof storage of any human food not under directly physical control of a responsible person.

Topic	Comments re: Management Actions & Strategies
Enforcement	Comments about enforcement at KRRC included: • Need to emphasize and increase enforcement of existing rules. Specific suggestions included: – Promulgate and enforce regulations to minimize improper handling and disposal of fish, fish waste and human foods. – Enforce rules in campgrounds; sets expected tone for use of entire KRRC area. – Increase weekend and holiday enforcement. – Address unregulated parking. – Enforce fishing licenses, limits. – Make penalties substantial, as deterrent. – Put law enforcement where there are usually bears (e.g. Cottonwood Hole, falls, confluence). – As alternative to fines, require volunteer service at KRRC. – Include public in enforcement.
Infrastruc-ture	Suggested improvements to KRRC infrastructure related to reducing attractants or potential for human-bear conflicts included: • Electric fencing around areas where bears must be excluded (e.g. tent campsites, fish cleaning tables, dumpsters). • Provide more bear-proof food storage & garbage containers in campgrounds and at dump stations (e.g. Sunrise). • Provide bear-proof containers for disposal of fish waste; remove/empty frequently. • Provide or rent out bear-proof containers for retained fish, convenient to the river. • Install remote toilets.
Trails / Visibility	Suggestions related to trails and visibility at KRRC included: • Clear vegetation to improve visibility on trails. • Raise boardwalks to improve visibility and possibly discourage bear use.

Topic	Comments re: Management Actions & Strategies
Funding for Implementation	More funding (or volunteer capacity) will be needed for implementation of management actions, scientific research & monitoring. Specific suggestions included: • Sockeye stamp or user fee ($5-$10) • Commercial Fishery Division contribution • Grant Lake mitigation funds (Homer Electric Assn.) • Expand use of volunteers
Area Capacity - Human Use	Consider capacity of the area for human use; there are too many people using the area. Specific ideas for reducing numbers of people visiting include: • Have people stop fishing after reaching limit of three sockeye. • Manage unregulated parking.

Members of the public who have comments/questions regarding this document, please contact:

Jan Caulfield, project facilitator, 907-523-4610 (in Juneau) or at janc@gci.net