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PRESS RELEASE

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Habitat Concerns Prompt Restrictions on Cottonwood Creek ATV Trail Public Meeting Set for November

(Palmer) – All but the first mile of the Cottonwood Creek trail in the Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge will remain closed to motorized vehicles through the fall season as the Alaska Department of Fish and Game works to protect wetlands. The closure will affect waterfowl hunters and other recreationists who use ATVs to access remote portions of the refuge via the 6.5-mile-long trail.

The restrictions come as critical waterfowl habitat in parts of the refuge is lost to accelerated wetland drainage created by the expansion of naturally occurring tidal guts. ATV use threatens to further escalate tidal gut erosion and speed habitat loss.

“In the past few years, we’ve seen significant advancement of some tidal guts that have started to encroach on the trail,” said State Refuges Coordinator Joe Meehan. “About 250 acres of standing water wetlands have already been drained by tidal gut erosion and another 2,000 acres of wetlands are at risk.”

“We’re concerned that ATV use through the tidal gut area will accelerate erosion and drain additional wetlands.”

The department is in the process of installing physical and vegetative control structures in an attempt to slow tidal gut erosion along the trail and to revegetate areas where erosion is most severe. Refuge managers will also seek ways to stabilize the trail, protect habitat, and allow the greatest possible public use and access to the wetlands.

The motorized access endpoint will be clearly identified with signs and other markers on the trail approximately one mile from the Cottonwood Creek parking area. Alternative motorized access into the refuge is by boat via Rabbit Slough and Wasilla Creek; the entire trail and remainder of the refuge remains open to travel on foot.

The department will hold a public meeting at the Matanuska-Susitna College on November 3 at 7:15 p.m. to explore ways to restore ATV access and discuss management of these wetlands including potential mitigation of tidal gut and trail erosion while maintaining public access.

Located via the Cottonwood Creek access off Hayfield Road west of Wasilla, the entire length of the trail is traditionally open during the waterfowl hunting season each fall through November 15. The access area is one of three main entrances to the nearly 32,000-acre Palmer Hay Flats refuge. Waterfowl hunters, birders and naturalists have long used the access to pursue and observe ducks, geese and cranes which nest and stop over by the thousands in the refuge's freshwater and coastal wetlands.

A copy of the updated General Permit (FH-15-IV-GP13-SA, Amendment I) addressing motorized use within the refuge is available on the department's website at www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=uselicense.gpareas.

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