

Compatibility Determination

Use: Recreational Fishing

Primary Use: Fishing (general and other)

Supporting and Incidental Uses: Boating (motorized and non-motorized), fixed-wing aircraft landings, hunting, firewood cutting, trapping, camping, hiking and backpacking, picnicking, pets, natural resource gathering, wildlife photography and videography, swimming and beach use, wildlife observation, snowmobiling.

Refuge Name: Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authority:

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) established the 1.6 million acre Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge (Kanuti Refuge) as part of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuge System (Department of the Interior) in 1980.

Kanuti Refuge Purposes:

ANILCA sets out the primary purposes for each refuge in Alaska. The purposes of the Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge are described in Section 302 (4) (B) of ANILCA and are as follows:

- (i) to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including, but not limited to, White-fronted Geese and other waterfowl and migratory birds, moose, caribou (including participation in coordinated ecological studies and management of the Western Arctic caribou herd), and furbearers;
- (ii) to fulfill the international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats;
- (iii) to provide, in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in subparagraphs (i) and (ii), the opportunity for continued subsistence uses by local residents;
- (iv) to ensure, to the maximum extent practicable and in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in paragraph (i), water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended [16 U.S.C.668dd-668ee]).

Description of Use:

This determination re-evaluates recreational fishing as a compatible use on Kanuti NWR. Recreational fishing was originally found to be compatible in the original Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (1987), and was again determined to be compatible in 1994. Means of access for recreational fishing include fixed-wing airplanes (mainly floatplanes), motorboats, non-motorized boats, hiking and snowmobiling. Associated activities such as camping, backpacking, hiking, and other incidental uses are considered part of wildlife-dependent recreational fishing activities. Recreational fishing occurs spring through fall, and is managed under State of Alaska fishing regulations (5AAC). Of the four major rivers on the refuge, all could be classified as having good recreational fishing opportunities, based on reasonable accessibility by float plane or boat, and sustainable populations of anadromous and/or resident fish. Although all these drainages provide opportunities for day use and overnight primitive camping, cost of traveling to these areas for day-use fishing is prohibitive for most visitors. All drainages provide opportunities for northern pike fishing; however, only the Koyukuk, South Fork Koyukuk, and Jim rivers, and Fish and Henshaw creeks have salmon runs that would attract recreational fishing. Arctic grayling, whitefish, and Dolly Varden are also available in some waters within the refuge. Recreational fishing patterns are estimated primarily through direct observation by refuge staff and reports from local residents. Use is very low outside of the hunting season. Refuge staff members are aware of only a few public recreational trips per year, mainly non-motorized river trips. It is likely recreational fishing occurs on most of these trips.

Availability of Resources:

Adequate refuge personnel and base operational funds are available to manage recreational fishing at existing levels. Administrative staff time primarily involves phone conversations, written correspondence, and could involve engagement in regulatory review. Field work associated with administering the program primarily involves conducting law enforcement patrols to ensure recreational users' compliance with State fishing regulations and refuge regulations and to work with adjacent land owners to monitor public use on rivers flowing onto Kanuti Refuge. It is estimated that less than a week of staff time is required to manage this use on Kanuti NWR.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Both the Federal Subsistence Board and State Board of Fisheries regularly adopt regulations in response to fish population levels and to address issues of fishery allocation. Providing an opportunity for continued subsistence uses of fishery resources by local residents receives the highest priority from the Federal Subsistence Board. Although salmon experienced a worrisome decline in the late 1990's, recent run strengths indicate that a recreational fishery on salmon currently is sustainable. The Kanuti Refuge Fisheries Management Plan (USFWS 1993) warned that refuge fish populations could decline without sufficient data to measure population trends. Based on guidance provided in the Fisheries Management Plan, refuge staff members continue to work with the Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office and ADF&G to implement inventories and studies in the Plan and to conduct other research aimed at understanding fish populations and key habitats on Kanuti Refuge. At current levels recreational fishing harvests require little monitoring, and there are no anticipated deleterious effects on fish habitat. Should intensity of use increase, refuge staff would increase monitoring efforts. If necessary, refuge staff would

review regulations and, propose changes to protect fishery resources and subsistence fishing opportunities for people living near the refuge.

Additional potential impacts or threats are associated with floatplane or motorboat access. The introduction of invasive plant species carried on boats or aircraft floats could affect refuge resources, although it is not known to have occurred on the Kanuti Refuge to date. In addition, frequent motorboat or aircraft traffic could impact nesting, molting or staging birds (Bouffard 1982, Miller 1994 and Ward et al. 1994). Temporary displacement and/or disturbance to wildlife can also occur in response to low level overflights and during aircraft takeoffs and approaches to landings (Calef et al. 1976).

Public Review and Comment:

Public comment was solicited concurrently with the revision of the Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan. One person commented that our bibliography was outdated and that using information from 10-50 years ago is not useful for the future. We find both references from the past and recent ones to be useful for current management. The State questioned inclusion of "pets" as an incidental use in compatibility determinations. We included pets because many people travel with their pets, usually pet dogs, and we were making it clear that pets are allowed to accompany people engaging in these activities.

Refuge Determination (check one below):

☐ Use is Not Compatible
☒ Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

The Fisheries Management Plan for Kanuti Refuge (1993) will be used to identify specific management actions to ensure that recreational fishing and related activities continue to remain compatible with refuge purposes.

Justification:

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (as amended by the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997) identifies compatible recreational fishing as one of six priority public uses of national wildlife refuges. The law states that, when managed in accordance with principles of sound fish and wildlife management, administration of these uses has been, and is expected to continue to be, generally compatible and that priority public uses should receive enhanced consideration over other general public uses in refuge planning and management. The law also states that the Service should provide increased opportunities for families to experience compatible wildlife-dependent recreation, particularly opportunities for parents and their children to safely engage in traditional outdoor activities such as fishing. When determined appropriate and compatible with refuge purposes, Service policy guides refuge managers to provide opportunity for all six wildlife-dependent recreational uses, while maintaining quality of experience. The overarching goal of the wildlife-dependent recreation policy (605 FW 1) is to enhance wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities and access to quality visitor experiences on refuges while managing refuges to conserve fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats.

Means of access by airplanes, motorboats, snowmobiles and non-motorized means for traditional activities, as provided by ANILCA and as currently regulated by the Service, have not materially interfered with or detracted from refuge purposes. Should motorized transportation in support of recreational fishing increase to levels where it interferes with refuge purposes, staff would work with anglers and ADF&G to address impacts and resolve compatibility concerns.

Recreational fishing is an activity that Congress intended to preserve when the refuge was designated by ANILCA. As stated previously, recreational fishing within the refuge provides the public with safe and unique recreational fishing opportunities of a quality found few places elsewhere in the world. The State Board of Fisheries and the Federal Subsistence Board, respectively, review regulations to manage public fishery resources and to provide the continued opportunity for subsistence fishing by local residents in response to changing fish population levels and harvest patterns. These regulations provide adequate protection for the refuge's fishery resources, and continued subsistence opportunities, in balance with other refuge purposes. After fully considering the impacts of these activities, as described previously in the "Anticipated Impacts" section of this document, it is my determination that recreational fishing within the refuge does not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes of the refuge or mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Supporting Documents:

Bouffard, S. 1982. Wildlife values versus human recreation: Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Transactions of the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference 47:553-558.

Calef, G.W., E.A. DeBock, and G.M. Lortie. 1976. The reaction of barren-ground caribou to aircraft. Arctic 29(4):201-212.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1987. Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Wilderness Review, and Environmental Impact Statement. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Anchorage, Alaska. 326 pp.

Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge, Fisheries Management Plan 1993, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Fairbanks, Alaska, 52pp.

Miller, M. W. 1994. Route selection to minimize helicopter disturbance of molting Pacific black brant: a simulation. Arctic 47: 341–349.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2007. Draft Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge . U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Anchorage, Alaska.

Ward, D. H., R. A. Stehn, D. V. Derksen. 1994. Response of staging brant to disturbance at the Izembek Lagoon, Alaska. Wildl. Soc. Bull. 22: 220–228.

Refuge Determination:

Refuge Manager/

Project Leader Approval: /s/ Mike Spindler 8/4/2008
(Signature) (Date)

Concurrence:

Acting Regional Chief,

National Wildlife Refuge System: /s/ Mike Boylan 8/12/2008
(Signature) (Date)

Mandatory 10-Year Re-Evaluation Date (for allowed uses only): _____

Mandatory 15-Year Re-Evaluation Date (for priority public uses): 2023

NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Decision:

_____ Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Memorandum
_____ Categorical Exclusions and Environmental Action Memorandum
 X Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact
_____ Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision