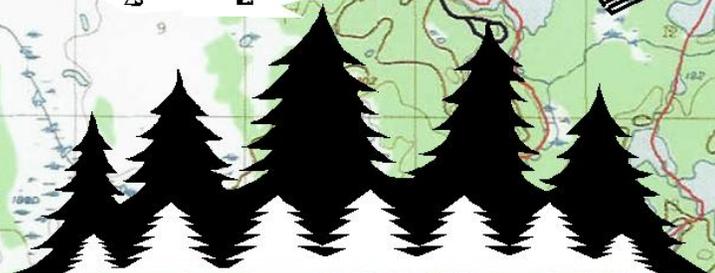
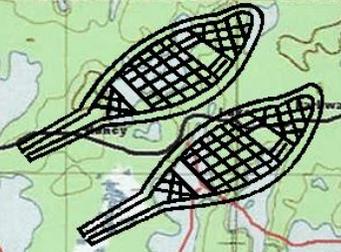
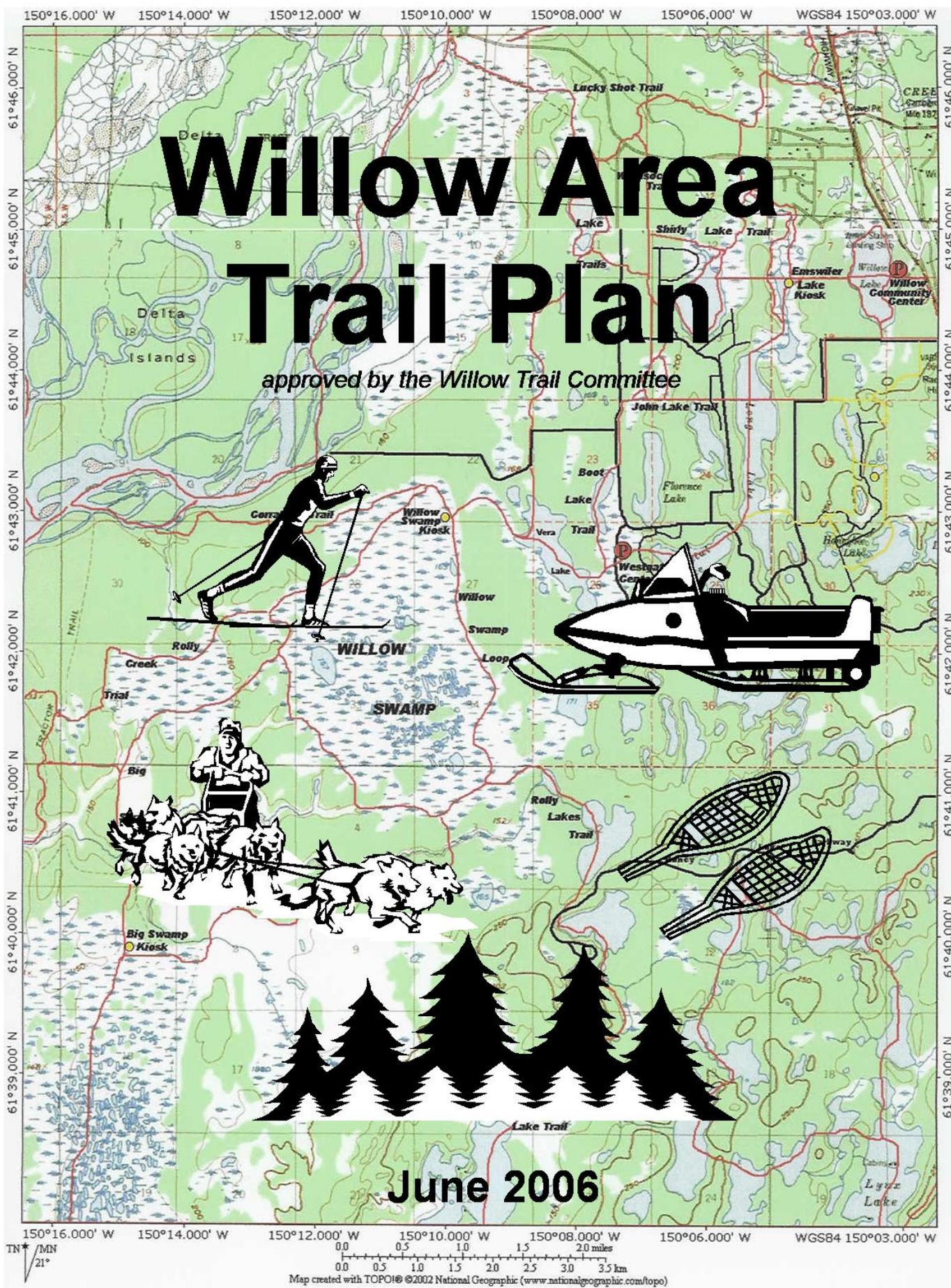


# Willow Area Trail Plan

approved by the Willow Trail Committee



June 2006



Map created with TOPO!® ©2002 National Geographic (www.nationalgeographic.com/topo)

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## PREFACE

The purpose of the Willow Area Trail Plan is to promote the preservation and development of recreational trails within the Willow area.

As Willow grows, the importance of recreation and trails to our community needs to be conveyed. However, rapid population growth threatens existing trails for all users, and for the sports snow machining and dog mushing in particular.

This document is meant to guide:

- Public agencies in making policy decisions,
- Private companies in their investment decisions, and
- Individuals in making their personal decisions.

Planning is a continuous process and this plan was written with information and opinions of Willow residents in 2006. As future developments and community needs change over time, this document should be revised to reflect those changes.

## **WILLOW- A Gateway Community for Outdoor Activities**

The community of Willow is situated on the edge of the most developed area in Alaska and this population is steadily moving into the Willow area. A residential and recreational community of several thousand people, it is unincorporated and has a voice through its community organization, the Willow Area Community Organization (WACO). Growth in population and recreational activity during the last decade has been among the fastest in the state and will certainly continue. Quality of life is one of the main reasons families relocate to Willow where they can enjoy a rural lifestyle with its wildlife lakes, streams, rivers and mountains. Winter is a popular time of year with abundant snowfall providing opportunity to enjoy the outdoors. A winter weekend on the Parks Highway will see numerous vehicles loaded with snow machines, dog teams and skis heading for recreation in the Willow area.

Our trail systems not only enhance this quality of life, but they also support businesses and provide employment opportunities and economic benefits to the area, particularly important in this customary sluggish part of the year for merchants. Further, it has been well documented in the Anchorage area that trails, in and of themselves; actually increase the value of the properties having access to the trails as well as the overall community. Willow has well established trails that already are in use and it is the goal of this Willow Area Trail Plan that they be protected and enhanced.

Tourism, having become the second largest industry in Alaska, has brought an increased number of visitors to the community as well. Here, too, Willow's trail systems play a significant role.

The Willow Trail Committee (WTC) is a special standing committee of WACO. As a Mat-Su Borough Trail Crew Member, it recently received a *2005 Miles by 2005* award by the Mat-Su Borough. The Trail Committee has identified and mapped three trail systems in the area:

**West Gateway Trail System**  
**Haessler-Norris Trail System**  
**Emil Stancec Trail System**

Maps and trail routes of these systems are attached. The routes of all three systems are based on consistent historical use for mining, hunting, trapping, dog mushing, supply freighting, and recreational snowmachining. These systems have been submitted to the Mat-Su Borough Lands Division for inclusion as multi-use trail systems requiring cooperation among trail users. All are extensively used today.

Our goals are to:

- Identify historic and currently used trails.
- Obtain public easements for recreational trails and trailheads.
- Maintain trails for safe and enjoyable use.
- Provide information to the public on trail safety and trail etiquette.
- Provide a forum for trail conflicts.
- Recognize trails as an important natural resource that contributes to the economic well-being and the quality of life in Willow.

## TRAILS

### West Gateway Trail System

Located directly west of Willow between the Parks Highway and the Susitna River, the West Gateway Trail System is a recreational jewel. These trails connect Willow to Big Lake and Nancy Lake Recreation Area Trails to the south and access to the Big Su, and Deshka Rivers to the west. Willow's location makes it the most popular jumping off point for people traveling west to back country cabins and lodges.

The earliest trails within the West Gateway system, the Lucky Shot and Corral Hill Trails, were blazed nearly 100 years ago for freighting to the Hatcher Pass mines from the Susitna River. Homesteaders, hunters, trappers and dog mushers through the years have extended the trails.

At present, the Willow Trail Committee, in conjunction with the Mat-Su Borough has acquired legal easements on all the West Gateway trails. They are also included in the Mat-Su Trails Plan as "regionally significant." As Mat-Su Borough Trail Crew Members, the WTC has been assigned maintenance of these trails. WTC volunteers brush and sign the trails year around and groom each week during the winter months. In addition, kiosks with maps, safety and educational information are maintained at all trailheads and strategic locations.

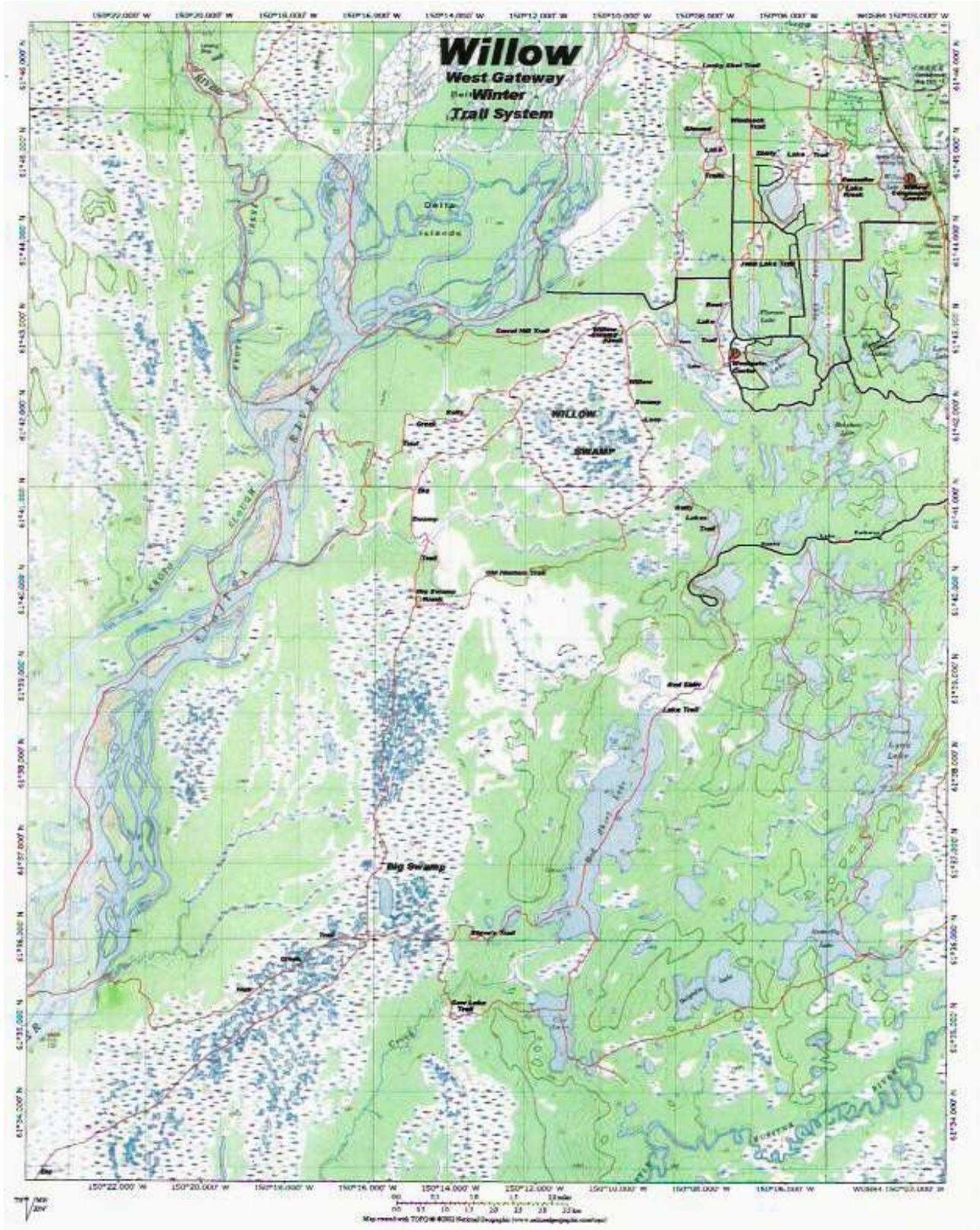
Because of its proximity to residential areas and trailheads, the West Gateway trails are very popular with recreational trail users of all varieties including snowmachiners, dog mushers and skiers. Willow is host to the Alaska State Winter Carnival each year and is dependent on these trails for the many snowmachine, dog mushing, skiing and skjoring events.

In addition, other events utilize these trails including the Klondike 400 and Aurora 200 snowmachine races, the Junior Iditarod, the Don Bowers 200/300 sled dog race, Klondike 300 sled dog race and the Earl Norris Open Sled Dog Race. The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race often uses the West Gateway Trail System for its restart.

#### Future Plans and Goals for the West Gateway Trail System:

- Establish legal protection for the trails
- Improve safety for road crossings/plan for tunnels under roads
- Continue maintenance projects through grants and funding
- Replace signs to conform with State standards
- Plan and improve trail access
- Expand trail events and race capabilities
- Develop detailed maps of Trail Systems
- Incorporate the Willow Community Center as the hub

# West Gateway Trail System Map



## Haessler-Norris Trail System

The Haessler-Norris Trail System has its primary roots in freighting, trapping, dog mushing and mining. It lies east of the Parks Highway; its boundaries are the Little Su River to the south, Hatcher Pass Road to the north and Hatcher Pass Recreation Area to the east. All three trail systems in the area are connected to one another historically.

The southern portion of the Haessler-Norris System includes the Willow Creek Sled Trail; otherwise know as the Herning Trail. This trail was an original route from Knik to the gold fields in Hatcher Pass. Hatcher Pass Road to the north was formerly a trail also leading to the gold mines. Trapline trails following the Nancy Creek drainage past Windy Lake to Deception Creek were the origin of many other trails in the system.

The Haessler-Norris Trail System was named for dog mushing pioneers in the area. Lloyd Haessler was a local trapper and musher who established “Lloyd’s Trapline”, one of the several trails documented in the Deception Creek Management Plan. Earl and Natalie Norris, sprint dog mushers who homesteaded in Anchorage in the 1940’s, were instrumental in establishing sled dog racing in Anchorage. Earl was co-founder of the Fur Rondy Sled Dog Race in 1946. Due to development in Anchorage, they moved to Willow where they helped expand and improve the existing trails.

Primarily used by mushers today, this system provides an important training circuit for Iditarod, mid-distance, distance, sprint and recreational teams as well as excellent trails for the growing tourism business in the area.

However, the trail system is in danger of being compromised. Planned transfer of state land in the middle of this system to the University, the sale of public lands to the private sector, and the placement of subdivisions without trail consideration are causes of concern.

### Future Plans and Goals for the Haessler-Norris Trail System:

- Establish legal protection for all trails in system
- GPS/Survey/Map trails
- Reconnect this system to the Emil Stancec System
- Expand system connecting trails to the north and east
- Install uniform signage
- Develop trail events and racing capabilities for system
- Protect, maintain and expand trail access



## **Emil Stancec Trail System**

Most of this system is located to the east of the Parks Highway. It runs from Hatcher Pass Road on the south to the Kashwitna River on the north and to the foothills of Hatcher Pass bearing east. A small part of this system is also located on the west side of the Parks Highway where it connects to the West Gateway Trail System.

This system presents a variety terrain. From the low-lying swampland to the higher elevations of the Talkeetna foothills, one can experience panoramic views of three mountain ranges.

Emil Stancec worked for the Alaska Railroad and trapped for a living. His traplines provided many corridors that are now a part of the trail system; earlier development of these trails was done by the U.S. military conducting maneuvers.

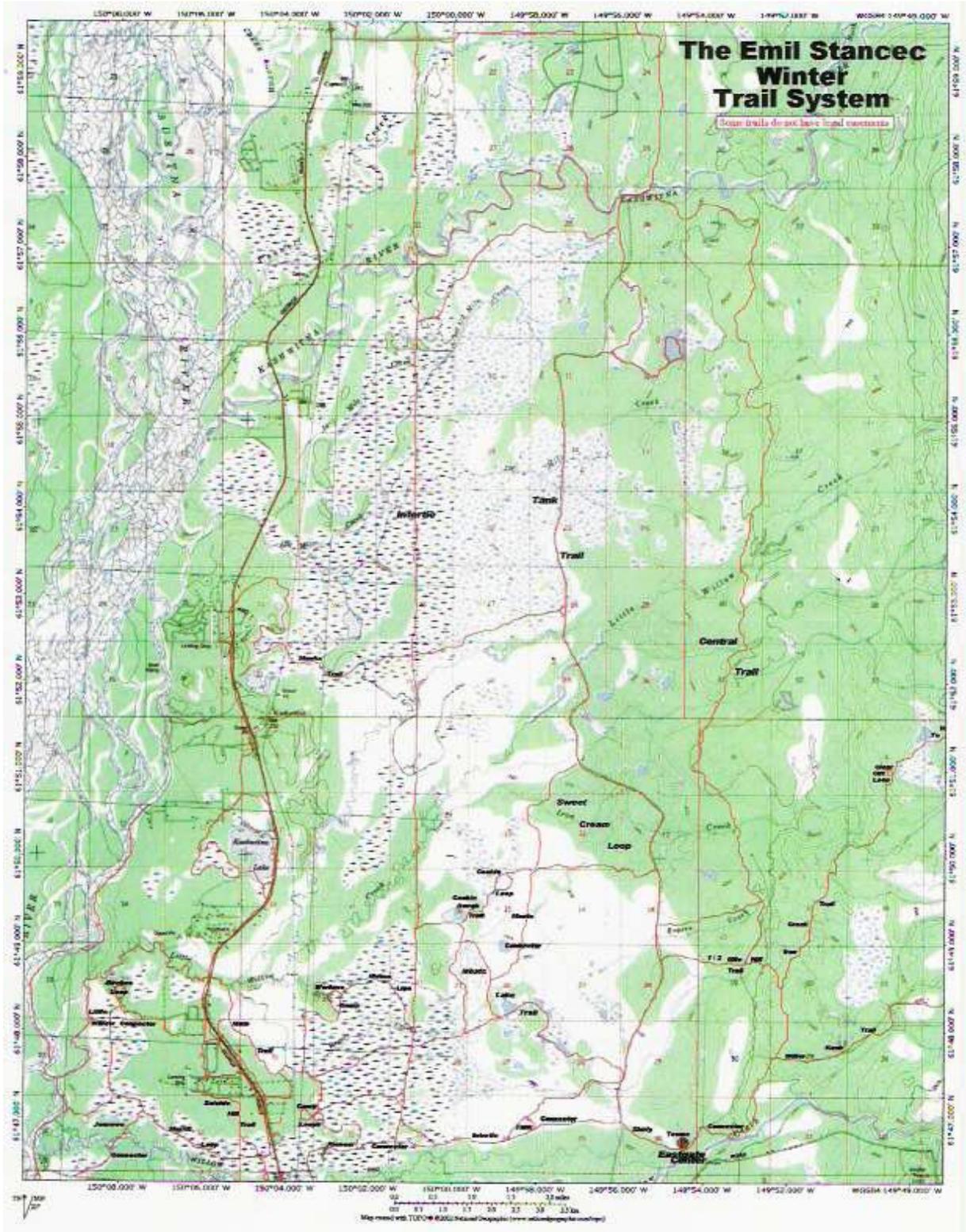
The main trail in this system is the “Tank Trail”, also known as the Talkeetna Mail Trail. Connecting from the north end of what is now 4-Mile Road, in the Haessler-Norris system, the Tank Trail continues north, originally crossed the Kashwitna River and proceeded to Montana Creek and Talkeetna. Although documented in the Kashwitna Management Plan and evidenced in the U.S.G.S. maps of the region, the continuity of the Tank Trail is now blocked by subdivision development. Proposed logging (wood-chips) in the Willer-Kash area further endangers the existence of the trails within this system.

Dog mushers, snowmachiners and hunters use this system extensively.

### Future Plans and Goals for the Emil Stancec Trail System:

- Establish legal status of trails within system
- GPS/Survey/Map trails
- Improve Central Trail and connect it to Tank Trail
- Connect to trails east of the system
- Reconnect this system to the Haessler-Norris Trail System
- Develop trail events and racing capabilities within system
- Install uniform signage
- Maintain and improve trail access
- Incorporate the Willow Community Center as the hub

# Emil Stancec Trail System Map



## Trails Preservation

Aside from the Mat-Su Borough being the fastest developing area in the state, recent events (listed below) have highlighted the need for assistance from the Borough and State in preserving these trails.

- The transfer of state lands to the University of Alaska, an area in the heart of the Haessler-Norris Trail System, was legislated over the objections of the Community of Willow.
- The rapid transfer of Borough and State land to private ownership.
- Scheduled timber sales (wood-chips) in the Kashwitna Management Area will have a tremendous impact on the Emil Stancec Trail System.
- New subdivision developments that block trails and/or access to the above trails.

The Willow Area Trail Committee requests recognition and preservation of the trail systems documented in this Plan to facilitate protection and development of these trail systems,

*We request* that Willow's three trail systems be legally dedicated upon all public lands owned by the State of Alaska or the Mat-Su Borough,

*We request* that any future land transfers by the State of Alaska, the Mat-Su Borough or quasi-public entities such as the University of Alaska, or Mental Health Trust Lands be subject to these trail systems, and that title to transferred lands reserve out these trails for public use, as well as access to them,

*We request* recognition and preservation of Willow's trail systems during any platting process by the Mat-Su Borough. This applies particularly to the Haessler-Norris and Emil Stancec areas, since the legalization process for trail protection often takes years to accomplish, and

*We request* funding for surveying and documentation of trails within the Haessler-Norris and Emil Stancec areas to accelerate legal protection and inclusion in governmental trail plans, and

*We request* funding and assistance in relocating trails off of private property if necessary, since previous land transfers by the State and the Borough did not protect these trails.

## VITAL MUSHING HABITAT

The Willow Trail Committee maintains that the wisest and best use of public lands within the *Emil Stancec and Haessler-Norris Trail Systems* is for recreation and dog mushing related activities. These two trail systems cover an area of 300 square miles.

The preservation of trails for dog mushing also translates into preservation of trails for other outdoor sports enthusiasts. It is by no means the intention of this document to suggest that this area be reserved exclusively for mushers or other winter sports advocates.

The Willow Trail Committee would like to point out however; the urgent need to set aside a geographically suitable area where sled dog kennels can legally operate. For this reason, the Willow Area Trail Plan wishes to address the establishment of what we have called an area of *Mushing Habitat*.

### The Need

Dog mushing is the official sport of State of Alaska; Willow is considered, by many, the mushing capital of Alaska. The community is home to many professional kennels that support teams for the Iditarod Sled Dog Race, the Fur Rondy Sprint Race, the Open North American Sprint Race, the Yukon Quest International Race, Willow Carnival/Norris Cup Sprint Race and the Norman Vaughan Serum Run. In addition to these professional kennels, recreational sled dog teams and tourist oriented kennels make kennel owners an important contributor to the local economy.

Certain crucial things are necessary in order for a sled dog kennel to operate and properly train canine athletes:

- Looped trail systems that comprise enough miles for teams to train for the Iditarod and other distance races.
- Continued access to these trail systems from adjoining sled dog kennels.
- Trails that will not be compromised by future subdivisions.
- Legal protection from noise ordinances that would limit times of day and length of noise emanating from a kennel.

With abundant snowfall and large open spaces, Willow is the perfect “mushing habitat.” The Haessler-Norris and the Emil Stancec trail systems, in particular, provide the trails necessary for professional as well as recreational sled dog kennels to operate. This document has already addressed the importance of protecting the trail systems.

The protection of these trail systems, however, is not the only requisite for a sled dog kennel to exist. The concern of noise must also be addressed. It is no secret that dogs make noise; a kennel of sled dogs can bark and howl during any part of the day. Dogs get excited before eating and training; they bark when a moose or other visitor wanders into their area. A kennel of sled dogs cannot exist if a noise ordinance allows the animals to vocalize for only a certain length of time during a certain part of the day. That is why a solution to this concern is absolutely necessary for mushers and teams to flourish.

Failure to protect training trails and failure to amend noise ordinances, both Borough and State, will ultimately lead to the decline and elimination of sled dog kennels. Evidence of this is the loss of kennels and training trails in the Palmer and Meadow Lakes areas, and the rapid decline around Knik. One important factor in the Iditarod Restart being held in Willow in recent years is not only because of the lack of snowfall in the Wasilla area, but also because of the difficulty in providing trail access from Wasilla to Knik due to over 30 road crossings.

*We do not want Willow to be the next community to loose its mushing heritage.*

### **Mushing Habitat Preservation**

With these concerns in mind the Willow Trail Committee would like to make some proposals which we deem necessary if the sport of dog mushing is to continue to thrive in the area.

*We call for* public lands incorporating the Haessler-Norris and Emil Stancec Trail Systems be recognized as areas of *Vital Mushing Habitat* and be incorporated as such in the Deception Creek Management Plan, the Willow Sub-Basin Area Plan, the Kashwitna Management Plan and/or any other land use plan affecting these areas. These plans should be amended to recognize and protect these areas for public recreation, tourism and dog mushing.

*We call for* the State of Alaska, the MSB and the MSB Animal Care Advisory Board, with approval of the community in question, to modify or amend the noise nuisance or annoyance ordinances and the statutes to allow and encourage kennels to operate and train within the Haessler-Norris and Emil Stancec Trail areas.

*We call for* the State of Alaska to amend AS.:09:45 to include “dog kennels, whether operated for profit or recreation” within the protection of AS 09:45:235.

The importance of dog mushing to the heritage of our great state is undeniable. The importance of dog mushing to tourism and the economy is also significant. But, as the state grows and Alaskan lifestyles change to resembling those outside of Alaska, we need to preserve our unique Alaskan qualities.

Establishing *Mushing Habitat* in the lands encompassing the Emil Stancec and Haessler-Norris Trail Systems will not only allow dog mushers and dog kennels to continue to live, operate and train on these trails, but it will also protect a true Alaskan heritage.

***Once lost, it can never be regained***