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Alaska Department of Fish & Game  
Private Cabins on State Game Refuges  
Summary 3/4/2024

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The Alaska Departments of Fish and Game (DFG) and Natural Resources (DNR) are working to phase out the use of private cabins in state game refuges, and where appropriate, convert them to public use.

Construction of private cabins on public lands around Cook Inlet began as early as the mid-1940s in coastal areas of Cook Inlet for commercial fishing, trapping, waterfowl hunting, and other purposes. Known locally as “duck shacks,” cabins were built near good hunting and recreational areas where overnight or longer stays were preferred because access is difficult and people wanted substantial shelter from the fall storms. Valuable traditions evolved from flying or boating into a cabin to stay for a few days for hunting, enjoying the comradery and natural setting.

In 1975 and 1976, the state legislature designated large portions of the coastal zone of Cook Inlet as State Game Refuges. The primary statutory purpose for these areas is to protect fish and wildlife populations and their habitat with hunting as one of the priority uses. This includes Susitna Flats State Game Refuge (SGR), a 300,800-acre protected wildlife area located between the Beluga River and Point Mackenzie on the west side of Cook Inlet. In 1977, ADF&G documented 144 cabins on Susitna Flats SGR: 42 occurred on private land, 5 were for commercial fishing, and 97 used for recreational or other purposes. Today, some cabins are rough shacks, some deteriorated beyond repair, and others are elaborate.

All private cabins built on public land were built in trespass and occupied illegally until the State of Alaska implemented the Personal Use Cabin Permit (PUCP) program in 1984 (11 AAC 65). The purpose of the PUCP program was to stop the construction of new cabins and phase out the use of private cabins built in trespass. It allowed temporary continued use of cabins built prior to August 1, 1984 by issuing non-transferable permits valid only during the lifetime of the original permit holder. Amendments to the PUCP regulations were adopted by DNR in 1993, 2001, 2018, and 2022. In 1985, approximately 111 PUCPs were issued and 22 commercial leases reviewed for Susitna Flats SGR. Now, 38 years later, many of the original permit holders have passed away, lost interest, or are otherwise unable to use them; thus, the structures have been abandoned and relinquished to the state.

The State is assessing whether to make these remaining cabins available for public use and how best to do that.