

Water quality in lower Kenai River improves

RESULTS: Hydrocarbon levels have fallen.

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KENAI -- Water quality in the Kenai River improved over the summer with new antipollution measures in place, according to preliminary findings.

State water quality officials in 2006 listed the lower Kenai as an impaired waterway because of high hydrocarbon readings. Preliminary findings this summer indicate those hydrocarbon levels have fallen.

"I'd say we're at least halfway home," said Robert Ruffner, president of the Kenai Watershed Forum, one of two independent organizations contracted by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation to monitor water quality in the Kenai during the king salmon fishery.

On July 19, 20 and 22, the watershed forum sampled water on both sides of the river in deep and shallow water at River Mile 1.5. The group conducted aerial surveys to count boats on the river.

Oasis Environmental Inc., an Anchorage consulting and engineering firm, sampled the river at Miles 5 and 10.1. About 300 samples were taken.

"We didn't have any samples that came close to exceeding the state water quality standards (of 10 parts per billion)," Ruffner said.

The results are preliminary, he said, but there is no reason to believe the numbers do not accurately reflect cleaner water.

"They're not going to go up. They may go down if anything as we scrutinize more," he said.

At its worst, the Kenai River yielded samples as high as 23 parts per billion.

This year, samples revealed a two-thirds reduction in hydrocarbons.

At River Mile 1.5, the highest hydrocarbon level was 7 parts per billion. At River Mile 5,

the highest was 5.02 parts per billion and at River Mile 10.1 the highest was 4.98 parts per billion.

Ruffner attributed the success to the ban on conventional two-stroke boat motors that went into effect in July.

"The four-strokes (and direct-injected two-strokes, which are also legal) are a more efficient, cleaner technology," he said.

The two-stroke ban drew protests. Ruffner said he heard from fishermen who missed quality king salmon fishing this season because they could not afford a new motor to comply with the regulations.

"It wasn't without sacrifice, but we are happy it worked the way we thought it would," he said.

Compliance was high, he said. "We had nearly 100 percent compliance within the sportfishery of the Kenai River Special Management Area Park Boundaries, and we had about 95 percent compliance in the personal-use fishery," he said.

Hydrocarbon reductions would have been lower if not for the noncompliant 5 percent, he said.

If the numbers hold next year, the Kenai River will be on the way to having its "impaired" listing removed, he said.