

## Refuge plan to be revised

by Robin West

It has been said in a variety of ways that an organization without a plan has no road map, and without a road map that the arrival at a particular desired destination is left to mere chance. This is certainly true in administering a large area of public lands such as the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and it is time for us to begin revising our existing plan.

The Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (Conservation Plan) provides for the overall direction and management of the Refuge. The Refuge's original Conservation Plan was initiated in 1980 and finalized in 1985. The public involvement process, from scoping of issues, to providing comments on a draft plan, is a lengthy one, but it provides ample opportunity for all those interested to get involved. Conservation Plans are designed to have a life of about 15 years and we are overdue in our plan revisions. Much has changed since the mid-1980s: new laws and policies, increased public use, more people living on Refuge boundaries in the "wildland-urban interface" and increased concern over wild fire in these areas, changes in salmon management, concern over Kenai brown bears, subsistence, and a variety of other issues which have evolved significantly in recent years.

The plan revision process for the Refuge will begin later this year. We will hold several public open house meetings this winter in Kenai Peninsula communities and Anchorage, and will provide workbooks for people to use to help them formalize their scoping comments. We will provide regular newsletters and post planning updates on the web (<http://kenai.fws.gov>). Once all of the goals and issues have been identified, options will be developed and a draft Conservation Plan (in the form of a draft Environmental Impact Statement) will be prepared and released for review—probably in 2005. After public review and comment on the draft document, including public hearings, a final Conservation Plan will be prepared.

While theoretically there are no issues that are off the table for discussion in the planning process, the reality is that there are many side-boards that will direct the work: the U.S. Constitution, various statutes, regulations, policies, and Executive Orders, to name some. Regulatory changes could result as part of the plan re-

visions. I know that anytime new regulations are mentioned, many people get immediately concerned, but new regulations are not necessarily all bad. They can both restrict and liberalize public use opportunities.

One potential proposal, for example, for new regulations is a change that would legalize the take of some natural resource products for personal use. Currently, it is technically illegal to remove most natural objects from the Refuge, but everyone knows that berries and mushrooms are collected and a shed antler finds its way home now and again. I personally would like to see some regulatory acknowledgment that addresses such incidental and non-commercial use of natural resources and hope that this issue will be evaluated in the planning process.

The most specific guidelines that we must follow in the planning process are the mandated purposes given to us by Congress when the Refuge was established. These include the conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats in their natural diversity; fulfillment of international fish and wildlife treaty obligations; assurance of adequate water quality and quantity; providing opportunities for research, interpretation, environmental education, and land management training; and providing for opportunities for fish and wildlife-oriented recreation.

The planning process is long and can seem somewhat bureaucratic. I am at a loss about how to change this significantly to meet our legal obligations and provide everyone a reasonable opportunity to participate at each level of the process. Everyone's ideas are important. I encourage everyone to get involved and bear with us as we go through this multi-year exercise. The good news, I think, is that our current plan is still effective so our operational guidelines in the interim should continue to work pretty well. Hopefully our new updated plan will be even better!

To get on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan mailing list, please write, fax, or e-mail our planning team leader, Rob Campellone at: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Conservation Planning and Policy, 1011 East Tudor Road (MS 231), Anchorage, AK 99503-6119. Also, please feel free to give me a call or stop by at the Refuge

office to chat with me about the forthcoming process.

*Robin West is the manager of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, one of 542 refuges in the United States that make up the National Wildlife Refuge System. For*

*more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.*