

Statement regarding Kenai River Habitat Reports

RC 238
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Since 1999 the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has been tasked with providing Riparian Habitat reports on a Triennial cycle corresponding to the Upper Cook Inlet Finfish Meetings. This is a summary of my findings on habitat reports for the required assessments.

The H-8 Projects were done by Mary King as the Principal Investigator. She did the original reports called "Assessment of Angler Impacts to Kenai River Riparian Habitats". The 1997 assessment was released in a report June 1999. The 1998 assessment was released in a report with the same name in March 2001. The 1999 assessment was released in a report October 2002. After the habitat assessment in 1999, there was funding from Grant No. F-10-15 (H-8) for FY 2000 to continue the Assessment of Angler Impacts to Kenai River Riparian Habitat. That report has never been published. From what I understand, it never made it out of peer review. In FY 2001 there was funding from Grant No. F-10-16 (H-8) with the same name, with no report. In FY 2002 there was funding from Grant No. F-10-17 (H-8) with the same name, with no report. In FY 2003 there was funding from Grant No. F-10-18 with the same name, with no report. In 2004 there was funding from Grant No. F-10-18 (H-8) entitled "Kenai River Watershed" with no report that I have been able to locate.

When I requested copies of the current Habitat reports for the Kenai River, I was sent the report that was contracted by Kenai River Sport Fishing Association through the Watershed Forum in partnership with Inter-fluve. When I read the report, I see no new habitat studies, it is basically a report about the "Repair Projects" that have been done on the Kenai River which is essentially the Bandaid and not what is actually causing the wound. This report is not a habitat assessment to determine net loss from non-commercial users.

I do have the report that was given to the 2002 Board of Fisheries and the 2005 Board of Fisheries. Both reports are based on the original studies done in 1996-1998 with references to the 2000 and 2001 assessments. From what I have gathered with all of the information that is available to me, there has been significant habitat damage done to the Kenai River Riparian Habitat from Angler foot traffic. The native habitat has been impacted significantly, although the reports say that the cover has not been reduced, the type of cover has been changed. The natural grasses have been replaced by dandelions and horsetail, which are not as effective for bank stability.

In the 2004 report that was prepared for the Alaska Board of Fisheries 2005 Upper Cook Inlet meeting, on page 21 it was asked if we are encroaching on a point where the sport fishery for late-run sockeye salmon has grown to a size that may be negatively impacting rearing habitat of juvenile salmonids at a level that warrants concern? Do you have an answer to that question today? Later, it was stated that

"Salmon runs appear to be highly productive in the Kenai River at present, but cumulative impacts (e.g., development in the riparian zone, changes in water quality, changes in ground and surface water flow, increased bank erosion) may ultimately become a biological concern." "Results of the shore angler impact study showed significant changes to herbaceous and shrub/herbaceous habitats and was measured in three seasons (1998-2000)." What is the state of the riparian habitat on the Kenai River in 2013? Do we believe that the habitat is the same or better than it was in 2000?

The Kenai River Late-Run Sockeye Management Plan states **"The sonar count levels established in (b)(2), (c)(1), and (c)(2) of this section may be lowered by the board if noncommercial fishing, after consideration of mitigation efforts, results in a net loss of riparian habitat on the Kenai River.** The department will, to the extent practicable, conduct habitat assessments on a schedule that conforms to the Board of Fisheries (board) triennial meeting cycle. **If the assessments demonstrate a net loss of riparian habitat caused by noncommercial fishermen, the department is requested to report those findings to the board and submit proposals to the board for appropriate modification of the Kenai River late-run sockeye salmon in-river goal.**

It was asked of the Department "What report will be presented to the Board of Fisheries at the 2014 meeting for Upper Cook Inlet?" With the decline in King Salmon, why is the department not protecting the banks of the Kenai River, where juvenile chinook salmon rear, from increased foot traffic by sockeye fishermen? Why are the reports not being released in a timely manner? By the time the information is released, we will have lost 13 years of data and the ability to make adjustments for the good of the Kenai River and its Chinook, Sockeye and Coho salmon.

Although the Board of Fish cannot direct the department to fund or conduct habitat assessments, they can request current status determining no "NET LOSS" of riparian habitat caused by noncommercial fishermen. When this information is not available, we must assume that there is "NET LOSS" and take action. The Board of Fish does have the ability to lower in-river escapement goals or modify in river methods and means to mitigate negative angler effects on Chinook and Coho Riparian habitat if the Alaska Department of Fish and Game is unable or unwilling to provide these current assessments.