

Airport Dump Site



Introduction

The Airport Dump Site is an approximately 5-acre former dumping area located about 1.4 air miles south of Copper Center and 0.35 miles east of the Richardson Highway, at the end of a trail that runs past a small plane runway. Nestled on the east side of the Richardson Highway and west of the Copper River, the site sits within the northeast corner of a 320-acre parcel in Section 30, Township 2 North, Range 1 East of the Copper River Meridian.



The property is owned by the University of Alaska (UA), transferred through a state conveyance and quitclaim deed executed in 1984 and officially recorded in 1988. The site is situated at approximately 1,170 feet elevation, beginning at the edge of a bluff that descends sharply 125 to 170 feet into a drainage channel. This drainage eventually flows into the Copper River, roughly 3,000 feet away. The site's unique topography and proximity to natural waterways raise potential concerns regarding environmental impacts, particularly due to the historic disposal of debris along the bluff's edge.



History



The Airport Dump site has a long history of unauthorized dumping dating back to the 1950s, when it was informally used as a regional disposal area. Waste was discarded over the northern bluff in at least four primary locations along a 675-foot stretch, creating multiple debris fields spanning an estimated 3 to 5 acres.

The site, located atop a steep bluff approximately 3,000 feet from the Copper River, contains various forms of household waste, white goods, derelict vehicles, paint cans, and other potentially hazardous materials. Over decades, erosion and seasonal runoff have caused debris to migrate downslope into a drainage channel that connects to the Copper River, a vital subsistence resource for the Native Village of Kluti-Kaah. Community concerns about contamination, physical hazards, and impacts to wildlife and water quality prompted renewed attention to the site. The site remains overgrown and largely unmanaged.

Previous Activities

The field assessment approach consisted of a single field assessment conducted following an initial site visit on September 10, 2023, and a second site visit took place on October 3 and 4, 2023. The investigation identified four primary debris areas spanning approximately three acres, though the actual surficial area affected is estimated at less than one acre.





The debris, mostly dating from the 1960s and 1970s, consists of household waste, vehicle parts, drums, broken batteries, scrap metal, and other industrial and residential items. The site appears shallow, overgrown, and generally stable, though natural erosion and a drainage channel continue to influence debris movement downslope. Water at the base of the bluff contacts debris along an estimated 800-foot stretch of drainage, which ultimately flows into the Copper River approximately 3,000 feet away. While no specific contamination sources were identified and no environmental sampling was conducted, the presence of hazardous materials such as paints, fluids, and battery residues suggests the potential for contamination. The primary immediate risk is physical injury due to hidden sharp objects and unstable materials on the steep, vegetated slope.

Current Activities



The Airport Dump Site is currently inactive and no longer used for waste disposal. There is no evidence of recent dumping activity, and the site appears to have remained unused for several decades. The property remains undeveloped and functions as a non-active historical landfill. Although the surrounding area includes the Richardson Highway approximately 0.4 miles to the west and an active small-plane runway located about 0.5 miles to the north, the dump site itself is isolated at the end of a trail extending past the airport. Native allotments in the area may serve intermittently as seasonal camps, though this usage has not been evaluated. The nearby Copper River, approximately half a mile from the eastern edge of the site, continues to serve as a vital subsistence resource for local communities. Ongoing erosion of the bluff along the site is a concern, as the bluff erodes more each year, exposing additional waste materials and potentially increasing the risk of contaminant migration toward surrounding areas, including nearby surface waters.



There are currently no controls or mitigation measures in place to restrict access to the site. However, due to its isolated location at the end of a trail extending beyond the small airport runway, the site is not widely known or frequently accessed by the public.

Revitalization



The community envisions the future of the Airport Dump site as a restored natural greenspace that supports traditional subsistence practices and improves local food security. Their goal is to remove the waste and debris from the site, allowing native vegetation and wildlife to return and thrive. This ecological restoration would promote the growth of moose browse, native plants such as berries, and other natural resources vital for cultural and nutritional needs. Community members rely on the area for harvesting moose, small game, berries, and salmon from the nearby Copper River. In addition to revitalizing the land for subsistence use, the community also hopes to improve access to fishwheels on the river, which are essential to their seasonal harvests. Reuse of the property as a greenspace would not only restore an important habitat but also protect the region's water and food sources from potential hazardous contamination, supporting long-term health, safety, and cultural resilience.

Though this is the long-term goal for the site, there are currently no additional assessment, cleanup, or redevelopment actions planned or scheduled. This is primarily due to the site's remote location, limited accessibility, and the challenging terrain where the waste is located.