

MANAGEMENT UNIT 4: BIG RIVER - SOUTH FORK

Background

Location and Land Ownership. The Big River - South Fork management unit consists of the watersheds that drain into the Kuskokwim River, including the South Fork, Big, and Little Tonzona rivers. Less than half the unit is state owned or state selected. Approximately half the unit is in the Upper Kuskokwim block which is owned by BLM. The remainder of the unit is Native owned or selected, or overlapping selections. Approximately 80 Native allotments exist in the unit that are located primarily along the Kuskokwim, South Fork, Windy Fork, and Big rivers. Most of the unit's population reside in Nikolai, though permanent residents also live in Medfra and more remote parts of the unit.

Resources and Land Use. Most of the unit is covered with black spruce and shrubs. A large burn area along the South Fork River north of Farewell is covered with grasslands and fallen timber. There are some narrow bands of white spruce growing along several rivers; including the Kuskokwim, Big, Windy Fork, Pitka Fork, Little Tonzona, and South Fork rivers and Blackwater Creek. Hardwoods, primarily cottonwoods and birch, are also found in bands along the rivers, including lower Blackwater Creek, the upper Big River, and the middle sections of the Windy Fork and Middle Fork rivers. Some south-facing slopes along the Kuskokwim River, such as Halfway Mountain, are also covered with hardwoods. These timber resources are primarily used for house logs and firewood by residents of McGrath, Nikolai, and Medfra.

The Kuskokwim River, the lower reaches of the major tributaries in the unit, including the Big, Pitka Fork, South Fork, and Little Tonzona rivers, and many of the streams that lead into them contain anadromous fish. Moose, bear, and caribou are generally distributed throughout the unit. Concentrations of brown bear and caribou calving areas exist along the lower South Fork River. The buffalo herd in-

roduced into the Alaska Range along the South Fork River drainage now uses the land adjacent to this river as far north as Nikolai. Moose concentrate in the winter along the South Fork and Kuskokwim Rivers. Large areas of wetlands exist in this unit where ducks and geese are widely distributed.

The area is primarily used by the residents of McGrath, Medfra, and Nikolai. No guiding areas exist in the unit, and recent mining activity is limited to the area north of Medfra. Residents of McGrath and Nikolai use the northwestern part of the unit, particularly along the Kuskokwim River, for moose, bear, caribou, furbearers, berries, fish, firewood, and house logs. Nikolai residents also use this area, areas next to the major rivers in the eastern half of the unit, and the South Fork drainage upriver almost as far as Farewell Lake. The area around Deepback Creek and the upper Little Tonzona River has very high potential for coal although the likelihood of near-term development is low.

Access. The most heavily used trails in the unit are along the Kuskokwim River between Nikolai and McGrath. Several trails connect Nikolai with Farewell Lake, Telida, Medfra, and McGrath. In the Medfra area, trails connect to Nikolai, Telida, McGrath, and several local mines. Also, major winter trails connect Farewell Lake with Farewell Landing, the Big River roadhouse, and McGrath. Many of these trails date back to the gold rush and are recognized as part of the Iditarod National Historic Trail System. The Iditarod race trail also passes through the area and connects Farewell Lake, Salmonberry Lake, Nikolai, and McGrath. Traplines are also prevalent in the unit. Summer travel is primarily by boat along major rivers and by plane. State-maintained, -operated, and -owned airports are located in Nikolai and Medfra. A private airstrip also exists at Farewell Landing, two airstrips at Farewell Lake, and one at Farewell. Floatplanes can land on several lakes and natural or minimally maintained

landing areas exist along river bars. Winter travel in winter is primarily by snow machine or dog team along the trails or major rivers. Ski planes are also commonly used in winter.

Management Intent

The general management intent for areas along the heavily used rivers, particularly the Kuskokwim and South Fork, is to provide opportunities for public use of resources, including hunting, fishing, trapping, forestry, transportation, and recreation. Because of the high use the area receives from the residents of Nikolai in the eastern half of the unit and the valuable resources and public use along the Kuskokwim River, remote cabin permits will not be allowed. Lands along the South Fork and Kuskokwim rivers will be managed for multiple use with emphasis on forestry and fish and wildlife habitat and harvest. Lands along the foothills of the Alaska Range and uplands with low resource values will be managed for general multiple use.

The Upper Kuskokwim block is owned by BLM and the lands near McGrath and Nikolai are owned by the Native corporations. However, the beds of the Kuskokwim River and other navigable waters such as the Big, South Fork, and Kuskokwim rivers are state owned and therefore subject to the guidelines in this plan. Nearly all state lands in this unit will remain open to mineral entry. The beds of one short segment of the Big River where sheefish spawn, will be closed to mineral entry.

Resources on federal lands in this unit have been studied for possible selection or relinquishment. Lands along Sheep Creek will be relinquished because of low resource values. Lands along the lower Big River and the Kuskokwim River will be selected because of high resource values or to consolidate state land ownership.

Subunit 4a - South Fork Uplands

This subunit consists of lands next to the Kuskokwim and South Fork rivers with low timber value but high wildlife values. One

trapping cabin permit has been issued in this subunit on the Big Salmon Fork. Most of this subunit is state owned or selected with some overlapping selections in this subunit. These lands will be retained in public ownership and managed for multiple use with emphasis on wildlife habitat. Some additional lands along the Big River will be selected based on wildlife habitat, oil and gas, and recreation values and to consolidate state land ownership. If conveyed to the state, these lands will be managed as part of subunit 4a. Lakes around Farewell have documented cultural and historic sites. The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation should be consulted before leases or permits are authorized on these lakes.

Subunit 4b - Hinterlands

The hinterlands consist of several blocks of state-owned and state-selected lands and overlapping selections. These lands are located away from the rivers, have poor access, and low surface resource values. These lands will be retained in public ownership and managed for general multiple use. One township that is state selected on Sheep Creek will be relinquished because of its low resource values.

Subunit 4c - Lower Big River and South Fork River

Most of the land in this unit is state owned, but some is state selected or overlapping selections. One trapping permit has been issued in this subunit on Submarine or Steele lake. These lands are located along the Kuskokwim, Big, South Fork, and Little Tonzona Rivers and have high timber and wildlife values and good access. Very high coal potential exist on the upper Little Tonzona though the likelihood of near-term development is low. These lands will be retained in public ownership and managed for multiple use with emphasis on wildlife habitat and forestry. Approximately two townships in this subunit along the Kuskokwim and Big Rivers will be selected for timber, wildlife habitat, oil and gas, and recreation values and to consolidate state land ownership. If conveyed to the state, they will be managed as part of subunit 4c. Some lakes around Farewell have been docu-

mented cultural and historic sites. The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation should be consulted before leases or permits are authorized on these lakes.

Management Guidelines

The complete set of management guidelines is presented in Chapter 2. Any of the guidelines could apply to uses within this management unit. Those most likely to apply are listed below:

- Fish and wildlife habitat
- Forestry
- Lakeshore management
- Public and commercial recreation resources
- Remote cabins & trapping cabins
- Trail management

Subunits 4a, 4b, & 4c - South Fork Uplands, Hinterlands, Lower Big River, & South Fork River

Grazing. Grazing leases or permits will not be allowed in the following areas because they support large concentrations of moose in winter and are concentration areas for brown bear (Map 2.1). This does not prohibit temporary passage through these areas for travel between areas where grazing is permitted. Grazing may be allowed in portions of these closed areas if consistent with the guidelines in Chapter 2 ("Grazing on Important Habitat Lands").

- T27S R22E K.R.M. sec. 23, 24-29 & 31-36
- T29S R22E K.R.M. sec. 1-6
- T28S R19E K.R.M. sec. 36
- T28S R20E K.R.M. sec. 31-36
- T28S R21E K.R.M. sec. 1, 12-15, 21-29, 31-36
- T29S R20E K.R.M. sec. 1-6
- T34N R27W S.M. sec. 31-36
- T34N R29W S.M. sec. 31-36
- T33N R30W S.M.
- T33N R28W S.M. sec. 1-12
- T33N R26W S.M. sec. 7, 8, 15-18, 20-25 & 36
- T32N R26W S.M. sec. 1-3 & 11-13

- T32N R25W S.M. sec. 6-7, 17-20, 28-30, 32 & 33
- T31N R25W S.M. sec. 4, 5, 8-10, 14-16, 22, 23 & 26
- T31N R24W S.M. sec. 13, 24 & 25
- T31N R23W S.M. sec. 19, 20 & 29-32
- T30N R25W S.M.
- T30N R24W S.M. sec. 5-9, 16-21 & 27-34
- T29N R26W S.M. sec. 1-3, 10-15 & 22-36
- T29N R25W S.M.
- T29N R24W S.M. sec. 3-10 & 18-36
- T29N R23W S.M. sec. 17-20 & 27-34
- T28N R25W S.M.
- T31N R20W S.M. sec. 23-28 & 32-36

Subunits 4a and 4c - South Fork Uplands, Hinterlands, Lower Big River, and South Fork River

Cultural and Historic Sites. Historic sites have been reported near Farewell, Submarine, and John lakes. The State Office of History and Archaeology in DOPOR should be consulted before leases or permits are granted adjacent to these lakes.

Selections and Relinquishments. The following land will be selected for known timber and wildlife habitat values and oil and gas potentials (Map 4.1).

- T33N R30W S.M. sec. 19-36
- T32N R30W S.M. sec. 1-4, 10-15, 22-27 & 34-36
- T32N R29W S.M. sec. 18, 19, 30 & 31

The following land will be selected for known wildlife habitat, and recreation values, and oil and gas potential and to consolidate state land ownership:

- T32N R29W S.M. sec. 1-18, 20-29 & 32-36
- T33N R28W S.M.
- T34N R27W S.M.
- T33N R26W S.M. sec. 19-21 & 28-33

The following land will be selected to consolidate state land ownership:

- T28S R21E K.R.M. sec. 1, 12-15, 22, 23, 26 & 27

The following township on Sheep Creek will be relinquished because of low resource values:

T29N R26W S.M.

Mineral Closures. One of the only two known sheefish spawning areas that exist in the Kuskokwim drainage are on the Big River. Sheefish spawn over a 2-mile segment of the Big River, approximately 40 to 42 miles up from the mouth. The best spawning area is probably 2 to 2.5 miles above the last large meander in the river. Sheefish enter the Big River from July through early September and probably arrive at the spawning grounds in late September. Though the uplands of this portion of the Big River are owned by BLM, the bed of the river is state owned. To protect this important spawning area, state lands below ordinary high water in the following sections of the Big River will be closed to new mineral entry. This area currently has low mineral potential and no existing mining claims. The boundaries of the closures are described in Appendix H and are shown on Map 2.4.

T31N R30W S.M. sec. 33 & 34

T30N R30W S.M. sec. 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 17, & 18

Iditarod National Historic Trail System and Race Trail. Both trail systems pass through portions of all this unit (Appendix C). Setbacks along them will be consistent with policies in Chapter 2.

Subunits 4a, 4b, and 4c - South Fork, Hinterlands, and Big River

Agricultural Potential. Although preliminary ratings in the USDA Exploratory Soil Survey show portions of these subunits as having moderate potential for agriculture, detailed information is unavailable to confirm these ratings. To protect options for long-term use of these lands, the Division of Agriculture should be consulted before permits or leases are issued for any activities that would significantly diminish their capability to support agriculture.

RESOURCE INFORMATION SUMMARY

Management Unit 4 - Big River-South Fork

Resource	4a	Subunit 4b	4c
Agriculture	Moderate to low potential	Moderate to low potential	Moderate to low potential
Energy	Very high coal potential on Little Tonzona River; rest low to moderate	Very high coal potential on Deepbank Creek; rest low to moderate	Mostly very low, some low potential
Fish	Salmon & resident fish	Salmon & resident fish	Salmon & resident fish
Forestry	Low to unsuitable	Most unsuitable; some moderate potential near Kuskokwim River	High potential along South, Pitka, & Windy Fork rivers ; rest unsuitable
Grazing	High potential	High potential	High potential
Historic/cultural	Iditarod NHTS	Unknown	Iditarod NHTS
Materials	Low potential	Low potential	Low potential
Minerals	Low potential	High near Medfra; rest low potential; mining claims near Medfra	Low potential
Oil & gas	Partially within currently mapped estimated Minchumina sedimentary basin boundary	Partially within currently mapped estimated Minchumina sedimentary basin boundary	Partially within currently mapped estimated Minchumina sedimentary basin boundary
Public access	Boat on rivers; plane to natural landing areas and airstrips; snow machine trails	Snowmachine trails	Boat on rivers; plane to lakes & riverbars; snowmachine & dog trails
Recreation	Moderate on Iditarod Race Trail; rest low potential	Low potential	Moderate on Iditarod Race Trail; rest low potential
Settlement suitability	Unsuitable	Most unsuitable; pockets of high and low	Most unsuitable; some high and low along rivers
Wildlife	A-1 and B-1; Moose winter range; bear	B-2 and C; Moose winter range; bear	Mostly A-1; some C; Brown bear conc. area; moose winter range
Important trails	Iditarod Race Trail & NHTS; local trails near Medfra; little Tonzona trail	Local trails near Medfra	Iditarod Race Trail & NHTS; Nikolai trail; South Fork River trail; trails near Medfra

See glossary for definition of ratings.

LAND-USE DESIGNATION SUMMARY

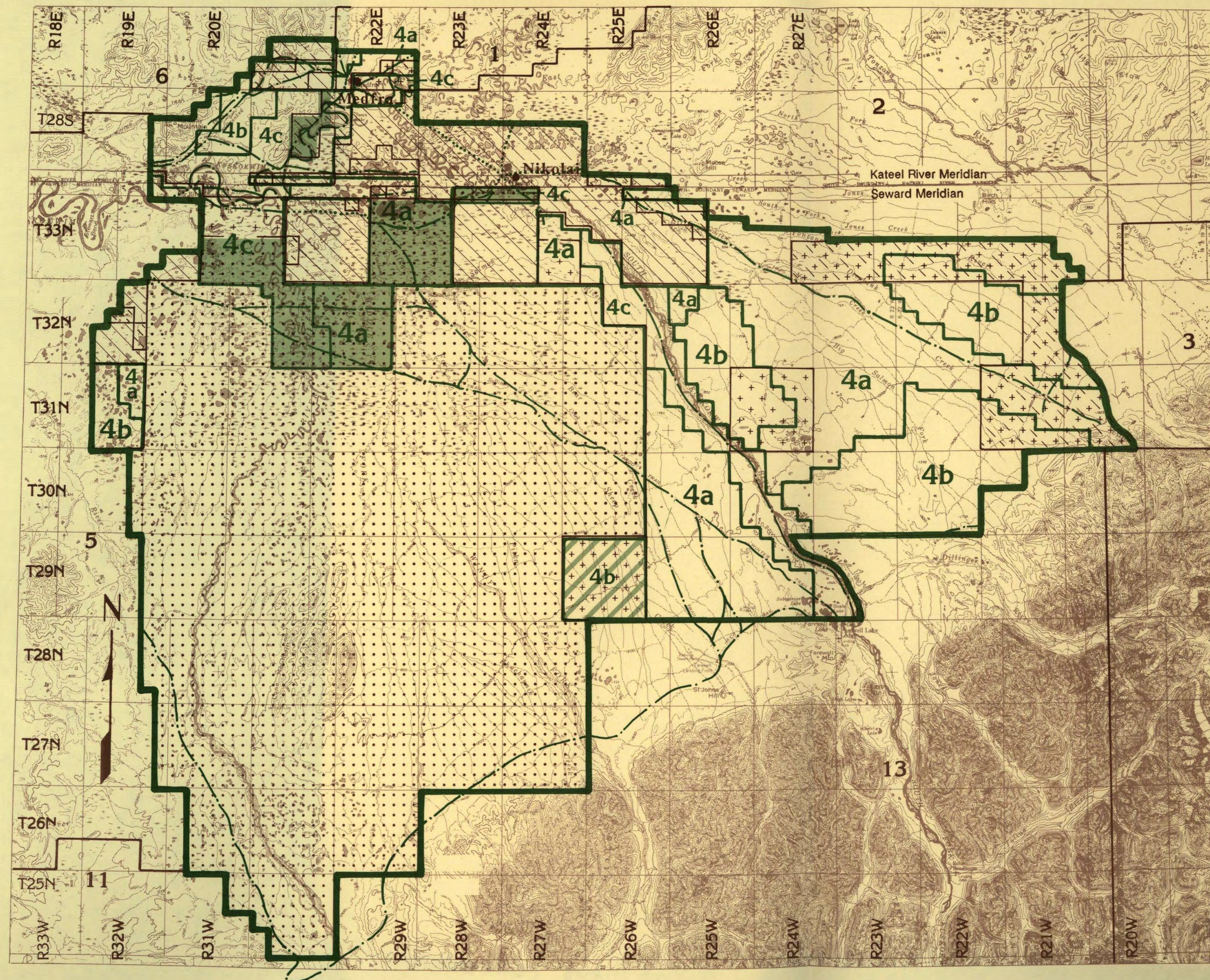
MANAGEMENT UNIT 4 - BIG RIVER-SOUTH FORK

SUBUNIT	LAND OWNERSHIP	LAND USE DESIGNATIONS			COMMENTS
		Primary Surface Uses	Secondary Surface Uses	Prohibited Surface Uses ^a Subsurface ^b	
4a South Fork Uplands	State, state selected, state/Native selected & federal	Wildlife habitat		Grazing in part Land disposals Remote cabins	Open Includes new selections
4b Hinterlands	State, state selected & state/Native select & fed.	General use: low resource values		Land disposals Remote cabins	Open One township proposed for relinquishment
4c Lower Big River and South Fork River	State, state selected & state/Native selected, and federal	Forestry Wildlife habitat		Grazing in part of subunit Land disposals Remote cabins	Open Includes new selections

^aOther uses such as material sales, land leases, or permits that are not specifically prohibited may be allowed. Such uses will be allowed if consistent with the management-intent statement, the management guidelines of this unit, and the relevant management guidelines listed in Chapter 2. Grazing may be allowed in portions of closed units when consistent with the guideline in Chapter 2 (Grazing on Important Habitat Lands).

^bAll areas are available for leasing for leasable minerals. Statements of whether or not the unit is open to mineral entry refer only to locatable minerals.

4: Big River - South Fork



— Management Unit Boundary
 — Subunit Boundary

- No Pattern State Owned
- + + State Selected
- / / Native Owned
- / / Native Selected
- Federal
- Proposed State Selections
- / / Proposed Relinquishments
- Trails on public lands
- ANCSA 17 (b) easements & State Omnibus roads

Map shows approximate location of easements to state land and trails across state land. Portions of trails may cross private lands.

