

KOBUK RIVER

THREAT: Mining, development, climate change

STATES: Alaska

AT RISK: Iñupiat subsistence traditions and economy, clean water, fish and wildlife

SUMMARY

The free-flowing Kobuk River lies north of the Arctic Circle in Alaska, at the northern edge of the boreal forest that flanks the Brooks Range. The river meanders through homelands of the Indigenous Iñupiat who continue to live from their ancestral lands as they have for millennia. The river's abundant fish and wildlife provide spiritual, cultural, and nutritional sustenance to the Iñupiat communities. With no road connections or industrial development, the river offers a rare glimpse into an almost primordial North American landscape. The proposed Ambler Road and associated mining development would cause irreparable harm to the Kobuk's water quality and fish and wildlife, threatening communities all along the river. The Biden Administration must revoke all permits allowing construction of the road.



NICK JANS

THE RIVER

The 380-mile-long Kobuk River originates in the heart of America's northernmost mountain range—the Brooks Range—and flows west to the Arctic Ocean. Its headwaters cut through steep canyons of cascading rapids, then it gradually mellows as it approaches a wide delta with a rich maze of waterways. The middle and lower river winds through a ribbon of boreal forest, and from October to May, the river is frozen, covered by a thick layer of ice that becomes a winter “highway” for wildlife and people.

The river has long supported the Iñupiat with its natural resource bounty, including intact salmon runs, abundant waterfowl, Alaska's second largest caribou herd (the Western Arctic herd), and spawning grounds of the famed sheefish. The salmon runs also support a locally-based commercial fishery that provides jobs and income to over a hundred families in the area. The Kobuk River is rich in archeological evidence, including the renowned Paatitaaq, or Onion Portage, where the Iñupiat have hunted caribou for more than 8,000 years. Today five Iñupiat communities with a total population of about 1,800, sit along the Kobuk River, as well as numerous scattered family fishing and hunting camps.

In recognition of its outstanding values, a 110-mile stretch of the Kobuk was designated a Wild River in 1980 by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.

THE THREAT

The proposed Ambler Road, a huge threat to the Kobuk River, is a 211-mile road that would begin at the Dalton Highway and cut westward to the Kobuk River watershed, allowing for the development of multiple open-pit mines currently under exploration. The Ambler Road project would weaken permafrost and require thousands of

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crossings over streams, rivers and wetlands, impacting the river's water quality, migration patterns and habitat of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd, the second largest caribou herd in Alaska, as well as salmon and sheefish populations found in the Kobuk River watershed.

It is hard to overestimate the impact of this proposed road on the Kobuk River. The Kobuk River currently has no road connections to the rest of the world, which would make the Ambler Road the first to access what has remained a remote region up until now. The land, fish, and wildlife in the Kobuk River watershed are as pristine as can be found in the modern world. The Iñupiat have been excellent stewards of the Kobuk River for untold generations.

According to the Bureau of Land Management's own Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, subsistence access for 66 remote villages would be reduced if the Ambler Road is approved. All villages along the length of the Kobuk River (Kobuk, Shungnak, Ambler, Kiana, and Noorvik) as well as all other communities in the Northwest Arctic Borough (Kotzebue, Selawik, Deering, Buckland, Noatak, and Kivalina) and several villages on the North Slope, Seward Peninsula, and the Interior regions of Alaska would be impacted. The Ambler Road development presents a food sovereignty issue in communities that do not have year-round employment and depend on the land for their food, culture, and way of life.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is the lead agency in the environmental review process of the

Ambler Road. In the fall and winter of 2023, Kobuk River residents and people from across the United States submitted over 135,000 comments to the BLM. Folks from the Kobuk River region also attended BLM hearings, highlighting the detrimental impact to subsistence and asking that the Ambler Road project be stopped.

The final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) is expected to be published in the first half of 2024. The Draft SEIS included numerous new data that detail the massive subsistence, cultural, and ecological impacts to the Kobuk River and the people who live along it. We ask the public to take immediate action by signing the petition to the BLM, Department of Interior, and President Biden requesting that they revoke all Ambler Road permits.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

SARAH DYRDAHL

Northwest Regional Director
American Rivers
503-277-3223
sdyrdahl@americanrivers.org

CHINA KANTNER

Protect the Kobuk
907-347-2005
admin@protectthekobuk.org

KATIE MCCLELLAN

Northern Alaska Environmental Center
907-452-5021
Katie@northern.org

ALEX JOHNSON

National Parks Conservation Association
907-277-6722
ajohnson@npca.org

TARYN CALHOUN

Tanana Chiefs Conference
907-452-8251 ext. 3570
taryn.calhoun@tananachiefs.org

DELOOLE'AANH ERICKSON

Native Movement
907-723-7671
delooleaanh@nativemovement.org

TAKE ACTION:

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SETH KANTNER