

Mendenhall Wetlands Boundary – 1973 (Updated 2018)

Background: The LWV of Juneau studied and adopted the MENDENHALL WETLANDS BOUNDARY CONSENSUS in 1973, a boundary policy (see Original study). They also participated in 1976 when the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge was established.

The following information is included from the description of the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge and included here to update the original study's discussion of the 22.7' tide line which is no longer applicable once the Refuge was established:

“The Mendenhall Refuge encompasses a series of estuaries created by the numerous streams originating in the surrounding mountains. As the tides ebb and flow, the refuge alternates from grassland to shallow sea. The varying salt conditions produce a diverse community of plants from sedge meadows and beach rye, to spruce-hemlock forests in uplands surrounding the refuge. The complex of vegetation provides resting and feeding habitat for spring and fall migrations of waterfowl and shorebirds. Over 140 species of birds are known to frequent in and around the refuge. Mammals found in the refuge area include harbor seal, Sitka black-tailed deer, black bear, muskrat, land otter, mink, short-tailed weasel, snowshoe hare, porcupine, little brown bat, and long-tailed vole. Numerous fish streams flow into the refuge providing spawning areas for sockeye, coho, chum, and pink salmon, Dolly Varden, char, and cutthroat trout.

“The refuge boundary is dotted by numerous private dwellings and commercial developments. Juneau’s airport actually protrudes out into the wetlands, however it lies outside the actual refuge boundary. Just south of the airport, glacier highway borders the eastern boundary edge on the mainland side of the refuge. Currently, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game holds responsibility for the refuge, and manages it primarily for public recreation.”¹

Land within the Mendenhall Refuge that is tidally influenced up to the mean high-tide level (15.4 ft), also known as the meander line, is protected and managed by the State for its unique recreational and wildlife values. In some areas, State management is extended to the extreme high tide line at 22.7 ft.

As the outer edges of the Refuge following the meander line become lifted by post glacial rebound beyond frequent tidal inundation, the Refuge boundary shrinks. The accreted land begins to assume upland characteristics supporting pioneer communities of plants like grasses, fireweed, and eventually first generation stands of young, open growth Sitka spruce. No longer held within the refuge these uplands become available for private ownership by adjacent landowners through a process called quiet title. The underlying assumption behind quiet title is that present-day owners of waterfront property retain the same right to water access as the original owners received at the time the land was conveyed from the public domain. ²

¹ 2017 <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=mendenhallwetlands.main>)

² 2017 <http://www.southeastalaskalandtrust.org/pdf/accretion.pdf>

With land rising an average of a half inch per year due to post glacial rebound in the Juneau area, and low-gradient tidal flats a persistent feature of the Refuge, seaward shifts can total hundreds of feet over the course of several decades. With uplifted lands no longer protected as part of the Refuge, as the original study noted, all avenues of land acquisition should be explored that will be fair to property owners and contribute to maintaining the size of the Refuge. The concept of land swapping has precedence here in our borough and has been an important tool for coastal zone management in other areas of the United States. The League of Women Voters of Juneau is willing to work with other interested groups and the City and Borough to ensure equitable and reasonable funding measures based on national expression to maintain the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge.

References: For more information on the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge please refer to the [Mendenhall Wetlands Management Plan](#). For current land status information, see the [Mendenhall Wetlands Land Status Map \(PDF 1,384 kB\)](#). You may also [download the KML file](#) which depicts the refuge area boundary.