

Nikiski beach closure festers

PROTEST: Residents want access to the area that was closed for security concerns.

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Monica McGahan and her family have been using a Nikiski beach since before statehood -- for relaxing picnics after work, for collecting pretty rocks called agates, for teaching kids about the tides and sea birds.

But McGahan, her husband, Rich, and their kids, Jimmy, 11, and Tessa, 9, haven't spent any time on the beach this summer.

They've been barred because of a local land dispute rooted in the post-9/11 era of heightened homeland security.

A company that runs a dock for Cook Inlet oil platform supply boats closed the access road to the beach six months ago. It did so over the objections of officials with the state Department of Transportation and the Kenai Peninsula Borough, and now the matter is in court.

So today, McGahan and a lot of her family and friends are planning a "friendly protest walk" down the road. McGahan said she expects as many as 200 protesters waving signs they made by hand.

It'll be peaceful, she said, but pointed -- give us our beach back.

McGahan said she understands the company, Offshore Systems-Kenai, had to tighten security around its dock to comply with new federal port security requirements.

"We're totally cool with that," she said. "But they went to extremes, in our minds. They just threw up a guard shack and said nobody could go to the beach."

The situation in Nikiski, an unincorporated community along the Inlet, is fallout from a nationwide effort to tighten security and guard against terrorism at the nation's harbors.

One requirement is for ports handling hazardous material such as fuel to file a security plan with the U.S. Coast Guard, an agency within the Department of Homeland Security, and to check identification for everyone entering the area.

Mike Peek, dock manager for Offshore Systems, wrote the security plan for his operation.

The tightened security began in late December with a guard shack on Nikishka Beach Road, which runs down to the dock from the Kenai Spur Highway.

After people in six or eight cars drove past the guard shack -- they did it "solely to harass" the guard, Peek believes -- the company erected a gate across the road.

A state DOT supervisor wasn't happy and sent Peek a letter in March citing the "illegal closure of

Nikishka Beach Road" and threatening a lawsuit if it wasn't reopened to the public.

The DOT official said he believed Offshore Systems could have found a way to accommodate beachgoers but took "simply the most convenient and economic" way for the company to meet security requirements.

The DOT last month sued Offshore Systems in state Superior Court.

The state lawyer handling the case was off Friday and couldn't be reached for comment.

Commercial fishermen who use beach sites to net salmon are allowed in, and Peek said he offered authorities a plan to admit others. But he said the state and borough officials didn't like the idea of anybody having to stop at the guard shack before following signs to the beach.

Tim Navarre, the borough chief of staff, said local residents need and deserve access to the beach. The Kenai Peninsula has only a few public access points to its beaches, he said.

He suggested the Coast Guard wasn't open enough to helping find a solution.

"Our biggest disappointment here is a lack of communication, or willingness to come together," he said.

Petty Officer Sara Francis, a Coast Guard spokeswoman in Anchorage, said it's not the Coast Guard's place to settle the access dispute. Once the court rules, the Coast Guard will review any changes that might be needed in the Offshore Systems security plan, she said.

Francis said the company dock is one of 106 ports or other facilities around Alaska that now have security zones under the federal Maritime Transportation Security Act.

McGahan said she and other protesters plan to walk down Nikishka Beach Road beginning at 1 p.m. today, to stop at the guard shack, and then walk back to the highway to wave their signs.

The family event will end at 3 p.m. and any troublemakers will be asked to leave, she said.

"That is so not what we're about," McGahan said.

The beach is special, she said, a secluded place to relax, with no fee to park in a public lot.

And not to talk bad about the Kenai's tourism industry, but "that's one beach Alaska tourists don't know about," McGahan added. "It's the only beach that the locals go to and it's a beautiful beach."

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