

Refuge planning effort continues to progress

by Robin West

As we approach the end of the second year of Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's efforts to revise its Comprehensive Conservation Plan, I'm pleased to report that our interdisciplinary planning team has made substantial progress.

After completing a three month long public scoping process designed to identify management issues and concerns, the team drafted nine goal statements and more than 100 wildlife and public use objectives which will guide Refuge management efforts for the next 15 years.

The team also developed a reasonable range of management strategies, which present a variety of ways to address five significant issues identified during public scoping. The team is currently conducting research and compiling data, which will lay the foundation for what will inevitably be a lengthy environmental impact analysis of the proposed management strategies. We will continue working on the draft plan throughout the summer and into the fall, and I anticipate having the draft ready for public review this winter.

For those who have followed Kenai Refuge management issues for some time, there is likely to be few surprises. Many of the issues raised during the 1985 planning process have re-surfaced: habitat management, Kenai River crowding, snowmobile access, etc.

As with any complex natural resource management program, there are many ways to manage the land and address management issues. Such actions are often viewed either positively or negatively depending on personal values and experiences. This is certainly true at the Kenai Refuge and it is reflected in many of the compromises we have in our current management program. For the most part, however, the public has endorsed current management, and responses received so far from those who commented on our range of alternatives have said that the proposed range is acceptable.

The issues that seem to be of most interest are crowding and increased public use along the Upper Kenai River, and the future use and management of industrial areas, such as the Swanson River and Beaver

Creek Oil and Gas Fields and the ENSTAR Pipeline corridor/Mystery Creek Road, once these facilities are no longer necessary for industrial purposes.

For current industrial use areas, should the areas be restored as wildlife habitat, managed for public uses similar to what has evolved in these areas over time, or should improvements be made to enhance public use, once industrial use ceases?

Should additional restrictions be placed on guiding? Should the Refuge ever consider limiting use by the general public? Should restrictions on camping beside the Kenai River be considered? These are just a few of the questions being examined, which address the issue of crowding along the Upper Kenai River.

All these issues generate interesting discussions, and are ripe for comprehensive planning exercises like the one we are currently undertaking. I'm of the opinion the planning team has done a fine job identifying a range of management strategies that address these questions. I hope you agree.

If you haven't been involved in our planning process, but want to contribute your ideas, it's not too late! You can add your name to our mailing list by contacting Rob Campellone, Kenai Planning Team Leader by mail at: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1011 East Tudor Road, MS-231, Anchorage, AK 99503-6119; phone: (907) 786-3982.

Also, I personally welcome your thoughts and comments anytime. You can submit comments on the proposed range of management strategies via an on-line comment form at: <http://alaska.fws.gov/nwr/planning/pdf/KenaiPlanUpdate3.pdf> or if it's easier for you, contact me at the Refuge at (907) 262-7021, or better yet, stop by for a visit.

Planning is not particularly fun, nor does it happen quickly, but it is incredibly important. If you have an interest in how the Refuge is managed in the future, please consider getting involved in the process. Many thanks!

Robin West has been the Refuge Manager at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1995. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.