



Homer Soil and Water Conservation District

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ATV User Group Meeting Ninilchik High School November 13, 2008

Notes from a public meeting held to gather information from trail users and supporters and incorporate their concerns and knowledge into a regional strategic plan for off-road trails in the Homer-Ninilchik area. In particular, the meeting will focus on trails in the Caribou Hills, to prioritize trail needs, coordinate stakeholder efforts, and explore collaborative ways to address trail-related concerns.

Attendance: Homer SWCD District Manager Tara Schmidt introduced herself, District Chair Chris Rainwater, past District Manager Shirley Schollenberg and Trails Coordinator Alder Seaman. User representatives from the general public, Snomads, Caribou Hill Cabin Hoppers, Ninilchik Native Association (NNA), and Cook Inlet Region Inc. (CIRI) were present. Agencies in attendance were Alaska State Troopers (AST), Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) Habitat Division, and the Kenai Peninsula Borough (KPB).

Background information on the District's Role: Tara Schmidt explained that the Homer Soil Water Conservation District (HSWCD) is a quasi-state agency, responsible to the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) that has been representing the private land users and trail groups. Districts do make recommendations to DNR related to the management of our natural resources. District officers are nominated and elected from the Districts cooperators. Districts function at the grass roots level, working in partnership with individual landowners and groups to address resource related concerns and to set goals. Districts are only as successful as their partnerships. The District receives some state and federal funding and leverages the value of the funding by securing matching funds or in kind services. One of the goals for this meeting is to bring together the trail users and the local regulating agencies to prioritize projects, discuss habitat concerns and water quality issues. Shirley Schollenberg gave a brief history of how the HSWCD became involved in trails and water quality issues.

Past Trail Projects: The HSWCD has completed several trail projects and is now stepping back to look at what they have done, determine if the money is being spent wisely, listen to the trail users, and advise DNR regarding easements for public use. Tara described the projects the District has completed at Caribou Lake, Watermelon Trail and a recent grant application for the east side of the Water Hole Trail. Alder Seaman, HSWCD Trails Coordinator, provided a power point presentation on this summer's Water Hole Trail geo-block hardening project. The misuse of the trail by trucks during moose season brings questions about the need for regulation of users and establishing weight class limits, signage or limiting vehicle size. There were no questions for

Alder from the audience. Danny Lehman, representing CIRI, said that CIRI has done geo-block projects, but not on these trails. CIRI had no plans to do any more trails.

The Caribou Hills Cabin Hoppers cleaned up the scraps etc. at the Water Hole Trail Project and felt that the project was not installed correctly. Alder Seaman responded and said the District, once they had seen the damage, organized a work party and used the engineering specs to repair the damage. Chris Rainwater also talked about the site constraints and the difficulty of using geo-block on the wetlands. Group discussion also focused on the need to use heavier geo-grid since the type that was used in the project. The soils underneath the project also determine the success of the geo-grid installation. Truck wheel bases are too wide and geo-grid can't stand up to that type of use. Barriers at the head of trails, signage, and a ten-thousand pound restriction for easements on land owned by DNR were discussed. On state land, if the soil is degraded, the ten thousand pound restriction goes down to one thousand five hundred pounds dry weight. Wet weight includes vehicles, gas, and gear.

Brian Oskolkoff, representing the NNA, felt an assessment of project costs versus the recovery of the wetlands needs to be done. Is the cost worth it? Water Hole Trail is a demonstration project that will be evaluated after a year for vegetation re-growth and project stability. Shirley Schollenberg suggested using gravel for the trails. Caribou Hills has gravel. That would not be an option for the Caribou Lake Trail. There are 490 miles of infrastructure and gravel makes more sense than geo-block. Large trucks using the trails will be a problem no matter what surfacing is used.

Someone from the audience asked why the culverts had been pulled from the existing logging roads and trails. Brian Oskolkoff from NNA said that it was done to comply with the Forest Practices Act. If roadways are not being maintained the Forest Practices Act requires them to be removed. It was also considered a liability issue by NNA.

Prioritizing Goals: The group moved to the next agenda topic of prioritizing future goals and what makes the most sense for the users and the HSWCD. Surveys are costly and it is not always clear what type of survey is needed to establish an easement for a project. A trail from the end of Oilwell Road to Water Hole Trail is all on state land, trail improvements undertaken this past summer need to be surveyed. . The HWSCD sponsored a user group meeting in 2006 and public easements were the top issue. House Bill (HB) 25 may also come into play with trails crossing private property.

Prioritizing goals was discussed and the Snomads said they had \$50,000 invested in the trail systems and easements. Their priorities are easements and parking lots. Snomads identified three main trails they are working on, the Caribou Lake Trail, the North Fork trail and the Watermelon trail. It was stated that currently there are no public easements from the road system east of Homer to Caribou Lake, and obtaining an easement was a priority. Snomads is working with the Kenai Peninsula Borough to establish a parking lot to access the Watermelon trail; they are also working with DNR to obtain a legal easement on this trail. The Caribou Hills Cabin Hoppers priorities are also easements and parking. Tara asked the group to help clarify the vision for the trails in the Caribou Hills.

Four Corners to Caribou Lake is clearly a winter trail, not a 4 season trail. There was a general consensus that it would be a valuable to our community to establish an easement from the 4-corners area to Caribou Lake, and that if a year round trail were to be developed it would be well utilized.

Neil Shishido, from DNR, has a trail concept that he shared with the Snomads board. Dave Mastolier, president of Snomads, outlined this trail concept. The trail would go from Water Hole (year round trail) to Center Plateau (year round trail) to Deep Creek Dome (winter trail) to Caribou Lake. The creek stops the connection of the segments. Chris Rainwater suggested bridging the creeks. The only issues are hardening the trail for summer time use. The current DNR practice requires a land use permit first, the trail construction and then the easement is issued. All present supported the idea of issuing the easement first, building trails, bridges and hardening the trail because the costs are prohibitive. There is only one person in DNR who does trails. Mat-Su Borough has trail authority and is paying for a DNR employee to adjudicate trail issues in their borough. Since the position has been funded two thousand miles of trails reserved in the Mat-Su Borough.

Mat-Su Borough has the advantage in that they can hold a public easement; KPB lacks the authority to do so, limiting the State somewhat. There needs to be an entity willing to have cooperative agreement with DNR, or to hold easements.

Easements stay with the land when the land status changes. Easements are also about the right to travel and improve the trails. There was a sense that process of acquiring easements on trails through DNR is way to cumbersome. The rule that requires surveys if the trail is within one hundred feet of private property is also a problem.

The 5000 Road is on CIRI land and the users should ask if it can be used instead of the Deep Creek Dome as a connection point. There was a consensus that it would benefit CIRI to gather all trail users to one trail. The state land at Deep Creek Dome is wetlands. Chris Rainwater pointed out that there is potential for the current Farm Bill to reimburse native land owners and Seaton's HB 25 would relieve them of liability. Brian Oskolkoff pointed out that CIRI manages its lands for profit. If easements are granted now, how are they retracted later when the land use changes? One audience member said that CIRI can grant permission now and rescind it later. It would be better to keep the trails on state land. Danny Lehman went on to say that CIRI is interested in all plans and ideas for the Caribou Hills.

Paul Seaton explained HB 25 and how it relates to trails across private property. The bill does not give permanent access.

In summary, there appears to be agreement among the users for the winter trails. Summer easements are more difficult because of Anchor River on the southern end. People will stay on the trails and bridges if they are provided. We need to have easements to keep all of the activities valid. Clarification of the routes and defining the public routes is also needed. Everyone agreed that anadromous stream crossings are valid concerns and that it is to benefit of the trail users to address these concerns before there is any action to limit access to these areas.

Follow Up Actions:

- Develop trail plans that would address the wetland and stream crossings on the Deep Creek Dome trail to allow all season use. Promote an all season easement from 4-corners to Caribou Lake.
- Meet with DNR, DLMW easement unit to review existing trail usage and encourage easements.
- Seek funds to address stream crossings on the Watermelon trail, work with DNR to establish a public easement on this trail.