

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

KENAI - RUSSIAN RIVERS ACCESS AREA

BANK REHABILITATION



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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

KENAI NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

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1. INTRODUCTION, PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

Alaska's Kenai-Russian River Complex (KRRC) (Fig. 1), defined as a five-mile radius from the confluence of the Kenai and Russian Rivers, is managed as a highly utilized recreational area that is also one of the richest areas of archaeological resources on the Kenai Peninsula. The Russian River is a tributary of the Kenai River and lands within the KRRC are managed by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service as part of the Chugach National Forest (CNF), the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as part of the the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge), and by Cook Inlet Region, Inc. The KRRC hosts one of the State's most popular sport fisheries, focused primarily on sockeye salmon, silver salmon and resident rainbow trout and Dolly Varden. The KRRC lies within the Sqilantnu Archaeological District,

The Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area is located within the KRRC and managed by the Refuge. This area includes the Sportsmans Landing boat launch and the Russian River ferry and campground facilities which provide access for both shore-based and boat angling. The Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area annually accommodates approximately 70,000 visitors. The intensity of the foot traffic for shore-based activities results in impacts to riverbank vegetation, riparian function, important fisheries, archaeological resources, and increased erosion rates. This project will re-establish bank vegetation for better riparian function, fish habitat and bank stabilization and protection of cultural artifacts downstream of the ferry landing on the south side of the Kenai River. Restored bank vegetation will be protected through the construction of angler access stairways, fencing and interpretive/educational signage. The project will complete and complement a previous bank stabilization project undertaken on the Refuge along the Kenai River within the KRRC in 2006 and 2007.

In 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service contracted with an engineering firm to design riverbank stabilization and public use facilities for the Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area with a goal of protecting Kenai River and Russian River banks from further degradation (USFWS 1999). Streambank stabilization measures were designed based on established bank stabilization techniques that enhance habitat for juvenile salmon. The project also implemented mitigation measures identified in the Refuge's 1996 Guide for Managing Cultural Resources (USFWS 1996). These measures included: 1) hardening the trail along the upper bank with metal grating and, in some cases, moving the trail back from the top of the bank; 2) limiting access from the trail down to the waters' edge to a few carefully chosen locations; and 3) fencing the majority of the bank to allow revegetation to slow erosion and prevent exposure of cultural artifacts. Public use facilities were designed to provide access for visitors while protecting the restored riverbank.

Bank stabilization work was begun in 2006 (upstream of ferry landing on the south bank of Kenai River) and continued in 2007 (north bank of Kenai River) in the Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area consistent with established streambank revegetation and protection standards (ADFG 2005). The work completed in 2006 and 2007 has successfully established vegetation on the impacted banks and, through fencing and stairway construction, has kept foot traffic from destabilizing these banks.

The Service completed an Environmental Assessment (USFWS 2006) that covered the entire project area including the area intended for work under this project in 2016/17. Due to a

shortage of funding, the Service was not able to complete the riverbank stabilization downstream of the ferry landing on the south bank of the Kenai River or install an elevated boardwalk in 2006/07. Funding has now been secured to continue work on the project. The Service drafted this Environmental Assessment (EA) to ensure that conditions evaluated in the 2006 EA for this project remain similar to conditions today.

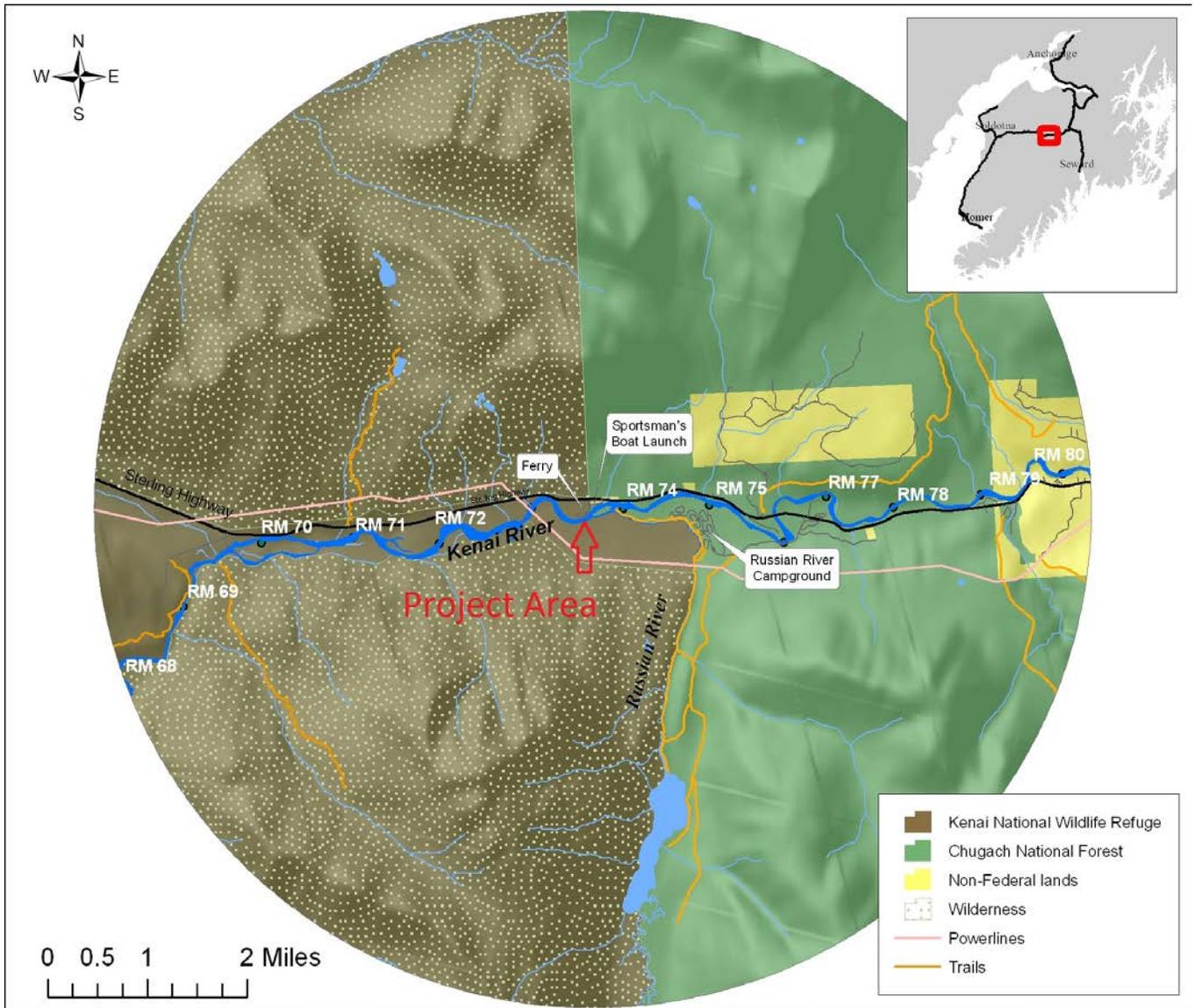


Figure 1. Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area

2. ALTERNATIVES

Two alternative strategies have been developed for managing the affected section of riverbank. In Alternative A, the “No Action” Alternative, restored bank vegetation and visitor facilities now present would be maintained, but no additional bank stabilization work in the project area would

occur. Alternative B, the “Preferred Alternative” would continue maintenance of current facilities and implement bank stabilization through vegetation restoration and installation of visitor access facilities downstream of the ferry landing on the south bank of the Kenai River for approximately 600 feet. Vegetation restoration and access improvements would be similar to those implemented and constructed in 2006 and 2007 in the project area.

2.1 Alternative A: CURRENT SITUATION (NO ACTION)

Under Alternative A, the project area would remain much as it now is. Restored bank vegetation would continue to be protected, and facilities now available for public use in the area would continue to be available and periodically maintained, including the existing ferry operation, fencing and access stairs. No additional vegetation restoration would occur, and no new stairways, fencing, or interpretive facilities would be developed.

Prior to 2006, levels of public use in the Kenai Russian Rivers Access Area were resulting in damage to Kenai river bank habitats, negatively impacting natural and cultural resources. The riverbank restoration and access improvements completed in 2006 mitigated many of these impacts. Under Alternative A, similar impacts would continue to occur along the south bank of the Kenai River downstream of the ferry landing. No construction costs would be incurred under this alternative.

2.2 ALTERNATIVE B: PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Under Alternative B (Preferred Alternative), in addition to maintaining the habitat restoration and visitor facilities developed in 2006-2007 in the area, similar improvements would be implemented downstream of the ferry landing along approximately 600’ of the south bank of the Kenai River. The current steep riverbank in this area contains a mixture of gravel, sand and loam that is easily displaced by foot traffic preventing establishment of any natural vegetative cover. The project would include the following: 1) revegetation of the riverbank through plantings of native alder and willows; 2) installation of metal, light-penetrating stairways to provide access to visitors; 3) installation of a wooden fence to direct users to designated access points and protected revegetated areas; and 4) installation of an elevated, light-penetrating boardwalk along the top of the bank. Additionally, interpretive and information signing would be developed and installed to educate users about riverbank importance to fish habitat and protection of cultural resources. Wildlife-oriented recreation would continue to be the major use of the area, with enhanced interpretive facilities designed to increase visitor understanding and appreciation of the area’s natural and cultural resource values.

Under Alternative B, vegetation restoration and infrastructure may be completed in prioritized phases, pending final project costs and availability of funds. Total current estimated cost to conduct streambank revegetation, construct stairways and a wooden fence along the 600 feet of streambank under this alternative is estimated at \$275,000. The cost of installing a light-penetrating boardwalk along the entire length of the current project area and the 2006 project area (1,4000 feet) is currently unknown.

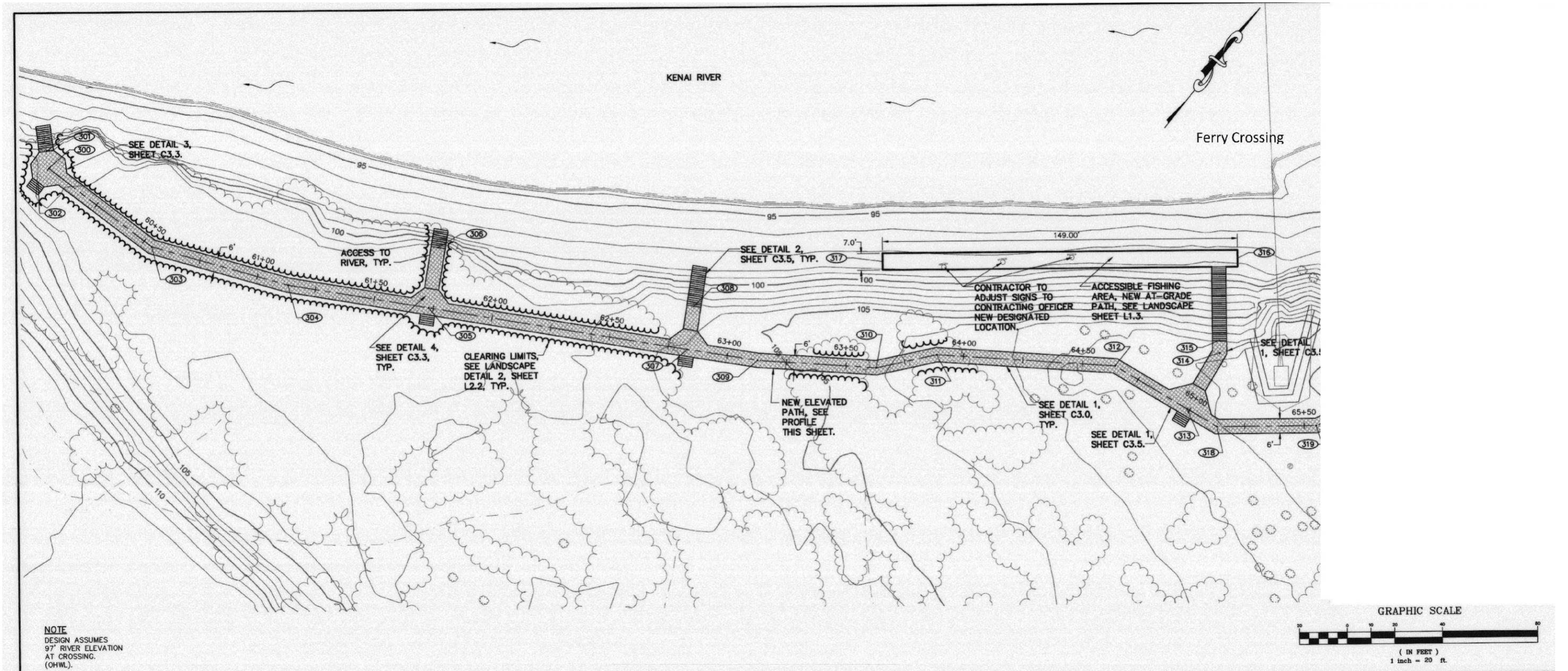


Figure 2. Project Area Infrastructure Design Concept

3. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The affected environment within the project area as described in the 2006 EA is still applicable. The environment that would be affected by the proposed action is described in detail beginning on page 1-14 in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan. That plan is an environmental impact statement, as defined by the National Environmental Policy Act, and describes in detail the anticipated environmental effects of the proposed refuge program. This assessment focuses specifically on a portion of the total area covered by the comprehensive plan. Thus the descriptions that follow are summaries of the comprehensive plan information that apply to the confluence of the Kenai and Russian Rivers Access Area.

3.1 THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

3.1.1 SOILS

Lowland soils of the area are glacial deposits of varying texture overlain by well drained to poorly drained silt loess and capped by silt loam derived from post-glacial windblown loess. Low areas, such as muskeg, contain peat soils produced by the slow decomposition of organic materials in the subarctic climate. Riverbank slopes are vulnerable to erosion, especially if the vegetative cover is removed.

3.1.2 WATER

The Kenai and Russian Rivers join just upstream of the project area. The Kenai River runs east-west across the northern region of the Kenai Peninsula. Originating from Kenai Lake, the Kenai River flows approximately 70 miles (112 kilometers) before entering Cook Inlet. Approximately 18 miles (29 kilometers) of the river lie within the Refuge, from its confluence with the Russian River to 5 miles downstream of Skilak Lake.

The Russian River is located in the central Kenai Peninsula and flows 12 miles from Upper Russian Lake, through Lower Russian Lake, and empties into the upper Kenai River at Kenai River Mile 74 (ADFG 2006). The Russian River forms the boundary between the Chugach National Forest and the Refuge. The Refuge, therefore, shares land ownership of the river corridor with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service.

Most of their aquatic habitats are in near pristine condition and have significant ecological and recreational value. The rivers may be frozen from November to May and summer water temperatures rarely exceed 68 degrees Fahrenheit. Their high oxygen content, lack of pollution, and physical diversity create excellent fishery habitats. The net results are conditions that favor the reproduction and early growth of anadromous fishes, such as salmon, but that cannot support large standing populations of resident fishes. The streams, in addition to transporting water to Skilak Lake, provide access to spawning areas for anadromous fish, and living and reproduction habitat for resident fishes.

The productivity of aquatic habitats in subarctic regions is fragile, depending on high quality water, proper water temperatures, clean stream gravels (lack of siltation), and the nutrient exchange cycles driven by the annual return of anadromous fish from the sea. Protection of these key physical determinants of productivity must be a high priority management goal.

3.2 THE BIOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

3.2.1 VEGETATION

The Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area is located in the interior of the Kenai Peninsula. Elevation is approximately 50 to 75 feet above sea level. Most of the area is covered by taiga forest of white and black spruce (*Picea glauca*, *P. mariana*) mixed with birch (*Betula papyrifera*), aspen (*Populus tremuboides*), and other hardwoods. White spruce and birch dominate the uplands; black spruce and other hydrophibous plants are typical of low, poorly drained areas.

There are several other habitat types that do not cover large areas but that are especially valuable to wildlife. Riparian habitats, those associated with lakes, ponds and streams, are among the most valuable of wildlife habitats and are also heavily used by people. Some types of wetlands are also very valuable to fish and wildlife, despite the small area that they occupy.

3.2.2 WILDLIFE

The Refuge has documented 1,086 species of flora and fauna: 151 birds, 20 fish, 30 mammals, 164 arthropods, 484 vascular plants, 97 fungi, 35 lichens, 14 liverworts, 90 mosses, and 1 other invertebrate. No threatened or endangered species have been observed in the project area.

The abundant productivity of the Kenai River and its tributaries and associated habitats supports a variety of wildlife, including bald eagles, migratory waterfowl, brown and black bears, moose, lynx, wolf, wolverine, river otter and beaver. All of these species utilize the Kenai Russian Rivers Access Area.

3.2.3 FISH

The Kenai River supports major runs of four Pacific salmon species – Chinook, sockeye, coho and pink. All four salmon species move from the mainstem Kenai River into the Russian River and its watershed for spawning, with sockeye providing the main fishery in this clear water tributary. Sockeye salmon return to the Kenai and Russian rivers in two distinct runs. The entire early run spawns in the upper portions of the Russian River watershed, arriving at the confluence of the Kenai and Russian rivers in early June. The late run sockeye typically arrive at the confluence in late July. The Kenai and Russian rivers also support healthy populations of resident rainbow trout and Dolly Varden, which are also highly valued by anglers.

3.3 THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

3.3.1 CULTURAL RESOURCES

The Sqilantnu Archaeological District reaches from Kenai Lake to Jim's Landing and includes the lands within the Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area. There are at least 77 prehistoric archeological sites within the District that have been identified by the Alaska Heritage Resources Survey. The site has been proposed for listing and is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. One site consists of a prehistoric village with 16 house pits and 62 cache pits. The site represents at least 5,000 years of human history, documents at least seven prehistoric and early historic Native cultures, and may be the largest concentration of sites on the Kenai River and one of the most important sites in Alaska.

Federal agencies are required by federal law to manage and protect archaeological and historical resources on lands under their jurisdiction. The Refuge's Guide for Managing Cultural Resources (USFWS 1996) assists Refuge staff in meeting legal requirements to protect and manage cultural resources. Under the Russian River 14(h)(1) Selection Agreement, which was ratified by the Russian River Land Act (P.L. 107-362), ownership of all cultural artifacts on 500 acres of Refuge lands, which include lands in the Kenai Russian Rivers Access Area, was transferred to the Cook Inlet Region, Inc.

3.3.2 EDUCATIONAL/RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

The importance of the educational and recreational opportunities on the Refuge was recognized in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. Refuge purposes, as delineated by the Act, include providing opportunities for environmental education, interpretation, and fish and wildlife-oriented recreation.

The Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area is used for a variety of recreational pursuits, with the primary activity being sport fishing. The largest sockeye salmon recreational fishery in Alaska occurs at the confluence of the Kenai and Russian Rivers. This roadside fishery is remarkable in its availability because it has the only large run of sockeyes readily available to the Anchorage urban area, and as such is extremely popular among residents of southcentral Alaska. The fishery also hosts many visitors to Alaska, including many international visitors. In 2015, the Russian River ferry transported nearly 20,000 passengers to the south side of the Kenai River; 27,000 vehicles entered the area during the June – September months the area is monitored to control vehicle parking. There is a boat launch access point for use by visitors on state-owned land immediately adjacent to the ferry parking lot that the Refuge manages through a Land Lease. Many visitors to the area camp on the Refuge, on U.S. Forest Service lands, or stay in local lodges or motels; some are on-site for less than 24 hours.

Refuge staff and concessionaire contractors provide information to visitors on a routine and recurring basis. Interpretive displays detailing the area's human history, fish and wildlife resources and providing overviews of area public use regulations are currently found at the Sportsman's Landing and Russian River Ferry facilities on the north side of the Kenai River.

3.3.3 PUBLIC ACCESS

Visitors to the Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area generally use the main entrance at Milepost 55 on the Sterling Highway. The Access Area is also accessible by boat from the Kenai River. Visitors also access the Access Area by a short hike from the USFS Russian River Campground to the east, or from scattered parking areas along the Sterling Highway.

Most campgrounds in the immediate vicinity are crowded during the summer, especially on weekends and holidays. Because several campgrounds are also heavily used access points to the Kenai and Russian rivers, traffic flow is often heavy and limited parking is often fully utilized. Parking areas along the Sterling Highway for more than a mile in either direction from the entrance to the Sportsman's Landing/Russian River Ferry facilities provide for some overflow parking.

3.3.4 VISUAL RESOURCES

The visual quality of scenery is almost completely unimpaired by development, except at the developed parking area and ferry docks. Most of the riverside vistas are typical of the Kenai Peninsula, forested or grassy, semi-open rolling lands in the foreground with mountains visible in the background, and the Kenai River visible most of the time. However, in some areas, relatively dense vegetation limits visual distances to a few hundred feet.

3.3.5 SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The overall economy of the Kenai Peninsula is diverse and healthy, and tourism is an important part of the economy. Recreational opportunities available at the Kenai Russian Rivers Access Area contribute to both local and regional economies. The community of Cooper Landing is the closest community to the Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area. As Cooper Landing is located between Anchorage and the Access Area, all visitors travelling from Anchorage via the Sterling Highway pass through this community.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The purpose of this section is to identify and describe potential environmental effects on the biological and social environments that could result from implementing either of the two proposed alternatives. The environmental effects of public use activities in the Kenai Russian Rivers Access Area are related primarily to the intensity of human use, that is the number of visitors recreating there annually. For both alternatives, it was assumed that the primary driver for levels of recreational use of the Access Area, which has remained relatively constant for the past five to ten years, would be the size and strength of the sockeye salmon runs from year-to-year. The number of visitors at utilizing the Access Area annually is not expected to change under either alternative.

4.1 ALTERNATIVE A: NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

4.1.1 EFFECTS ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

AIR QUALITY, SOILS, WATER

Under the No Action alternative, no impacts to air quality would occur. Continued soil erosion along the river bank would occur due to direct impacts of foot traffic on vegetation. Erosion of the bank and/or bank slopes would contribute some sediment input to the Kenai River, particularly from runoff during heavy rains and during flood events. Any effect on overall water quality in the Kenai River would be minor.

4.1.2 EFFECTS ON THE BIOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

VEGETATION, WILDLIFE, FISH

Under Alternative A, river bank vegetation would not be restored downstream of the Ferry landing on the Kenai River's south shore, and would be unlikely to reestablish naturally. Concentrated foot traffic along the top of the bank and along its slopes would continue to impede vegetative growth, resulting in continued bank erosion. Some pioneering of new foot trails would occur when access is impeded by ongoing erosion, resulting in additional impacts to vegetation. Under high use levels, these impacts become more severe.

At present, the primary impact of human use on wildlife in the Kenai Russian Rivers Access Area is disturbance. Human disturbance of routine movements and activities of some animals, especially large mammals, increases with increasing levels of recreational use. Disturbance impacts to wildlife would not be affected under the No Action Alternative.

Loss of river bank vegetation in the project area has reduced its value as rearing habitat for juvenile salmon. These impacts would continue under Alternative A.

4.1.3 EFFECTS ON THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Under Alternative A, continued unconstrained public use and ongoing erosion along the south bank of the Kenai River has potential to result in disturbance and/or loss of cultural artifacts. Any cultural artifacts uncovered by erosion require notification of the Service's Regional Archaeologist who would then consult with the State Historic Preservation Officer. Recovered artifacts would be transferred to the Cook Inlet Region, Inc.

EDUCATIONAL AND RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, PUBLIC ACCESS

Under Alternative A, existing recreational and educational opportunities for visitors would not change. Existing infrastructure supporting recreational activities and providing visitor education in the Kenai Russian Rivers Access Area would be maintained. No new infrastructure would be developed. Alternative A would not affect existing access facilities or means of access to the Kenai Russian Rivers Access Area.

VISUAL RESOURCES

The scenic quality in the project area would not change under Alternative A.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Recreational and educational opportunities at the Kenai Russian Rivers Access Area would not change and would continue to contribute to local and regional economies under the No Action alternative.

4.2 ALTERNATIVE B: PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

4.2.1 EFFECTS ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

AIR QUALITY

This alternative may improve localized air quality, especially with regard to visible dust along the riverbank proper and at the top of the bank, as a consequence of stairway use and revegetation of the bank.

SOILS

Installation of stairways and fencing will decrease erosion of the bank, and revegetation of the bank will increase absorption of rainfall. The net effect would be positive.

WATER

Installation of stairways and fencing will decrease erosion of the bank, as will revegetation of the bank. Given the low relief of the area, there would be little or no transport of sediments or other pollutants to streams. The net effect of this alternative on water quality would be negligible, and maybe positive when considering reduced levels of sediment or soils reaching the water.

4.2.2 EFFECTS ON THE BIOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

VEGETATION

The extensive vegetation planting seeks to re-establish plant growth and stabilize the bank; construction of a new access stairways and fencing along the top of the bank would protect the riverbank from impacts of human foot traffic. Proposed plants to be used in stabilizing the bank include native alder and willow species.

Implementation of Alternative B would improve facilities for, and control human uses of, the area and reduce the impacts of these uses. Stairways combined with the proposed barrier fencing should prevent extensive pioneering of alternate trails by the public. Extensive areas now trampled regularly could recover naturally or be rehabilitated. Considering these beneficial effects, the net effect of Alternative B on vegetation would be positive and significant.

WILDLIFE

Disturbance of wildlife by human activities would continue; rehabilitation and revegetation of the riverbank would not alter current patterns or periods of human disturbance impacts. It is likely that there would continue to be conflict between riverbank users and animals within the project area.

Installation of metal steps and wooden fencing would alter locations where wildlife access the river in this area. Bears have been observed using the stairs and crossing the wooden fences at the top of the bank within the area where construction occurred in 2006. It is likely that bears will utilize similar infrastructure constructed within this project area. Moose have not been observed utilizing the area where construction previously occurred in 2006 and would likely, similarly avoid this project area. Impacts would be negative but insignificant.

FISH

There is expected to be a limited to no increase in public use in this alternative. The overall impact on anadromous and resident fish would probably be minor; severe impacts are avoided by insuring state regulations are adhered to. Rehabilitation and revegetation of the riverbank will improve the quality of the riparian area, and aid in survival rates of young fish.

4.2.3 EFFECTS ON THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

CULTURAL RESOURCES

No degradation or destruction of significant archeological resources would be permitted under this alternative. Construction of designated boardwalks and stairways were identified as mitigation measures in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Guide for Managing Cultural Resources (1996) and should reduce degradation of cultural resources which has resulted from

the unregulated social trails currently in use. Revegetation of the bank should also provide additional protection for cultural resources. Any cultural resources identified during pre-construction surveys would be dealt with in the manner prescribed in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Guide for Managing Cultural Resources (1996). The Service will monitor the area during construction when earth disturbing activities are to occur. If any archaeological or historical resources are found, all work in that area will stop and the project may be modified to address any concerns or the sites may be excavated as guided by the National Historic Preservation Act and other applicable laws. The State Historical Preservation Officer and the Service's Regional Archaeologist will be involved in all determinations of significance and all decisions on management or protection of such resources.

EDUCATIONAL AND RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

This alternative would increase opportunities for educational and recreational experiences in the Kenai-Russian River Access Area. New interpretive and educational displays would be added, and the quality of the opportunities available would also increase as a function of better quality facilities and reduced impacts to the riverbank.

PUBLIC ACCESS

This alternative seeks to markedly reduce bank erosion with construction of stairways and fencing along nearly 600 feet of riverbank. New access points would make it easier for visitors to traverse bank areas that are now moderately difficult to reach due to slope and loose substrate. The realignment and designation of access routes would do much to correct the existing erosion caused by unrestricted access and related safety problems. Information and education signs would also assist visitors in understanding the importance of protecting riverbank habitats to insure healthy fish populations.

VISUAL RESOURCES

Alternative B would modify visual quality. Construction of artificial features such as signs, stairways, and other facilities, combined with normal human foot traffic, would adversely affect the "near" view to a minor degree, but as new vegetation becomes established, those effects would be improved by vegetative screening.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Design and installation of the proposed facilities would potentially reduce social problems under this alternative. Crowding and congestion would be somewhat relieved and traffic flow improved. Some crowding would probably still occur on peak weekends, and when salmon runs are particularly strong. The installation of stairways at multiple locations along the project area would increase dispersal of visitors, improving opportunities for quality sportfishing experiences. New interpretive and information signing would also increase the opportunities for visitors to learn about and appreciate the riverbank environment.

The net effect of this alternative on the social environment of the Kenai-Russian Rivers confluence area is expected to be markedly improved. There would be a significant improvement in the quality of visitor experiences and the social environment.

5. CONCLUSION OF THE DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

This Draft Environmental Assessment is intended to assist the Service in determining if rehabilitating the riverbank in the Kenai-Russian River Access Area (the Preferred Alternative) would result in significant impacts to the environment. This analysis indicates that while some minor positive and negative impacts to the biological and social environment may occur, no significant impacts are expected if the Preferred Alternative is selected.

The purpose of rehabilitating the riverbank in Kenai-Russian River Area is to assist in the stabilization and prevent the further degradation of the riverbank in this area. This project will not likely result in significant impacts to the biological or social environment. Without this project, it is likely that continued degradation and erosion of the riverbank is likely to occur, leading to continued absence of riparian vegetation, a slight localized decrease in water quality and potential exposure of cultural artifacts. Therefore, the Service recommends implementing the Preferred Alternative.

6. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION WITH OTHERS

6.1 Tribal Coordination

The project area is within the Squalantnu Archeological District and the proposed action could affect cultural resources or locations of cultural importance. The Service is consulting and coordinating with Cook Inlet Region, Inc. (CIRI) and the Kenaitze Indian Tribe (KIT), consistent with the provisions of the Squalantnu Archeological District Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This project is considered a “significant activity” under the MOU.

6.2 Russian River Interagency Coordination Group

Resource management in the Kenai Russian River Complex (5 mile radius from Russian and Kenai River confluence) is unique due to the geographical location of the river and the varying ownership and jurisdiction of the land base, fish, and wildlife species that exist. In 2007, as a response to increasing public safety concerns between humans and bears, the Russian River Interagency Coordination Group was established. The RRICG is comprised of; 1) Alaska Department of Fish & Game Division of Sport Fish, 2) Alaska Department of Fish & Game Division of Wildlife Conservation, 3) USDA Forest Service, 4) Cook Inlet Region, Incorporated, 5) Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 6) Alaska State Parks and Recreation Division, 7) Kenaitze Indian Tribe, and 8) U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The associated agencies have all agreed that they have common and shared interest to not only maintain, but to enhance the recreational experience, protect the visiting public, and to safeguard the natural and cultural

resources for current and future generations. This Service will notify all RRICG agencies about the project and request review of the Draft Environmental Assessment.

6.3 Endangered Species

No known federally-listed Threatened or Endangered species occur on the Refuge. The Service has therefore determined that the Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area Bank Stabilization project will have “no effect” on species listed under the Endangered Species Act or designated critical habitat, and finds the project to be fully consistent with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq; 87 stat 884, as amended).

6.4 National Historic Preservation Act

National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 review of the proposed action has been initiated and will be concluded prior to alternative selection and project commencement.

6.5 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act- Subsistence

Section 810 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 requires that, before permitting occupancy or use of public lands, a federal agency must evaluate the effects of that occupancy or use on subsistence uses or needs. The Kenai Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) (U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2010) contains a determination by the Service that implementing the preferred alternative, which includes management of the Kenai-Russian Rivers Access Area, would not significantly restrict subsistence uses on the refuge.

A further assessment of the impacts of the two alternatives considered in this document confirms the finding of the CCP. Subsistence uses of areas such as the Kenai-Russian Rivers confluence depend on the availability of harvestable fish and wildlife, a reflection of the health of fish and wildlife populations. The health of populations, in turn, depends upon maintenance of habitats in good condition. Neither Alternative considered in this Environmental Assessment would negatively impact subsistence users or the fish and wildlife populations upon which they depend.

6.6 Various Permitting Agencies

Concurrently with the development of this Environmental Assessment, the Service will be applying for permits to implement the Preferred Alternative. Permit applications will be modified as needed to reflect any changes resulting from public review of the Environmental Assessment. Should it become necessary, the permit applications will be withdrawn if the No Action Alternative is ultimately selected. The permitting agencies include Alaska State Parks, Kenai Peninsula Borough and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Division of Habitat. Permits from all these agencies may not be necessary to implement the Preferred Alternative but the multi-agency permit application process allows the permit application to be reviewed by these agencies.

7. LIST OF PREPARERS

This document was prepared and reviewed by Kenai NWR staff and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employees including:

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