

UNIT 15: HOLITNA RIVER

Background

Location and Land Ownership. The Holitna River management unit encompasses the watersheds of Holitna and Hoholitna Rivers. This is the largest management unit in the planning area, and is nearly all state owned. The land along the Kuskokwim River near Sleetmute is Native owned, and there are three parcels of Native selections near Sleetmute, two of which overlap with state selections. Three small parcels of federal land complete the ownership pattern in the Sleetmute area. The remaining land -- over 90 percent of the total area -- is state owned. Sleetmute, located at the confluence of the Holitna and Kuskokwim, is the only village in the unit. However, there are approximately 165 parcels of private land in or adjacent to this unit. They are a mixture of Native allotments, and federal homesites, headquarters sites, and trade and manufacturing sites.

Resources and Land Use. The central and northern portions of the unit are broad lowlands; western, southern, and eastern boundaries are defined by the Chuilnuk and Kiokluk mountains, the highlands dividing the Kuskokwim basin from Bristol Bay, and the mountains surrounding Sparrevohn Air Force Station. The upper elevations of these ranges are approximately 4,000 feet. The Holitna and Hoholitna rivers, and the lower Chukowan, Kogrukuk, Shotgun, Taylor, and Titnuk waterways are lined by relatively broad bands of white spruce and hardwood forest that are one-half to two miles wide on each side of the river. Some south-facing hillslopes scattered throughout the unit also support hardwood forest that are one-half to two miles wide on each side of the river. The rest of the lowlands is dominated by black spruce woodlands, grading into shrublands on the upper slopes, and alpine tundra on the highest mountains.

The Holitna basin contains the greatest concentration of salmon spawning areas in the entire Kuskokwim drainage and the most productive moose habitat. In addition, these lands support concentrations of bear and waterfowl, and provide winter range for caribou and extensive habitat for furbearers. The fish and wildlife resources of the Holitna basin attract residents of communities from McGrath to Bethel, and sportsmen and guides from throughout Alaska and the continental U.S. The greatest concentration of subsistence activities in the planning area occurs in the Holitna basin. It is used for hunting, trapping, fishing, berry picking, houselog harvest, and firewood collection. It is also the most intensively used part of the basin for sport hunting for moose. Twelve registered hunting guides, six fishing guides, and an unknown number of outfitters use this drainage, targeting moose, caribou, salmon, and sheefish. There are two lodges in the unit, and a third is planned for construction. Salmon from the Holitna drainage provide about 20 percent of the annual salmon harvest for Kuskokwim basin subsistence and commercial fishermen. The king salmon stocks from this and other Kuskokwim drainages are fully allocated at present.

The Holitna basin is rich in other resources as well. The riparian forestlands are among the most productive in the Kuskokwim basin. These forests are highly suitable for settlement and timber harvest for personal and commercial use. The Taylor Mountains and the Kuskokwim Mountains along the western boundary of the unit have moderate to very high mineral potential, a number of existing claims, and two mines that have been active in recent years. Gravel bars in the Kuskokwim River near Sleetmute also have provided materials for local construction projects.

Access. The main access to the unit is by boat on the Kuskokwim, Holitna, and Hoholitna rivers and their major tributaries. Small planes can also land on sections of the Holitna River, numerous lakes, and natural landing areas in the tundra. A public airstrip is maintained at Sleetmute, and there are strips of mining claims at Forty-seven Creek and in the Taylor Mountains. A number of trails cross the unit along major rivers or overland routes into the Kuskokwim Mountains.

Management Intent:

The emphasis of state land management in the Holitna management unit is protection of the fish and wildlife habitat, and support for continued subsistence, commercial, and sport use of these resources. Forestlands will continue to be available for personal and commercial timber harvest. Most of the unit will remain in public ownership, but opportunities for private use of state lands may be made available through a land disposal near Sleetmute, and a land disposal and remote cabin sites along the southern perimeter of the unit and in the Door Mountains. The remote cabin sites and land disposals are located to offer sites that can support private recreation and settlement, while avoiding the main public use areas and most important habitat lands. Land disposal offerings total approximately 3,600 acres of land and there are 56 remote cabin sites.

Most state lands will remain open to mineral entry. However, to protect important salmon populations, spawning beds and rearing areas in known mineralized zones will be closed to new mineral entry. Closures include portions of Portage, Bakbuk, Mukslulik, Taylor, Kiknik, and Chuilnuk creeks, a portion of the Gemuk River, Gemuk Lake, part of an unnamed tributary to the Holitna between Bakbuk and Portage Creeks, and an unnamed tributary of the Hoholitna in the Door Mountains. Uplands along the Gemuk River, Gemuk Lake, Mukslulik Creek and unnamed tributaries of the Holitna and Hoholitna river drainages will be subject to leasehold location requirements to ensure compatibility of mining with salmon spawning and king salmon rearing areas.

In addition to state-owned uplands, the beds of the Kuskokwim, Holitna, Hoholitna, and other navigable waters are state owned and are subject to the guidelines of this plan.

Subunit 15a - Holitna-Hoholitna Corridors

Subunit 15a contains the main stems of the Holitna and Hoholitna rivers, the core of the Holitna basin. It receives more use for subsistence and sport hunting for moose than any other subunit in the planning area, and is important for salmon spawning, and harvest of salmon and resident fish. The Department of Fish and Game's only Kuskokwim weir for estimating the size of salmon runs is located at Kashegelok in the southern part of the subunit. The forests along the rivers are the most productive in the Holitna basin, and some of the best in the entire planning area. This subunit is state owned except for a number of Native allotments along the river. Three permits for trapping cabins have been issued within the subunit. Subunit 15a is accessible by boat and small plane.

The Holitna and Hoholitna Corridors will be kept in public ownership and managed to protect the fish and wildlife habitat and populations, and to support continued use of these resources. The forest lands will be managed to provide timber for personal and commercial and timber harvest. Other uses of this land are permitted when compatible with the primary intent of protecting the fish and wildlife resources. Most state lands in this subunit will remain open to new mineral entry; however, portions of Whitewater Creek, Kiknik Creek, and from unnamed tributaries to Kiknik Creek will be closed to protect salmon rearing areas.

In recognition of the outstanding habitat, forestry, and human use values of this area, it is also recommended that the legislature consider designating it as a state Public Use Area. The Public Use Area would contain subunit 15a and the adjacent portions of subunits 15b and 15c that are rated A-2 ("special value") habitat (see in Appendix A). This designation would be intended to keep these lands in permanent public ownership; protect the fish and wildlife habitat; promote forest management; and ensure that fish, wildlife, and forest resources continue to be available for personal and commercial use. Other uses will be allowed whenever compatible with the intent to protect and manage habitat and forest resources. The Public Use Area would be managed by DNR under a management plan prepared with the concurrence of the Department of Fish and Game.