

Multiple Groups Aim to “Restrict” a Half-Century Tradition of Motorized Access to the Knik River Drainage

Get ready to walk. Whether or not you’re one of the thousands that access the Knik River drainage by ATV, snow machine, riverboat, airboat, or airplane you may find that the area is no longer available unless you’re willing to walk. There are a number of individuals, groups, and even government agencies that want to “restrict” motorized access. What “restrict” ultimately means is eliminating numerous areas of the drainage to any vehicle that rolls or floats. For most of us, this means loss of access.

The Knik River drainage has been enjoyed before the 1950’s by a variety of motorized equipment users. Alaskans have a long history of using power transportation to fish, hunt, and sightsee in this area. Although government studies have shown there has been no measurable impact to wildlife as result of motorized activities, some groups see the Knik River as their own private reserve. Select groups are actively working to restrict motorized users.

Anatomy of the attack on Traditional Motorized Access

Few efforts to remove public access are successful without a heaping dose of disinformation. Motorized access was not an issue in the Knik River Drainage until a new group named the Knik River Watershed Group formed. Here are some excerpts from their website and Anchorage Daily News article;

“...destruction of vegetation, stream banks and dunes from airboat, 4x4 and ORV traffic has left scars which will take years to heal. These activities have disenfranchised residents and visitors of the kind of outdoors experiences they can ordinarily expect on public lands...”

“...Even if you are not a resident of this area, but would like to be able to pursue the kind of recreation out here you used to do years ago - whether it’s a quiet morning of salmon fishing, a mountain bike ride, a hunt without fear of getting shot by a target shooter, a trek on horseback to the glacier, mushing your dogs to Friday Creek, or just having a family picnic at Jim Creek - please contact your legislator to allocate funds for a Plan during this 2005 session. The Plan to protect our natural resources will be done by public process...”

The following are some excerpts from an article written by Cecily Fritz, the chair of the Knik River Watershed Group (ADN, February 2005):

“...Unmanaged use is wearing on the watershed with erosion, an expanding network of airboat and ATV trails...”

“...waters are churned into mud bogs. Nesting and migratory trumpeter swans have been repeatedly flushed by motorized activity...”

“...This level of unmanaged activity diminishes experiences for all user groups...”

“...DNR must seek immediate solutions to mitigate ongoing damage to resources...”

“...A small army of users and concerned citizens is ready to volunteer time, resources and muscle...”

Fueled by rhetoric of the anti-motorized activist, public land managers take action

The Jim Creek/Knik River Cooperative Management Initiative was created in 2003, by the Palmer Conservation District, the Mat-SU. Borough, the BLM, and the Alaska Mental Health Trust with \$11,000 in allocations and another \$11,000 in Federal matching funds. Following is an excerpt from the U.S. F&WS Alaska Coastal Program literature: “The initiative is a cooperative effort to undertake a suite of community outreach, education, and collaborative planning projects aimed at reducing on-going riparian, wetlands, and stream damage in a popular recreational watershed **due to unregulated ATV use**, dumping of trash and hazardous substances, and malicious fires.”

The Mat-Su Borough is spending large amounts of money depicting the Knik River area as a fragile wetland. In February 2003 the borough awarded a private land design firm \$45,000 to develop a plan for the borough land in the Butte/Knik area. The plan places negative focus on motorized traffic. The draft plan, titled Asset Management Plan for Borough Owned Land in the Butte Area states: "This plan will guide the management of more than 6,000 acres of Borough-owned land in the Butte Community Council area." **The plan recommends motorized access bans, gates, parking fees and other means of controlling alleged user conflict.**

In June of 2003 the Borough allocated \$3,500 and received \$5,000 in matching federal funds to create a Poster of the Knik River area. This poster makes the Knik look like crystal blue waters and **focuses on alleged ATV and airboat damage to the vegetation.** Borough resolution no. 03-067 states: "...to provide information to residents and visitors on the importance of local natural resources and how they can interact with them responsibly, promoting the value, importance, and uniqueness of the Knik River watershed. The goal of this project is to produce at least 1000 posters of the watershed to be distributed by the MSB, the Palmer Soil and Water Conservation District, local community councils, and the Butte School."

The Borough issued an Information Memorandum in 2005 that notes heavy public use for salmon and trout fishing, waterfowl hunting, canoeing, hiking and winter recreation activities. No mention was made of motorized use. It claims that Legislation was proposed by State Department of Natural Resources, Division of Mining Land and Water and the Knik River Watershed Group to complete a management plan of the area.

The Mat-Su Borough Parks, Recreation and Trails Advisory Board issued a resolution in 2005 that recommends the area be designated as a State Recreation Area (managed as a park).

Additionally the Bureau of Land Management is planning to create a plan to designate lands of the Knik River drainage as either *Open, Limited or Closed* to ORV.

If we weren't worried before, we should be now. The Knik River area has never seen this focused attention on regulating, reducing, or eliminating motorized use. If we stand by, we will lose some, most or all of our access.

The reality of the issue

In truth, the Knik River drainage appeals primarily to motorized enthusiasts including ATVs, 4x4 trucks, buggies, airboats, aircraft landings, hovercraft or various Off-Road Vehicles (ORV's). The entire Knik River drainage is accessible and one of the most used motorized areas in South Central Alaska. The lands have withstood decades of motorized use without significant resource damage or loss of wildlife. The State of Alaska's Department of Fish and Game reports healthy fish and wildlife numbers.

South Central Alaska needs a place like the Knik River drainage for dedicated use of motorized vehicles. Suggestions have been made to limit or ban airboats or forms of ORV access. The Knik River drainage is the best place for these users to recreate.

The way to protect your access

The Alaska Outdoor Council (AOC) and Alaska Outdoor Access Alliance (AOAA) are standing up for access to Knik River. Both are working with local legislators to develop a bill that would designate the Knik River drainage as a Public Use Area. One of the key tenets of the designation would be to make the preservation of ORV use

as high a priority as preserving the environment. The goal is to ensure that the area is managed so with time motorized use will continue.

In May 2005 bills SB197 and HB307 were introduced by Senator Huggins in the Senate and Representative Stolze in the House on behalf of the AOAA. Recently the Mat-Su Borough Planning Commission and Assembly passed resolutions supporting management in the Knik River drainage. Although neither Borough Agency referred to these bill numbers, the agencies did specifically support the legislation to create a Knik River Public Use Area.

The AOC and AOAA focus regarding the Knik River area will be to ensure these bills don't change significantly in committee. Most importantly motorized access must remain as the primary use designation. We also intend to lobby for the approval of funds for enforcement in the area. Additionally AOAA will work with the BLM to ensure land designations by the BLM are no more restrictive than that of the Knik River Public Use Area.

What YOU must do

The AOC and AOAA have organized special public meetings in July to educate and motivate motorized users about these bills and to ensure ample public comment to support these bills as written. It is very important that you attended our Anchorage or Palmer meeting.

BRING others who care about this issue.

Senator Huggins and Representative Stoltze have been very supportive of motorized users in introducing these bills. We need to support them and ensure they have ample public comment to back up their positions. This fall and more importantly during next year's legislative sessions it will be imperative to provide written and verbal support for SB 197 and HB 307. There has hardly been a time where public participation in support of Traditional motorized access was more important then this summer.

Todd Clark, president
Alaska Outdoor Access Alliance
Dave Ausman, board member
Alaska Outdoor Council