



## **SOUTHWEST ALASKA SALMON HABITAT PARTNERSHIP STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN**

### **THE PARTNERSHIP**

The Southwest Alaska Salmon Habitat Partnership (Partnership) is an unincorporated association of local communities, Native organizations, subsistence users, anglers, hunters, commercial fishing interests, lodge owners, hunting and fishing guides, tourism interests, non-profit organizations, federal, state, and local agencies and corporations and foundations working cooperatively to conserve fish, wildlife and habitat and perpetuate the uses they support in Southwest Alaska. The Partnership serves as a clearinghouse, coordinator and point of synergy to increase habitat conservation, fund raising and education. Projects are accomplished through the coordinated work of partners. Several of the partners are 501(c)3 non-profit organizations and are the recipients of charitable contributions to support the Partnership's work.

The Partnership is governed by a Board, which consists of representatives from Native organizations, non-profit organizations, businesses, federal and state agencies. The Board provides strategic direction for the Partnership and serves as a forum for partners to interact, develop strategy and implement projects.

The Board is supported by a Technical Committee which serves as staff to the Partnership's Board. The Committee is primarily comprised of biologists and resource managers familiar with ongoing research and monitoring programs, historical data and other information. The Committee provides several important staff services to the Board and the Partnership (see Science and Data section of this plan).

### **THE GEOGRAPHIC SERVICE AREA**

The Partnership directs its efforts to habitat protection throughout Southwest Alaska, including the Alaska Peninsula, all Bristol Bay watersheds and the watersheds flowing into the Kuskokwim River from the south and east up to and including the Aniak River, an area of 39.8 million acres.

### **MISSION**

The Partnership works with foundations, corporations, governments, and individuals to raise awareness of the importance of protecting fish habitat in Southwest Alaska and to obtain support and funds to be used by agencies, land trusts and others to conserve private lands in cooperation with willing owners and to protect public waters essential for fish habitat.

## **VISION**

The Partnership envisions naturally sustainable fish and wildlife populations, in all their biodiversity, thereby perpetually supporting compatible human uses throughout Southwest Alaska.

## **RESOURCE ASSESSMENT AND ISSUES**

Southwest Alaska is home to a diverse and abundant array of fish and wildlife including a rich mix of brown bears, caribou, moose, and migratory birds. The region's pure waters teem with millions of wild salmon and trout. Subsistence use of fish and wildlife has been a way of life for thousands of years. Commercial fishing, subsistence, sport fishing and hunting, wilderness enjoyment and other recreational activities have flourished for decades supporting local people, communities and businesses. The rich natural resources have attracted visitors from around the world and provided immeasurable recreation and enjoyment.

Fish, particularly salmon, are the heart of Southwest Alaska, forming the basis for the ecology, economy, and culture. Nowhere else in the world do such robust fisheries flourish, supporting commercial, subsistence and sport fishing. Their abundance over such a grand area is unrivaled. The millions of returning salmon feed bears and bald eagles, their spawn feeds rainbow trout and char, their decaying carcasses release the nutrients, which allow the annual cycle to continue.

By almost any measure the habitat in Southwest Alaska that supports the diverse array of fish and wildlife is pristine and intact. Much of this habitat is protected by virtue of its inclusion within six National Wildlife Refuges, three National Parks and the largest state park in the United States. These conservation units comprise 23.5 million acres. Large tracts of Native Corporation land, State designated critical habitat areas and other federal, state, and local lands complement these conservation areas.

This richness and abundance of Southwest Alaska fisheries and their habitats are documented in numerous land and resource management plans including those listed in appendix 1, management and research reports and data bases such as those maintained by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game;  
<http://www.cf.adfg.state.ak.us/geninfo/pubs/pubshome.php>.

The sustainability of Southwest Alaska's natural resources is in question in spite of the region being blessed with abundant fish and wildlife and large areas of high quality habitat conserved by public agencies and Native landowners. Perhaps nowhere else in North America exists such a mix of high quality fish and wildlife habitats supporting diverse, economically and socially valuable uses yet confronted by an uncertain future because of the potential disposition of strategic private lands along major anadromous fish rivers and lakes.

Maintaining and protecting the quality of the existing habitat is the primary focus of the Partnership's efforts. Habitat degradation is generally localized and site specific. It is not expected the Partnership will become significantly involved in habitat restoration or enhancement in the foreseeable future. A measure of the Partnership's success will be the prevention of the kinds of habitat degradation that requires restoration and enhancement to revitalize fish and wildlife populations in the other 49 states and other parts of Alaska. Restoration and enhancement activities will most likely occur as part of the effort to protect a specific parcel of private property where the parcel is acquired and some measure of clean-up or restoration is appropriate.

Changing land ownership, increased population pressure, incompatible development, and burgeoning growth of recreation create conflicts that threaten habitat stability and existing uses. Hundreds of small tracts of private land, mostly Native allotments, are located along rivers and lakes, where fish and wildlife are abundant, access and harvest are easiest and camping is good. These same qualities make allotments attractive locations for lodges, recreational subdivisions and other development. Because of their strategic locations, private lands have an enormous impact on long-term sustainability of fish, wildlife and habitat, far exceeding the modest acreage they encompass.

The future disposition and use of these lands will largely determine the sustainability of Southwest Alaska's fish and wildlife and the uses they support. History of the other 49 states demonstrates conflicting land use and habitat fragmentation have been the major causes of declines of fish and wildlife and dependent uses. Stable, high value habitats must be ensured if future generations are going to enjoy the diverse and high quality opportunities that Southwest Alaska provides today.

## **PRIORITY CONSERVATION ACTIONS**

The pristine character of fish and wildlife habitat in Southwest Alaska drives the conservation actions of the Partnership. Sustaining the existing high level of fish habitat integrity and productivity is the focus.

The sustainability of Southwest Alaska's pristine habitat is uncertain despite the fact the region has abundant fish and wildlife and large areas of high quality habitat conserved by State and Federal agencies. Uncertainty arises because the ongoing and potential development of private lands and general use public lands within the region could degrade areas of high habitat value and undermine the fish and wildlife management practices within State and Federal conservation units.

Private lands, almost exclusively Native owned, in Southwest Alaska are disproportionately located along the coastal and riparian areas of the Region. Native lands were selected based on historical use. Historically, Alaska Natives relied upon salmon for over 90% of their subsistence foods; importance that continues today. There is a 100% correlation between the distribution of Native communities and major salmon runs. Therefore, Alaska Natives have enormous land holdings along the great anadromous fish systems of Southwest Alaska. Many of these tracts are located within

conservation units. Changing land ownership, increased population pressure, incompatible development, the burgeoning growth of recreation and the proliferation of mining claims create conflicts that threaten habitat stability, productivity and existing uses.

Conservation of these sites decreases conflicts between subsistence users, other local residents, anglers, hunters, wilderness users, and commercial operators. Resource depletion, displacement of wildlife, competition with historic uses and management problems for Native corporate landowners and state and federal agencies are reduced.

In addition to small tracts, hundreds of thousands of acres of land are owned by Alaska Native corporations created under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. Most of these lands contain traditional hunting and fishing areas and are located along river corridors and lake shores. These lands are corporate assets and subject to future disposition or commercial development to support the business interests of these Native corporations. Such business interests will often be incompatible with maintaining high quality fish habitat.

Accordingly, the primary focus of the conservation actions of the partnership will be to identify areas of high habitat value for fish and wildlife located on private lands within the region and perpetually secure those values.

## **OBJECTIVES**

- Conserve riparian habitats in drainages supporting anadromous and resident fish.
- Strengthen local communities by perpetuating fish, wildlife, and compatible human uses.
- Support historic uses of fish and wildlife through habitat conservation.
- Restore and enhance riparian habitat and associated uplands on public and private lands.
- Improve habitat management on publicly and privately owned riparian habitat and associated uplands through the use of cooperative management agreements and voluntary incentive programs.
- Reduce land management conflicts through habitat conservation.
- Identify, prioritize, and conserve important habitat.
- Support monitoring and evaluation of existing restoration projects, as well as pertinent research studies, to improve future restoration projects.
- Ensure traditional access points remain available to the public.
- Strengthen existing and promote new funding sources for habitat conservation.
- Encourage cooperation between the Partnership's members and other regional initiatives that have the potential for habitat conservation.

## **HABITAT CONSERVATION STRATEGIES**

Using an integrated, non-regulatory approach and an ecosystem perspective, the Partnership seeks to 1) create partnerships to complete habitat projects that benefit fish, wildlife, habitat and the full spectrum of uses they support, 2) leverage resources, and 3) develop new funding sources and match existing ones. Because the ecology, economy, subsistence harvest, and other uses of natural lands are driven by the fisheries, primarily anadromous, the Partnership focuses on land conservation along rivers, lakes, and streams to achieve its goals and objectives. The Partnership works through its partners to complete on-the-ground habitat projects and provides a forum to share skills, funding and information.

The Partnership does not own land, hold easements, apply for water rights or manage habitat. Rather, the Partnership raises support for partners who do. As funds are available the Partnership will direct resources to habitat protection priorities established in the relevant management plans adopted for the State and Federal conservation units in the service area, or developed by partners for areas outside those conservation units.

In all cases where an ownership interest is to be acquired by funds raised by the Partnership the preferred interest is a fee acquisition. However, conservation easements are the preferred interest where the seller is an Alaska Native or Alaska Native corporation and the retained rights support the continuation of subsistence use.

The Partnership endorses and will seek funding to support the following strategies:

### **1. Alaska Native Corporation Lands Located Outside of Conservation Units**

The strategy for the long term protection of Alaska Native corporation lands outside of conservation units is to harness financial resources that make it possible for these corporations to use conservation easements to perpetuate land management programs that continue to protect habitat and recognize subsistence as the priority use of these lands. Funding raised by the Partnership that can be used for Alaska Native corporation lands will be directed first to lands of significant habitat value within watersheds most likely to be threatened by industrial or commercial development. Preference shall be extended to corporations who are willing partners and who have land use management plans that dedicate habitat for permanent protection.

### **2. Small Parcels Located Outside of Conservation Units**

The strategy for the long term protection of small parcels, primarily Alaska Native allotments, located outside of conservation units is to encourage planning partners like the Nushagak-Mulchatna Watershed Council, The Nature Conservancy and others to prioritize the parcels by watershed within their geographic service areas and then the Partnership will help secure funding to conserve the highest priority parcels in the

watersheds, which are those most likely to be threatened by industrial or commercial development.

### 3. Alaska Native Corporation Lands Located Within Conservation Units

The strategy for the long term protection of Alaska Native corporation lands within conservation units is to harness financial resources that make it possible for these corporations to use conservation easements to perpetuate land management programs that protect habitat and continue to recognize subsistence use of these lands. Preference shall be extended to corporations who are willing partners and who have lands identified as habitat priorities by the land management plan of the conservation unit in which the lands are located.

### 4. Small Parcels Located Within Conservation Units

The strategy for the long term protection of small parcels, primarily Alaska Native allotments, located within conservation units like the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge, the Wood-Tikchik State Park, Alagnak Wild River and others is to acquire fee or conservation easement interests for those parcels identified as priorities by the land management plans of the conservation units in which the lands are located.

### 5. Water Rights – Instream Flow Reservations

The strategy for the long term protection of water quantity in the lakes and rivers in the geographic service area is to take advantage of those provisions in Alaska law that permit private individuals and organizations to secure legally enforceable rights to keep water in rivers and lakes for fish. Funds raised by the Partnership may be used to support partners applying for instream flow reservations to sustain fish habitat. Priority use of Partnership funds will be directed to supporting partners applying for instream flow reservation to protect fish in those watersheds most likely to be threatened by industrial or commercial development.

## **PERIODIC REVIEW OF STRATEGIES**

Given the hundreds of small parcels of private property scattered through-out the region, the hundreds of thousands of acres of private land owned by Alaska Native corporations, and the thousands of miles of river and stream reaches that are not protected by in-stream flow reservations, it is not anticipated Partnership strategies will need to change in the short-term. Likewise, because of the opportunistic nature of acquiring land and conservation easements and the wide spread need for private land protection throughout the region it is not anticipated that prioritizing the needs of sub-regions or watersheds will be necessary in the short-term. However, it is reasonable to anticipate that Partnership strategies may bring about satisfactory results in a particular watershed in the future such that further protections are either unnecessary or should be subservient to needs of other watersheds. To this end the Technical Committee established by the Partnership Board will meet regularly and review existing fish,

instream flow and other data, review the accomplishments of Partnership members and make recommendations regarding strategies, the geographic focus of the Partnership's efforts within the region and needs for additional or alternative data collection and research.

A change in geographic focus within the region may also be warranted by threats posed by planned development. The Technical Committee will be called upon periodically to assess the likelihood of development in the region with a view towards recommending changes in geographic focus warranted by the threat of development.

## **PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA**

The Partnership will seek to support projects that serve its mission, further its objectives, fit within one of its strategies and generally meet the following criteria:

### Location:

1. Within Southwest Alaska as defined by the Partnership.
2. Located within or would likely impact a state or federal conservation unit, area of special designation, a documented sensitive habitat area, e.g. salmon spawning area, caribou calving area, moose wintering area, or within an area of high biodiversity identified in an Eco-regional Plan or similar document.
3. Property is located so its protection may preserve or protect a much larger area than the parcel itself, i.e., the parcel is surrounded by already protected land or the property provides a habitat connection or corridor between parcels of protected land.

### Threat:

Key habitats within the parcel or the entire parcel are vulnerable to or potentially threatened by disturbance, habitat loss, fragmentation or degradation; or development of the parcel threatens key habitats/sites on adjacent public lands, or threatens a rare, endemic, or irreplaceable type of habitat.

### Management

1. Identified public, corporate or other organizational land manager willing to accept perpetual conservation management responsibility.
2. High priority tract for resource land manager or other organization.

### Cost

1. Seller willing to accept appraised value.

2. Owner willing to contribute to protection through bargain sale, easement donation or fee acreage elsewhere, stewardship fund endowment, or paying transaction costs.
3. The project is deemed attractive to donors and is likely fundable.
4. Contributions available from other sources.

## SCIENCE AND DATA

The Technical Committee will serve as staff to the Partnership's Board. The Committee will be primarily comprised of biologists and resource managers familiar with ongoing research and monitoring programs, historical data and other information.

The Committee will provide several important services to the Partnership. The Committee will:

- review existing fisheries and habitat related data available from multiple sources including those listed in appendix 1. Major data sources include the Alaska Department of Fish and Game salmon escapement and harvest data, <http://www.cf.adfg.state.ak.us/geninfo/pubs/pubshome.php>; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fisheries studies, e.g., [http://togiak.fws.gov/fish\\_research.htm](http://togiak.fws.gov/fish_research.htm); and academic institutions, e.g., the University of Washington's Alaska Salmon Program, <http://fish.washington.edu/research/alaska/>.
- assess existing fish populations and habitat conditions.
- identify process-level issues that may cause declines of fish, other aquatic species and the capacity of aquatic habitats.
- periodically assemble knowledgeable individuals and expertise, beyond its own membership, to gain broader perspectives of needed strategies for fish habitat conservation.
- develop strategies for preventing or minimizing impacts to fish populations and aquatic habitats.
- recommend to the Board project strategies, priorities, data collection needs, partnership opportunities, funding needs and strategies, changes in strategic direction and such other matters as it may wish the Board to consider.
- develop strategies to monitor project implementation and success in achieving the desired outcomes.
- interface with and provide data to the National Fish Habitat Board staff consistent with established procedures and standards.

APPROVED: 

DATE: 03/28/08

Appendix 1. Comprehensive Conservation Plans, General Management Plans, Watershed Plans, and other management plans available for use by the Partnership.

A. Comprehensive and Master Plans

Wood-Tikchik State Park Master Plan  
Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan  
Becharof National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan  
Togiak National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan  
Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan  
Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan  
Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan  
Lake Clark National Park and Preserve General Management Plan  
Katmai National Park and Preserve General Management Plan  
Aniakchak National Monument General Management Plan  
Alagnak Wild River Management Plan  
Bristol Bay Resource Area Management Plan

B. Fisheries Management Plans

Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuge Fisheries Management Plan  
Becharof National Wildlife Refuge Fisheries Management Plan  
Togiak National Wildlife Refuge Fisheries Management Plan  
Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Fisheries Management Plan  
Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge Fisheries Management Plan

C. Land Protection Plans

Alaska Peninsula National Wildlife Refuge Land Protection Plan  
Becharof National Wildlife Refuge Land Protection Plan  
Togiak National Wildlife Refuge Land Protection Plan  
Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Land Protection Plan  
Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge Land Protection Plan

D. Other Relevant Plans

Nushagak Bay Watershed Plan  
Nushagak River Watershed Traditional Use Area Conservation Plan  
Bristol Bay Coastal Zone Resource Area Management Plan  
Bristol Bay Ecoregional Plan  
Wood-Tikchik Site Conservation Plan  
Pacific Coast Joint Venture Strategic Plan