

## **Jim Creek's lawless parties may end**

### **Junked cars, reckless shooting may force state to create new use rules**

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JIM CREEK -- It must be spring in the Butte.

Four-wheelers zipped along the Knik River's broad mud flats. A hidden bird sang in a cottonwood on a dune above the popular fishing hole and party spot where Jim Creek flows into the Knik.

And, for the third year in a row, state resource officers counted burned-out, bullet-riddled cars and pickups lining the water.

"Oh, wow," state Department of Natural Resources resource specialist Adam Smith said Friday as he walked up a small rise to a Ford Bronco. Bullet holes pocked the Bronco's chassis and valve covers, but the old Ford was still reasonably intact.

"It's got a license plate on it and everything," said co-worker Justin Selvik.

Smith recorded the plate in hopes the state could track down the person who dumped it. That doesn't always work, though.

"It's probably stolen," Selvik said.

This is the third year for the abandoned vehicle count on heavily used state lands along the Knik, popular with both locals and Anchorage visitors. But the state isn't going to put up with the Jim Creek salvage job for long.

If problems with junk and trash continue, both men said, officials may have no choice but to create a new special use designation for state lands along the Knik all the way over to Mud and Jim lakes.

The designation could bring new restrictions on target shooting or four-wheelers, Smith said.

"It's too bad," he said. "It's not that many people screwing it up, just a small percentage."

Any new designation would be a ways off, after public hearings, Smith said. And, he added, it would have to unfold with cooperation from the Mat-Su Borough -- which owns the access road to Jim Creek -- as well as Alaska State Troopers.

The Butte is the part of the Valley closest to Anchorage, a community of about 3,000 that has largely retained its rural personality but is expected to double in population within 20 years.

Borough officials are in the midst of developing a plan for the 6,000 acres of borough-owned lands in the Butte.

Meanwhile, locals are trying to get a handle on weekend mayhem on the flats, where partyers gather around bonfires to drink and shoot.

Troopers have increased patrols in response to neighbors' requests. The Butte Community Council, which opposes any restrictions that limit use of the area,

continues to emphasize education. Council secretary Royce Qualls is just starting to work with Elmendorf Air Force Base -- airmen and other military are often among those who come up to party on the flats -- on public information signs.

Last summer, Butte fire volunteers patrolled the flats on weekend nights during burn bans, asking partyers to put out bonfires. They plan to repeat that effort later this summer.

The job wasn't as simple as it sounds. Patrols often ended up confronting bunches of people drinking around bonfires with lots of weapons handy, said Butte Fire Chief Charlie Von Gunten.

The chief put himself on Saturday night rotation. Most people, including military members, complied with instructions to put out bonfires. Younger partyers, who told him they were up from Anchorage or Eagle River, were harder to handle.

And occasionally, Von Gunten said, he ran into more serious trouble.

"We'd run into people back up Jim Creek, even on the trails, shooting, automatic weapon fire," he said. "When we got into those type of situations, we just reported that to the troopers and basically backed out of the area."

Back on the flats Friday, the state resource officers finished their count.

In less than two hours, Smith and Selvik found 14 junked vehicles, many torched and all shot up, most surrounded by beer bottles and cans. Only the Bronco bore a license plate, though several still had vehicle identification numbers. Last year's count was 14 vehicles too, plus another 12 that a local hauled off state land and onto borough-owned property, Smith said. The state pays Grizzly Towing on the Old Glenn Highway \$75 a piece to haul out the junkers.

Smith and Selvik came back later on Friday to pick up the trash littering the gray glacial mud.

An apocalyptic pile of debris glistened next to a nearly unrecognizable Lincoln Continental: A dishwasher, a 10-gallon gas can, fireworks, a can of spray paint and a beer bottle melted by the heat of the bonfire.

Palmer resident Claude Garoutte and a companion came by on four-wheelers, out for a two-day bear hunting trip up the Knik.

Garoutte shook his head as he looked over two junked cars nearby. The Knik Glacier, visible miles down the valley, was vibrant in the midday sun.

"They don't have a lot of respect for this place, do they?" Garoutte asked.

Garoutte said he and his hunting partner had left a white truck and trailer parked at the start of the Jim Creek access road, and he was uneasy about leaving it unattended overnight.

"Hopefully, you won't have to pick up my truck," he said.

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