

RC 215



Kenai Area Fisherman's Coalition
Position Paper

Proposal 238

**Rationale for Additional Drift Only Fishing Day on the Kenai River
For Both Guided and Unguided Anglers**

In 1999, the Alaska Board of Fisheries designated Mondays as a day on which fishing from a drift boat was permitted. Prior to that year, Mondays were closed to fishing from a boat. Although proposals that year asked for drifting on a day currently open to power boat anglers, the Board chose Monday to allow

Managers to gauge the popularity of this fishery without disrupting the established guided angling industry. By not including guided anglers in the Monday fishery, the Board also partly addressed concerns about the disparity in harvest between guided and non-guided anglers. The board deliberations also touched on the need for guides to explore alternatives to the current fishery that was already causing social and environmental problems in the lower Kenai River, and talked about revisiting this issue in the future.

The social issues identified then are still at the core of angler concerns today. The Kenai River Recreation Use Study recently completed for the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) indicates that significant majorities of users say the river is too crowded at certain times and in certain areas. The Lower River Chinook fishery in July is cited as the most contentious fishery. The source of these problems is perceived to be too many boats, lack of knowledge of boating technique, and aggressive behavior associated with attempts by anglers to fish the 'best holes'.

The public, and resource agencies, also acknowledge that the River is facing significant habitat issues that pose a threat to long term salmon production. These issues are a result of excessive power boat traffic and uncontrolled development in the riparian corridor.

The complex issues affecting the productivity of the river requires a coordinated effort by Agencies, Governments, and Non-Governmental Organizations. The Alaska DNR is now tasked with developing strategies to address the myriad of issues identified by their study that are within their purview. The BOF also needs to recognize that they have a part in addressing issues for which they have regulatory authority.

Perhaps the most widely proposed first step to addressing some of the issues is to add another day of driftboat only fishing on the river that is open to all anglers. This idea is favored by many constituent groups. The DNR commissioned Kenai River Recreation Use Study found that "Majorities of driftboat users (80%), driftboat guides (85%), and bank anglers (55%) support additional "drift-only" days on the Lower and Middle River.

The Kenai Area Fisherman's Coalition has submitted proposal 238 asking for an additional day of drift only fishing. Attempts at previous BOF meetings to gain additional drift boat days have raised numerous objections. The remainder of this paper provides a brief response to those objections, and other reasons why additional drift boat only fishing is beneficial to the social and environmental health of the Kenai River.

1. **Adequacy of boat launch infrastructure.** The attached maps show the locations of public and some private launches as well as access points that are or can potentially be used as launch sites. There are many additional private launch sites throughout the river not marked. Additional launch / take-out sites are also coming online in 2014 and 2015 as the Kenai Landing site, below the Warren Ames Bridge, is in the process of boat ramp improvements and increased parking.

The state has also purchased Eagle Rock Boat Launch and is planning on many improvements and increased capabilities.

Launch site parking issues facing Upper and Middle river anglers are currently addressed by professional drivers who deliver vehicles and trailers to pull out locations. These services evolved to meet the needs of the fishery. This same adaptation will occur in the lower river, as will services that trailer boats and transport them back to the point of origin.

2. Adequacy of Bathroom facilities. The attached maps show the locations of public restrooms. They are located at two to three mile intervals throughout the lower river and have temporary boat tie-ups. Most private launches that cater to customers paying per launch also provide facilities. A significant portion of guides also have river accessible business locations.

3. Egress is limited below Eagle Rock. There are two high volume pull out locations downstream of Eagle Rock. Downstream transportation was addressed at the 2011 BOF meeting by the passage of a regulation allowing motor use to navigate downstream when fishing has ceased for the trip. This approach has worked well for many years in the Kasilof River fishery.

4. Potential for anchor dragging. Dragging of an anchor is already prohibited in the Kenai River, as is anchoring that obstructs passage in the channel. These regulations apply regardless of the type of fishery. The coho fishery, which is primarily an on-anchor fishery, is subject to the same regulations. There have been no citations for improper anchoring in the coho or any other existing fishery on the Kenai River.

5. Potential reduction in catch efficiency. Efficiency of Chinook salmon fishing is related to a variety of factors, especially the use of bait. Current ADF&G data suggests little difference in efficiency between non-guided anglers in the drift boat and power boat fisheries, leading to the conclusion that there would also be no difference in efficiency in guided angler fisheries.

6. Participation in the late run Chinook salmon fishery will go down with an additional drift boat day. Monday drift boat participation is currently approaching 20,000 angler days per year and has doubled in the last five years. The power boat fishery results in about 200,000 angler hours per year during the last decade, down about 15% from the previous decade. It should be noted that these numbers do not reflect the many LR restrictions put in place in 2012 & 2013 due to low run abundance.

In terms of average angler hours per day, power boaters appear to outnumber drift fisherman about 2 to 1. However, the same numbers of non-guided anglers are fishing on the drift only days as any other day of the week. The difference in participation is due to the lack of a guided angler component. We anticipate that the growth of the guided angler drift fishery will equal that of the current non-guided angler effort.

7. There is a cost to the guide industry in new equipment. Approximately one third of guides currently register a drift boat with DNR.

8. **A change would discriminate against those not able to row.** All fishing methods discriminate against some fishermen. The cost of a power boat discriminates against a large portion of the fishing public. Further, fishing from a drift boat can be conducted in a variety of ways including at anchor and drifting, both of which require very little rowing.

9. **Auto fuel increases associated with transporting.** This argument has been made without documentation of vehicle and boat fuel tradeoffs. Upper and middle river anglers currently employ professional drivers who deliver vehicles and trailers to pull out locations. These services evolved to meet the needs of the fishery. This same adaptation will occur in the lower river, as will services that trailer boats and transport them back to the point of origin.

10. **Monopolizing the fishing hole by using an anchor buoy.** This is an issue in the coho fishery where anchor buoys are used to 'reserve' a spot when a boat unhooks to chase a hooked fish. The boat then returns to the marker buoy to resumed anchored fishing. Pulling the anchor in a drift fishery generally results in downstream displacement. Regardless, use of anchor buoy to reserve a fishing spot does not occur in other current Chinook fisheries and is presumed to be a non-issue.

11. **Shuttling of clients to an anchored drift boat.** This does not occur in current fisheries and can be addressed by making it illegal to haul Chinook salmon in motorized shuttles that were caught in the drift only fishery.

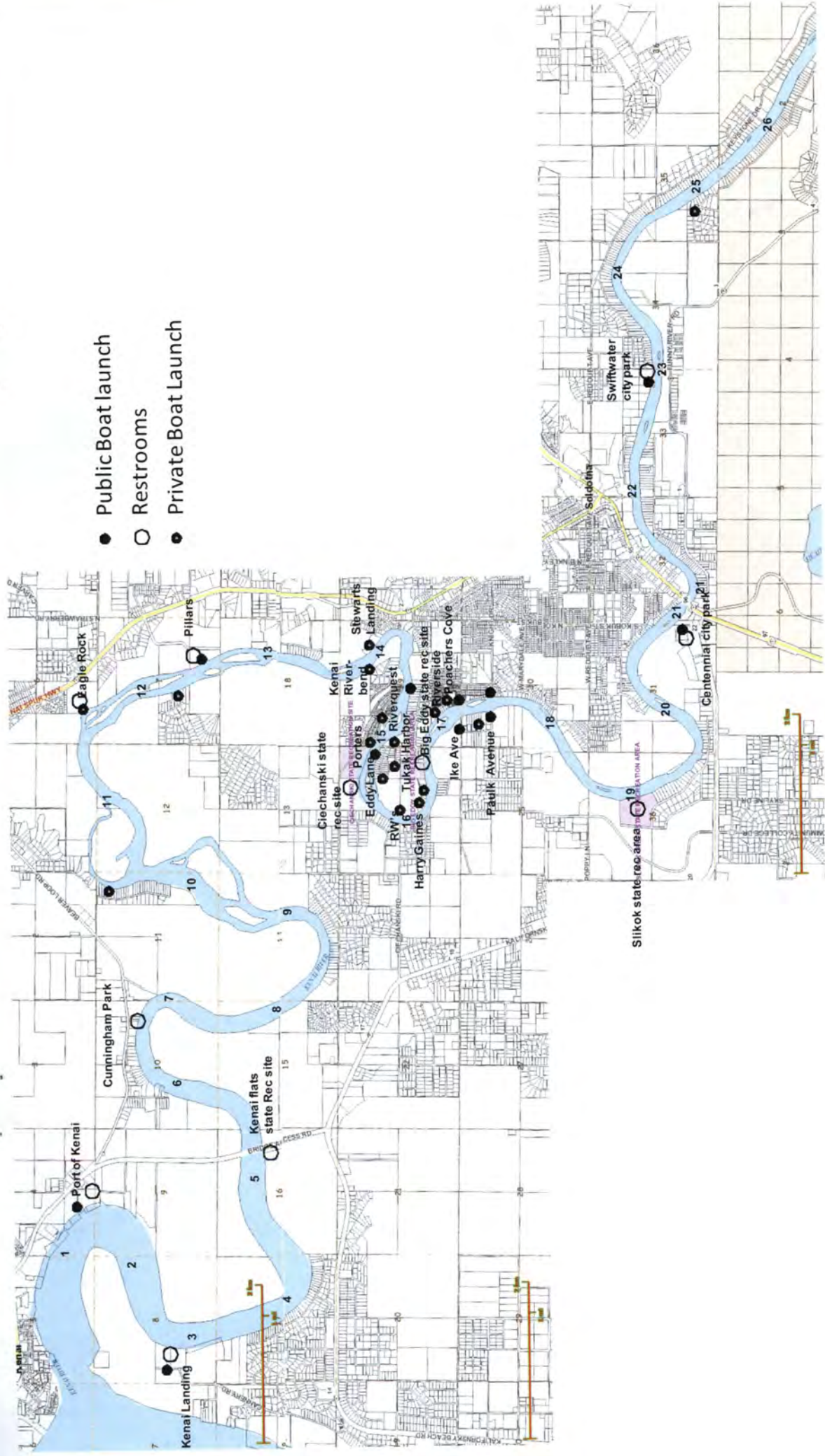
12. **The rise of hog lines.** This doesn't currently happen in the drift fishery. There is no reason to believe that this will change when guides are allowed to participate.

There are numerous positive reasons for drift only fisheries. Environmentally, the river is recovering from excessive hydrocarbon levels, but long term chronic low level consequences are unknown. Boat wakes are causing a measurable increase in erosion, and more recently are exceeding Environmental Protection Agency limits for turbidity at certain times and locations. Both the DEC and EPA are considering a water quality listing and remediation program for the Kenai River if the turbidity issues can't be resolved.

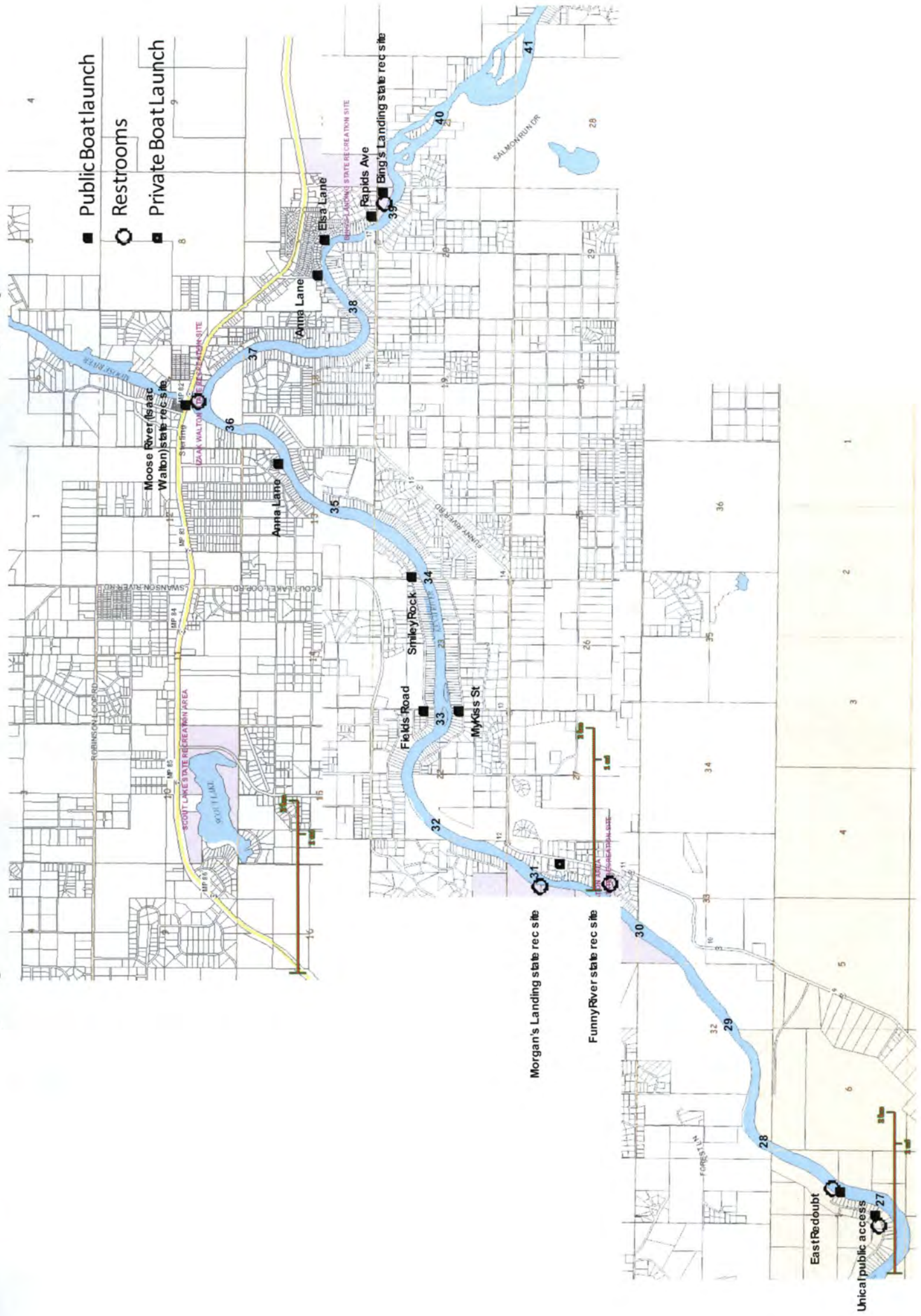
Drift boat anglers tout the quality of the experience without the constant roar of outboard motors, and the perception that there are fewer people on the river because of the absence of running. There is also evidence that fish behavior is altered by constant boat motor frequency and prop noise. Distribution of fish on drift only days may offer catch opportunities in areas currently avoided by fish due to disturbance.

Guides will get the chance to explore new business models and attract a whole new and different group of anglers.

- Public Boat launch
- Restrooms
- Private Boat Launch



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