



Clean Boating in the Cook Inlet Watershed FY 2017 Final Report



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Cook Inletkeeper is a community-based nonprofit organization that combines advocacy, outreach, and science toward its mission to protect Alaska's Cook Inlet watershed and the life it sustains.

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Cover photo: Boat and Big Lake launch with Clean Boating sticker.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mat-Su Valley is a recreational hotspot for boating, fishing, and camping. Boaters come from all over Southcentral Alaska, including Anchorage, to recreate in the Mat-Su Valley. This influx of people provides economic growth opportunities for the area, and the Valley has many communities deeply connected to their nearby waterbodies.

High boat use on lakes and rivers, however, can lead to high levels of petroleum hydrocarbons in the water. Water quality testing on several popular waterbodies by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC) has demonstrated harmful levels of oil and gas as a result of high boat use. Gasoline can come from individual leaks, drips and spills, with additional (and likely larger) inputs from the release of unburned fuel out of the exhaust into the water during combustion from older 2-stroke outboard engines.

Water quality testing and boat use patterns have highlighted three regional waterbodies as top priorities for educational outreach to reduce pollution. Big Lake, the Little Susitna, and the Deshka River support many species of fish and aquatic life, including several species of salmon. Persistent and increased levels of hydrocarbons can have negative impacts on juvenile and adult fish health. It is important to take this into consideration as we continue to expand and explore ways to effectively reach out to boaters and educate them on the impacts of hydrocarbon pollution in high priority waterways.

Boaters throughout the Mat-Su region can no longer afford to recreate without understanding how they can be part of a solution to the pollution problems facing the community. Through this ongoing project, our overarching objective is

to work with local communities, private businesses, Alaska State Parks, boaters and other stakeholder groups to identify and fill gaps in clean boating education and resources to ultimately reduce petroleum pollution in these and other Mat-Su Valley waterbodies.

Over the past fiscal year (July 2016—June 2017, FY17), Cook Inletkeeper built upon past years efforts and expanded this project to continue clean boating outreach at Big Lake, the Little Susitna River Public Use Facility, Deshka Land-



Outreach on the shore at Big Lake in late summer 2016. Boats and personal watercraft line the beach

ing in Willow, and the Swiftwater Boat Launch in Soldotna. We also continued a clean boating discount card program which partnered with businesses from Talkeetna to Kenai and increased radio and digital promotions of Clean Boating practices.

Big Lake

The residential community in Big Lake is growing. The 2010 population was 3,350; this repre-

sents an increase of over 27% from the 2000 census. Additionally, thousands of visitors come to Big Lake during summer months for boating, fishing, and jet skiing. Drivers entering the Big Lake community are greeted by a large map of the area with the headline: “Alaska’s Year-Round Playground”. There are 4 private marinas on Big Lake with over 300 slips for boat moor-



A map of Big Lake greets visitors at the turn-off to North Shore Drive.

age and public boat launches at two state and one borough-owned public recreation areas, all of which are heavily used for lake access during the summer. In 2006, ADEC listed Big Lake as impaired for petroleum hydrocarbon pollution above state water quality standards. The primary source of hydrocarbons (e.g. gasoline) to Big Lake is motorized watercraft—boats and personal use watercraft. Water monitoring results show higher concentrations of hydrocarbons during busy holiday weekends and in certain locations: near marinas, boat launches, and other high traffic areas in the east basin. Additional testing in 2013 showed hydrocarbon levels continue to exceed water quality standards on good weather days during the summer.

Starting in 2010, a community Water Quality Workgroup of Big Lake residents and stakeholders developed an Action Plan for reducing hydrocarbon pollution in Big Lake. Among other identified action items, outreach and education was a primary focus. The Water Quality Workgroup prioritized ensuring that all motorized watercraft users on Big Lake know and implement basic skills to maintain and run their engines with minimal fuel, oil, and other hazardous materials released into the water. Unfortunately, these skills are often not learned and tend to be overlooked by boaters throughout Alaska. All boaters can use efficient and effective best management practices to dramatically reduce, and in some cases eliminate, harmful discharges. Best management practices can also save money in fuel costs and maintenance. Through this project we are bringing these tools to boaters throughout the region, with a continued heavy focus at Big Lake itself.

Little Susitna River

Other regional waterbodies face similar pollution concerns to Big Lake, including the Little Susitna River. The ADEC has conducted water quality sampling on the Little Susitna since 2004. High boat traffic on the Little Susitna helped catalyze preliminary testing for hydrocarbons and turbidity in 2007. Sampling conducted above, at and below the Public Use Facility in 2007-2010 documented hydrocarbon levels exceeding state water quality standards, and high turbidity during times of increased boat use. The Little Susitna is a popular sport fishing and hunting area, with high boater and fisher volume during Chinook salmon season in June and Coho salmon season during August. In 2017, the Alaska Board of Fisheries put in place a 2-stroke engine ban during all fishing activities. During

our outreach at the Little Susitna River and at the Sportshows, we heard from many boaters that they were confused by the new regulation that boaters cannot fish from a motorized boat unless the motor is 4-stroke or direct fuel injected 2-stroke. We remain optimistic that the regulation may be a catalyst that stimulates boaters to upgrade their engines which will help reduce hydrocarbons in the Little Susitna.

Deshka River

Access to the Deshka River is through Deshka Landing, a privately-owned boat launch on a slough of the Susitna River. Boaters launch here to access remote homes, cabins, and fish on the Deshka River and other tributaries of the Susitna. Fishing pressure is highest during the early-summer Chinook salmon runs, and again in late-July/early-August during the Coho salmon runs. Additionally, closures that impact other areas such as the Little Susitna may not close the Deshka, likely resulting in increased pressure as fishermen move to open areas to fish. Limited water quality sampling on the Deshka River by ADEC indicates there may be elevated levels of petroleum hydrocarbons, especially in the lower 3 miles of the River. Similar to water quality concerns on Big Lake and the Little Susitna, high boat use can lead to high levels of hydrocarbons in the water.

Our Project

Concerned citizens founded Cook Inletkeeper in 1995. Inletkeeper is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with the mission to protect Alaska's Cook Inlet and the life it sustains. Organizational values include protecting water quality, wild salmon, lasting communities and sustainable local economies. Funding for this project came from

the ADEC's Alaska Clean Water Actions grant program. Through this funding we can work with boaters throughout Southcentral Alaska who recreate in the Mat-Su Valley and/or Kenai Peninsula, on our common long-term goal to improve water quality so these waters of concern meet State water quality standards and are healthy for salmon and other aquatic life.

The individual tasks under this project all focus on improving water quality through effective boater outreach. Objectives for this specific grant year were to: 1) Continue to implement the successful educational clean boating program developed during FY14/FY15, ensuring that boaters know how to practice clean boating skills with an understanding of the negative impacts of petroleum on human health and fish habitat; 2) Empower regional boaters to practice and encourage clean boating techniques through a broad clean boating outreach campaign; 3) Work with local businesses from Talkeetna to Homer to develop a discount card program to incentivize participation in clean boating; and 4) Visit Kenai launches to conduct outreach with boaters there.

As the grantee for this project, Cook Inletkeeper utilized state fiscal year (FY) 17 (July 1, 2016–June 30, 2017) funding from the state of Alaska to continue funding the outreach activities associated with the program, including tabling at events and at boat launches and radio and digital ads. Inletkeeper also worked to continue the clean boating discount card program. This program encourages participation in a free online clean boating course via the BoatUS Foundation and boaters receive a discount card to be used at participating businesses. Local businesses support clean water efforts and offer discounts in exchange for free advertising and promotion.

The On-site program began at Big Lake and is intended to educate boaters one-on-one about the importance of clean boating and tools to keep our rivers and lakes clean. Similar programs exist in other states, including a large “Dockwalkers” program in California (<http://www.coastal.ca.gov/ccbn/dockwalkers.html>).

The foundation of this program lies in one-on-one boater outreach with boaters as they launch and load their boats. Through this engagement, boaters receive free clean boating kits and are asked to fill out a clean boating survey.

For this project, clean boating kits included an oil absorbent pad, a magnet with clean fueling tips, brochures on clean bilges/spill response/clean oil changes, a floating keychain, a Clean Boating on Big Lake sticker, Clean Boating Little Su sticker, a Cook Inletkeeper sticker, tidebook, and a tote bag. Clean boating surveys capture basic demographic information about boaters, as well as information on their boats, their clean boating knowledge and their relevant boating behaviors. We updated our survey and moved to electronic survey collection on iPads, which made summarizing boater responses easier. A copy of the FY17 boater survey is included in the Appendix, along with copies of media articles and clean boating discount card flyers. Summarized survey results are included in this report under ‘Boater Survey Results’.

This year, Cook Inletkeeper relied on community organizers and volunteers to conduct the outreach onsite at boat launches and at events, like Sportshows. While recruiting volunteers was more successful this year, the overall contact rate was lower due to rainy weather and low fish counts during the pre-scheduled outreach days.

Cook Inletkeeper staff and volunteers conducted

on-site outreach on the following days: Big Lake 7/4/16, 7/23/16, 7/29/16, 8/27/16, 9/2/16, 9/3/16, 5/26/17, 5/27/17, 5/28/17, 5/29/17; Little Susitna 7/4/16, 7/29/16, 8/19/16, 5/28/17; Deshka Landing 8/27/16; 9/2/16; 5/27/17; Kenai Swiftwater 7/21/16 and 7/22/16

There was significant feedback from outreach staff with suggestions to adjust the approach in the next outreach phase. Feedback was also solicited from campground hosts. Overall, Big Lake remains the most challenging audience and



Outreach table at Big Lake during Memorial Day weekend 2017

responsiveness to Clean Boating messages is “lukewarm.” While people respond that they believe Big Lake is polluted, there is a disconnect between the problems and solutions. The organizer doing outreach noted: “Most people will stop to take free stuff but are generally unwilling to have the longer conversations required; we need a new approach.” Additional feedback included finding more social times to connect with boaters away from the boat launches

Overall, Cook Inletkeeper staff and volunteers

gave out over 1,480 clean boating kits at Big Lake, Little Susitna, Deshka and Kenai River boat launches, and the Mat Su, Anchorage, and Soldotna Sportshows. By far, the best event was the Anchorage sportshow where we talked to 900 people and distributed over 454 clean boating kits. The shorter format “pitch” worked well to engage boaters who didn’t want to spend 10 minutes completing a survey.

Events were the most effective place to meet and talk to boaters this year. Cook Inletkeeper had a great season of outreach at the Sportshows in the Mat Su Valley, Anchorage, and Kenai. These events are effective and efficient and continue to be a great way to reach people about clean boating practices.

Additionally, Burkeshore Marina in Big Lake is able to place and distribute Clean Boating Kits and info to customers without staff present, making it another efficient way to reach boaters.

However, the on-site outreach was challenging during this fiscal year. The rainy, cold summer we’ve had to date has significantly reduced our one-on-one contact rates.

Overall, Big Lake launches were the typically the busiest, with three locations to visit: the North Campground launch, South Campground launch, and the Mat-Su Borough launch. The Little Su PUF was where outreach was conducted for the Little Su, since this is the most popular access point for this river. Deshka Landing is a privately owned launch facility and provides access to the mainstem Susitna River, Deshka River and other tributaries.

At these locations, an outreach table was set up near the boat launches. Each table had a project

banner, a boating kit, a demonstration of the amounts of oil and gas lost with three types of common outboard engines, and temporary tattoos for kids. The Big Lake South Launch campground is not very busy and boaters are more relaxed, with more time to stop and engage. The Big Lake North Launch is a larger and much busier campground, and has more in-and-



Outreach table at Big Lake during a sunny weekend in August 2016.

out launching activity. Deshka Landing is also a busy launch, with most boaters focused on getting out on the water. The best time to reach boaters is while they are waiting to launch, walking from the parking lot, or waiting for their trailer. Boaters at the Little Su PUF are more relaxed and much more willing to spend time talking, taking surveys, and leisurely launch their boats. As in FY16, efforts were made in FY17 to spend the most time at Big Lake, but visit the Little Susitna, Deshka, and Kenai as often as possible.

SURVEYS + CLEAN BOATING DISCOUNT CARDS

During the FY17 year, Cook Inletkeeper staff used the long surveys sparingly. After feedback from outgoing staff and volunteers, staff recognized that the long format of the surveys was a major deterrent to engaging boaters in conversations.

In total, 42 people completed the survey; 16 were from Anchorage, 15 from Wasilla, 6 from Palmer, 2 from Big Lake, 1 from Eagle River, Willow, and Kenai respectively. When asked about type of engine, the following responses were tallied: 11% “new” direct-inject two-stroke outboard, 11% “old” carbureted two-stroke outboard; 10% diesel inboard; 47% four-stroke outboard; 19% gas inboard; 3% had no power/sail. When asked, 100% responded “yes, Big Lake is polluted.”

The Clean Boating Discount Card program was used again this year. Eighteen business participate in the program, including:

Napa Auto Parts - Big Lake
Napa Auto Parts - Wasilla
Napa Auto Parts - Glenallen
Napa Auto Parts - Eagle River
Napa Auto Parts Valdez
Denali Brewing Co
Mt. High Pizza Pie
Kaladi Brothers
Grape Tap
Lumberyard Deli
Burkeshore Marina
Sportsmans Warehouse
Cabela's
Alaska Raft and Kayak
Steam Dot Coffee
3 Rivers Fly and Tackle
Odie's Deli
Coop's Coffee
Resolution Brewing Company
Mountain View Sports
Marita Sea and Ski (Powersports)
B n J Sporting Goods



Outreach booth at the Anchorage Sportshow 2017. Staff concluded outreach was more effective without the surveys.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

A major component of this ongoing project is raising awareness among boaters and the surrounding communities of the collective impact of individual spills of fuels and oils on water quality. Many boaters come to recreate on rivers and lakes in the Susitna Valley from Anchorage, Eagle River, Wasilla, Palmer and other Southcentral communities. Therefore, spreading awareness in these larger population centers is critical to achieving success. In addition to the event and onsite outreach, extensive radio and digital ads were used to amplify the clean boating messages and promote the Clean Boating Discount Card.

Print News

Blog posts, Facebook posts, and threads on the Alaska Outdoor Forum were used to promote the Clean Boating Discount Card. Print media articles were published in Alaska Dispatch News and the Peninsula Clarion. Additional media outreach was conducted through Cook Inletkeeper's newsletters on July 14, 2016 and August 25, 2016, and May 5, 2017. These newsletters are estimated to reach approximately 1200 people in the Southcentral per newsletter.

Radio

With so many boaters coming to Valley boat launches from large population centers in the region, radio advertising is an extremely effective way of raising clean boating awareness. Optima Public Relations was again contracted to do placement of the ads. Increased funding from ADEC in FY17 for radio advertisements allowed for paid radio advertisement placements during the first, third and fourth quarters. Working with Optima Public Relations and using PSA recordings from FY16, a radio schedule was created and

launched on February 1 that includes regular radio spots on: KTNA 88.9 FM (Susitna Valley in Mat-Su / Talkeetna News Sponsorship (Public Radio)); KVNT 1020 AM and 92.5 FM (Mat-Su / Anchorage News Talk); KXLW – 96.3 FM (The Wolf – Anchorage / Mat-Su Country); KENI – 650 AM (Anchorage / Mat-Su Talk Radio); KBBO – 92.1 FM ("BOB" Anchorage / Mat-Su Contemporary and Top 40); KSRM – 920 AM (Kenai / Soldotna Talk Radio). A total of 3,450 radio spots aired during FY2017.



The busy Anchorage Sportshow was by far the most effective outreach location in FY17.

Due to staffing changes and shifting priorities, Cook Inletkeeper will not be continuing the ACWA grant funded project for the 2018 FY.

However, Cook Inletkeeper is committed to continuing education and outreach around “clean boating” practices within the Cook Inlet watershed. At this time, organizational leadership anticipates continued outreach at Sportshows and other events where large numbers of boaters are present, as well as continuing outreach via Cook Inletkeeper’s social media, email and newsletter lists.

Cook Inletkeeper is grateful for the support of partners who helped create engaging materials and solid strategies to reduce pollution in fresh water bodies throughout the Cook Inlet watershed.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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