KEEPING THE OIL IN THE PIPE: CITIZEN OVERSIGHT OF THE TRANS-ALASKA PIPELINE SYSTEM

BY KRISTEN POPE, COTAPS CAMPAIGN COORDINATOR

In November, CRWP joined a group of other stakeholders to form a working group called Citizen Oversight of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (COTAPS). COTAPS is a coalition of citizens and organizations promoting the safe transportation of oil and gas from the North Slope to Valdez and working to keep the oil in the pipe.

TAPS crosses 34 major rivers and nearly 800 other rivers and streams over the 800 miles from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez. The pipeline was completed in 1977 and built to last only 30 years but the lease and right of way have now been renewed through 2034. A breach in the line at or near a river crossing could result in oil reaching fish streams or rivers, and clean up in remote areas would be an enormous challenge.

Over the 35 years of TAPS’ operation, there have been a number of serious incidents along the pipeline and the pipeline owners have been fined millions of dollars for numerous violations. (For more information on incidents, see “Selected TAPS Incidents” at www.akpipelinesafety.org/whatcanyoudo)

Our most pressing concerns with the pipeline include: corrosion problems, wax and ice buildup in the pipe, deferred maintenance, inadequate leak detection systems, inadequate spill response planning, and seismic and geologic hazards.

To address these concerns, we are working to increase citizen oversight capacity. After the Exxon Valdez disaster, the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens Advisory Council (PWSRCAC) was formed to provide citizen oversight for the Sound and resulted in significant improvements in safety and operations.

Our coalition of partners that want to “Keep the oil in the pipe” include: Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association, Cascadia Wildlands, Copper Country Alliance, Copper River Watershed Project, Cordova District Fishermen United, Ecotrust, Native Village of Eyak, Gulkana Village Council, and Tazlina Village Council.

SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT CITIZEN OVERSIGHT:

What is citizen oversight?
Citizen oversight is a proven legal framework within which recognized citizen groups can act as independent observers of government agencies and private corporations for greater transparency, accountability and receptiveness to public priorities. Examples of effective oil and gas citizen oversight organizations include: Prince William Sound Regional Citizens Advisory Council, Pipeline Safety Trust, Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council, and the Washington Oil Spill Advisory Council.

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As I write to you, the first fishing period of the Copper River fishery is just shy of six weeks away! You can already feel the pace picking up in town – people returning to town after a winter elsewhere are starting to trickle back, and our daily sunlight dose is lengthening noticeably each day. Eventually, we trust, the snow piles will recede.

We’re introducing a new feature on our web site this summer, a Copper River calendar. We hope you’ll use it to track the seasons and tides with us, and to follow the progress of our fisheries, hunting, resource management and community events.

Projections are out from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game for this year’s salmon migrations. The forecast for the sockeye salmon harvest – by all users, including subsistence, personal use, commercial and sport fishermen – from the Copper River is 1.43 million fish. Last year’s forecast was for 1.2 million fish and the actual return was 2.1 million sockeye salmon, almost double the previous 10-year average harvest. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game notes that “the influence of environmental factors including the cooler ocean temperatures that have pre-dominated since September 2007, and the warmer ocean temperature from the El Niño event (August 2009 – May 2010) are factors that increase the uncertainty in the 2012 run projection” (Run Forecasts and Harvest Projections for 2012, ADF&G).

Good fishing to all, and help us keep it wild by eating more wild Alaska salmon this summer!

May 17: anticipated first fishing period on Copper River flats (season runs through September)

June 1 - Sept. 30: subsistence fish wheel harvests, with in-season updates on fishing periods

June 1 - Sept. 30: scheduled personal use (dipnet) fishing periods

July 1 - August 10: sport fishing for king salmon on Copper River (downstream of Klutina River confluence) and on Chitina River; fishing for all other species in Upper Copper River drainage open the entire year.

The Copper River Watershed Project wants to be your reporter for the watershed, your source of information when you wonder what’s going on with the fisheries or other issues in our drainage. And if we don’t have the information you’re looking for, please ask so we can look it up!
Copper River Country is home to a wealth of stories that fill the valley. From the last American homesteads in Slana, to the salmon that sustain the Ahtna people, to the geologic forces shaping the basin and its gold and copper mining riches, a trip through Copper River Country has so much to offer. The Copper River Watershed Project (CRWP) and a broad team of partners have been awarded $8,000 from the Alaska Humanities Forum to initiate an effort to identify the region’s stories and record oral histories of Copper Basin residents.

Alaska’s Copper River basin has a profound cultural history but the last generation of Ahtna language speakers and original homesteaders is slipping away. Traveling by Story was conceived as a way of bringing history to life, of telling the stories of this unique region through the voices of its people.

Project activities that will be funded through this grant include holding three talking circles, or facilitated conversations, focused on particular themes. We plan to hold the talking circles in locations spread throughout the basin to provide forums for a mix of diverse voices and stories. We’ll also make use of existing oral history recordings collected by the University of Alaska’s Project Jukebox program, National Park Service and Ahtna Heritage Foundation. We will record three new oral histories and develop interpretive text to accompany audio selections from the recorded oral histories.

These audio recordings will initially be shared through a web site, with development of a smart phone application and a printed map guide to follow. The group is trying to build on work initiated in 2006 when residents and tourism businesses around the Copper River valley gathered to develop a regional identity. With tourism in the region growing steadily, the group hopes to create avenues for connecting with visitors to convey what makes this valley so special. Many visitors are interested in the unique aspects of the region’s rural culture and want to understand how we live and work in our communities. The workgroup anticipates that a deeper understanding of the Copper River Country will encourage respect for private and public lands and the people of the area.

Project partners to date include: PWS Community College, BLM/Glennallen Field Office, Ahtna Heritage Foundation, and the Wrangell Mountains Center, which received a similar grant, and welcome the participation of other partners who might be interested.

The Alaska Humanities Forum funds projects that use the wisdom and methods of the humanities to enrich the civic, intellectual and cultural life of all Alaskans.

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By Kate Alexander
Not only is spring marked by the migration of shorebirds, songbirds, and spawning fish to the Copper River watersheds, but this year Kenny Lake 2nd & 3rd grade students will be migrating to Cordova to meet their pen-pals and learn about the unique coastal environment their peers have been teaching them about all year! Kenny Lake’s visit will coincide with the 2012 Copper River Delta Shorebird Festival. CRWP and the Prince William Sound Science Center education staff will work together to coordinate 2 full days of hands-on, outdoor learning and team-building activities for Kenny Lake and Cordova students. Field trips to the rocky intertidal and mudflat ecosystems will allow students to compare the intricate communities living underfoot along our shorelines. Students will also get to see how researchers catch Western Sandpipers to collect valuable scientific data on these tiny, powerful birds that migrate from the southern hemisphere to their Arctic nesting grounds.

Fun is inevitable because of the wacky games, pool party, and potlucks planned to help solidify the pen-pals’ relationships that were started via monthly Skype exchanges between classes. During these monthly exchanges students have swapped data about local weather (air temperature, total precipitation, etc.) and length of day in each community. They used these data to explore relationships between where a place is located and its weather and ecosystems. Each class also shared a presentation on life in its community via Skype, teaching their peers about what is unique about their community (recreational activities, fishing gear, etc.) as well as what we have in common—like Copper River salmon!

The gathering in May is an exciting opportunity to solidify the personal connection between pen-pals, building a watershed community in the younger generation that will continue to be nurtured through exciting watershed-wide education activities in place at later grade levels. These opportunities include hands-on habitat monitoring in local aquatic systems for middle school students and the annual field-based Copper River Stewardship Program for high school students. Don’t forget to “like” Copper River Watershed project and the Copper River Stewardship Program on Facebook so you can be kept up to date on exciting educational events and updates!
2011 FUNDING SOURCES:
Alaska Conservation Foundation • Alaska Department of Fish & Game
Alaska Department of Transportation • Alaska Geographic
Copper River/PWS Marketing Association • Ecotrust
National Fish & Wildlife Foundation • National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration
National Pacific Research Board • Pacific State Marine Fisheries Commission
The Mountaineers Foundation • U.S.D.A. Forest Service
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service • U.S. Geological Survey
U.S. Dept. of Transportation Pipeline & Hazardous Materials Safety Administration

2011 ANNUAL REPORT

REVENUES: $650,891

STATEMENT OF REVENUES & EXPENSES

Revenues
Grant Income $588,875
Contributions $44,241
Special Events/Programs $8,682
Sales (includes recycling & compost) $9,009
Investment -$256
Reimbursed Expenses $340
Total Revenue $650,891

Expenses
Salaries & Wages $156,650
Accounting Fees $30,971
Supplies $81,057
Equipment $4,776
Professional Fees $327,823
Telephone & Internet $3,967
Postage & Shipping $2,655
Rent (includes utilities) $13,217
Printing & Publications $4,454
Travel $5,303
Other (Insurance, etc.) $7,711
Total Expenses $638,584

CASH POSITION
AS OF 12/31/10

Assets
Cash Accounts $34,885
Investment Accounts $22,256
Accounts Receivable $14,462
Total Assets $71,603

Liabilities
Accounts Payable $5,032
Unearned Grant Revenue $39,046
Total Liabilities $44,478

Equity
$27,525
Total Liabilities & Equity $115,681

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

At a time when clear-cutting on the Copper River delta and in the Copper Basin, near-shore oil drilling, and cruise ships were being promoted as a way out of the Exxon Valdez oil spill economic disaster, residents in Cordova sought an alternative model for quality of life and for ending the community in-fighting. Since then, the Copper River Watershed Project, a nonprofit community-development organization, has made collaboration our signature approach. We’re criticized at times for not taking a harder stand on high-profile “environmental” issues. These “third rail” issues are so highly polarizing, and consuming, that we decided early on to put energy into the areas where residents share common ground as a way of building trust and working relationships. This collaborative approach has proven extremely effective in our conservative communities of hard-working, closely-knit families where young people are as likely to enter the fishing industry right out of high school as to proceed for higher education.

In our early planning stages, the founding board developed criteria for selecting which projects we would take on:
• Increases or conserves one type of capital (economic, natural resource, social) without diminishing others;
• Effects of project on community image;
• Feasibility, practicality (do-able?);
• Mix of near and long-term;
• Breadth/depth of community support.

In keeping with our commitment to collaboration, diversity and local representation are the strengths of our board leadership, with participation from up and down river communities. Board members include representatives from the fishing industry, an attorney, an educator, a mother and community volunteer, and a Native Corporation staff person.
PROGRAM SUMMARY

FISH HABITAT RESTORATION
Much of our work focuses on salmon and salmon habitat because this keystone species is the currency of our region. We work with fish biologists and public and private land managers and owners in the region to identify “hot spots” that would benefit from bank vegetation, water quality, or fish passage restoration.

INVASIVE WEEDS
In both the Copper Basin and the Cordova area we are facilitating partnerships with land managers and owners to identify and treat invasive weeds. Invasive weeds are aggressive and can create a vegetation monoculture by out-competing native plants. Resource managers are concerned about the threat to fish and wildlife habitat of non-native species such as reed canarygrass, which grows in thick mats and can choke streams.

CITIZEN OVERSIGHT FOR TAPS (COTAPS)
Residents of this region fear a spill from a Trans-Alaska Pipeline System breach could quickly end up in the main stem of the Copper River and damage spawning and migratory habitat of the world-famous Copper River salmon. We are working with pipeline corridor stakeholders to raise awareness along the pipeline about potential problems with its operating integrity and to increase the capacity of citizens to uphold current laws and regulations to their full extent.

WATERSHED EDUCATION
Building a watershed community among residents young and old is the motivation for CRWP’s education work. CRWP works with partners up and downriver to provide students the opportunity to connect with their peers from other watershed communities through school year weather and habitat monitoring programs, raising salmon in the schools, and summertime field-based programs. Visitors to the region can also learn about the watershed when they visit the road-side educational signs created by CRWP and partners, attend the Copper River Wild! Salmon Festival and listen to the soon to be collected oral histories from the region.

FISHING WEB RECYCLING
In 2010, the CRWP worked with several community partners to create a self-sustaining program for recycling discarded fishing web. We now have three dedicated shipping containers staged around town so that fishermen can drop off their old web. The monofilament nylon web is shipped to Seattle for consolidating with other web, then sold to Asia for re-processing into plastic pellets. The pellets are ultimately used to manufacture new plastic products.

2011 HIGHLIGHTS

A PWS Science Center monitoring report for the Eccles Creek culvert replacement (work done in 2010) shows that the presence of juvenile coho salmon and cutthroat trout and of adult pink salmon is evenly distributed above and below the culvert. In comparison 2009 surveys found fewer species and a lower abundance of fish upstream of the old culvert.

A culvert mapping tool was developed in collaboration with Ecotrust for displaying culvert condition and fish habitat data on culverts throughout the Copper River watershed. Currently we are working to finalize surveys on all State roads and expand the tool to include stream crossings on private roads.

Receipt of an organizational capacity grant from the Alaska Conservation Foundation, in recognition of our work in the Copper River watershed and our efforts to raise awareness about the watershed’s vulnerability.

Recreational fishing web collection: In 2011, we recycled 41,000 pounds of fishing web. Since 2009 we have collected nearly 100,000 lbs of web for recycling, keeping this material out of our City landfill and generating revenue to support future recycling efforts.

Clean Streets, Clean Streams, Clean Shoes campaign was developed to raise awareness about dog poop pollution. We collaborated with the Native Village of Eyak to obtain bio-bag dispensers for installation around Cordova to help residents and visitors “scoop the poop”.

Eight watershed education interpretive signs were installed throughout the Copper Basin.

Creation of COTAPS, an informal alliance of citizens in the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) corridor to help increase the effectiveness of laws and regulations in place for protecting tributaries of the Copper River, and the main stem of the Copper River itself, from a potential breach in the pipeline.

Installation of an oil and grit separator to filter storm water being discharged into Eyak Lake.
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR COPPER VALLEY UPDATED
Copper Valley Development Association is working to revise the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) plan that establishes regional goals, objectives and potential strategies for economic development in the Copper Valley. Analysis of state and regional data identified areas for intervention and potential partners for economic development.

Community level planning has been going on since January to prepare communities to participate in the Regional Roundtable Planning Session to be held in early June. All communities are invited to help determine and record their community level needs and concerns in the form of community plans that will then be incorporated in the CEDS document. A schedule of upcoming meetings will be posted on www.coppervalley.org and announced via KCAM and Copper River Record. For more information contact, Sandra Wagner, CEDS Project Manager, at 822-3544 or swagner@coopervalley.org.

TANGLE LAKES STATE WILDLIFE REFUGEE PROPPOSAL
The Tangle Lakes region is a favorite recreation and subsistence destination for many Alaskans, and is important habitat for the Nestchina caribou. It also harbors Arctic Wathlers, and many other species. It is also part of a larger region being explored for nickel, copper, and platinum group metals. This coming season, Toronto-based Pure Nickel, Inc., plans to do more exploratory drilling with a $4.9 million in funding from Japanese multinational ITOCHU Corporation. Copper Country Alliance and its allies are greatly concerned about the impacts that a mine could have on the Tangle Lakes region and they continue to gather support for creation of a Tangle Lakes State Wildlife Refuge. This would give ADF&G the authority to better protect wildlife and public lands currently used for hunting, fishing, recreation, and tourism.

More information at http://savetanglelakes.org, or by contacting Ruth McHenry at 907-822-3544, ccx@coopervalley.net.
THANKS TO OUR 2012 WILD FOOD FEAST & FILM FESTIVAL EVENT SPONSORS who helped make our recent event a success! Please support these businesses and organizations that contribute to CRWP.

CRANBERRY SPONSORS ($250+):
- The Lodge at Black Rapids

BLUEBERRY SPONSORS ($100-249):
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CROWBERRY SPONSORS (<$100):
- BLM
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