



18 March, 2016

Mayor Vern Halter and Assembly Members
Matanuska-Susitna Borough
350 E. Dahlia Avenue
Palmer, Alaska 99645

Re: Establishment of Riparian Buffer Standards for Anadromous Streams - IM 16-057

Dear Mayor Halter and Assembly members,

I am writing on behalf of the Mat-Su Basin Salmon Habitat Partnership in support of the establishment of riparian buffer standards for anadromous streams (IM 16-057). The Mat-Su Salmon Partnership formed in 2005 to address increasing human use and development related impacts to salmon and their habitat in the Mat-Su Basin. Over 60 tribal, local, state and federal governments, businesses, private land-owners, fishing interests and non-profits are now partners. The Mat-Su Borough is a founding member and has a permanent seat on the Steering Committee.

In 2008, the Partnership completed a comprehensive Strategic Action Plan, revised in 2013, that outlines goals for conserving and restoring salmon habitat in the Mat-Su Basin. **In 2015, the Partnership identified maintenance of intact riparian areas along lakes, streams and rivers as one of its top four conservation priorities.**

Alteration of riparian habitat can have numerous negative consequences for healthy salmon populations including loss of cover and potentially increasing stream temperatures - a concern for developing salmon fry. Decreases in large instream woody debris can also potentially increase vulnerability to predation, lower winter survival, decrease spawning gravel and reduce food availability. Impacts to riparian areas can ultimately reduce the capacity of waterbodies to produce salmon. It is also important to know that intact riparian areas benefit both salmon and people. They protect human infrastructure and reduce the impacts of floods. For these reasons, many partners have focused their efforts on both conserving intact areas and restoring degraded streambank and streamside habitats, as well as educating landowners about how to care for habitat.

Palmer Soil and Water Conservation District recently completed an assessment of riparian impacts on 35 priority waterbodies in the Mat-Su. Although some waterbodies like Big Lake, Blodgett Lake and Cottonwood Creek had 27%, 12% and 4% impacted shorelines respectively, the overall percentage of impacted shorelines remains relatively low. This underscores both the recognition there are areas of concern, and there is a great opportunity in the Mat-Su to conserve riparian salmon habitats before they are impacted and financial resources expended in their restoration.

There are precedents for these important standards. Two examples include the Alaska Forest Resources and Practices Act (AS 411.7), where the State of Alaska requires riparian buffers to protect fish and water quality for timber harvest activities, and in the Kenai Peninsula Borough. In response to increased urbanization effects, the Kenai Peninsula Borough designated portions of the Kenai River for riparian buffer protection to safeguard salmon spawning and rearing habitat in 1996. Today nearly all anadromous rivers, streams and lakes in the borough are included in the ordinance (KPB 21.18.025).

Adopting standards for riparian buffers next to streams and rivers that are recognized as high priority habitat for salmon will address critical goals for salmon conservation identified in the Partnership's Strategic Action Plan. Specifically, this project will address the plan's Overall Riparian Goal: to prevent alteration of riparian areas that provide valuable salmon habitat in the Mat-Su. It also directly meets Strategic Action 2.2.2 to protect riparian habitat with local mechanisms that maintain a riparian buffer along all priority waterbodies in the Mat-Su Borough.

Proactive policies are key to keeping Mat-Su salmon and their habitat intact, and not in a damaged state like much of the lower 48 states. In the Mat-Su, we still have intact salmon habitat and the Mat-Su Borough has exhibited great commitment and leadership in supporting that healthy freshwater habitat essential to wild abundant salmon runs. We encourage you to establish riparian buffer standards for anadromous streams (IM 16-057) that will help maintain healthy salmon habitat on top priority salmon streams in the Mat-Su. Thank you.

On behalf of the Steering Committee of the Mat-Su Salmon Partnership,



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Mat-Su Basin Salmon Habitat Partnership Steering Committee:

Roger Harding, Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Erika Ammann, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Lee Stephan, Native Village of Eklutna
Arni Thomson, Alaska Salmon Alliance
Jon Gerken, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Corinne Smith, The Nature Conservancy
Frankie Barker, Mat-Su Borough
Christy Cincotta, Tyonek Tribal Conservation District
Jessica Winnestaffer, Chickaloon Village Traditional Council