

## ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

### Denali National Scenic Highway Study

#### I. Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of the study is to recommend to Congress the desirability of establishing a Denali Scenic Highway in Alaska pursuant to Section 1311 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). This legislation withdrew all federal public lands along a 500 mile corridor and directed the Secretary of Interior to study the withdrawn lands and consider:

- the scenic and recreational values of the lands withdrawn for this study;
- the desirability of enhancing the experience of persons traveling between national parks in Southcentral Alaska; and,
- the desirability of providing a symbolic and actual physical connection between national parks in Southcentral Alaska.

Overall lead and coordination was delegated to the Alaska Land Use Council (ALUC) by the Secretary. The ALUC through an interdisciplinary team prepared the Draft Study Report. The Secretary must report his findings to the President by December 2, 1983. For further information regarding the purpose and need for this study, refer to "A Study To Determine The Desirability of Creating The Denali National Scenic Highway, Draft", May 1983 (Study Report), prepared under the auspices of the Alaska Land Use Council.

#### II. Alternatives

##### A. Background

ANILCA Section 1311 withdrew all federal public lands within one mile of either side of the centerline along approximately 500 miles of existing highways and roads in the State of Alaska along the Parks, Denali, Richardson, and Edgerton Highways and the McCarthy Road. The Secretary was directed to study these public lands to determine the desirability of creating a scenic highway.

The vast majority of these federal public lands lie along the Denali Highway. None of the other highways or roads have significant amounts of federal public land along their routes. (Study Report, Table 1, page 13). Consequently, for the purposes of an environmental assessment, the Proposed Action pertains only to the Denali Highway.

##### B. Formulation

At the outset of the study it was hoped that a National Scenic Highway could be defined and that certain criteria could be developed. In this way it was felt that it would be a fairly simple job to compare the characteristics of the various highways and roads in the study corridor against the criteria used for defining a National Scenic Highway. This comparison would then enable a decision to be made as to whether all or portion of the corridor qualified as a National Scenic Highway.

Unfortunately, the task of defining a National Scenic Highway proved much more complex. Numerous state and federal agencies as well as the general public were contacted so that objective criteria for a National Scenic Highway could be developed. (Study Report, Table 2, pages 15-18, and Table B-1). However, a range of definitions was received. This was a result of different state, federal and private management objectives as well as different missions among the agencies within these groups. Consequently, it was decided for the purposes of the Study Report that a range of definitions was the only appropriate way to define a National Scenic Highway (Study Report, pages 16-18).

#### C. Alternatives Considered

For the purposes of preparing an environmental assessment and being consistent with the Study Report, two alternatives will be considered for the Denali Highway. These are No. 1, No Designation (the proposed action) and No. 2, Designation.

##### No Designation

This alternative is the proposed action. The Denali Highway would be managed under existing local, state and federal authorities. It is proposed that all agencies involved with the management of land, resources or facilities along the Denali Highway explore cooperative management opportunities. To date numerous studies have been completed by these agencies, however, no cooperative management plans have been undertaken.

Existing federal proposals for management of the Denali Highway area are outlined in the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Management Framework Plan (MFP) prepared in 1980. This plan recommends development of an interpretive program for the Denali Highway using as a guideline the Denali Highway Study prepared for BLM in 1976 by Colorado State University (Study Report, pages 42 and 43). The Colorado State study discusses signs, pamphlet programs, visitor information centers, and interpretive pullouts. Cooperative management is listed as a support opportunity for this MFP recommendation.

The State of Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT/PF) has prepared in 1981a Location Study Report and an Environmental Assessment for a proposal to upgrade the Denali Highway. The DOT/PF proposal calls for construction of turnouts, boat launching ramps, and service and interpretive signing (Denali Highway Cantwell to Paxson, Environmental Assessment pages 9 and 10). Further it states "...the Denali Highway is a most scenic route and the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities intends to treat it as such ..." (Location Study Report, page 5).

The scenic resources of the Denali Highway were inventoried by the Department of Natural Resources in 1982. This inventory was contracted to D. L. Kuklok and is generally referred to as the Kuklok Report.

The above studies and plans can be used as a reference point for pursuing cooperative planning and management for the Denali Highway. However, it is not proposed that any of these studies or plans actually be implemented at this time.

### Designation

This alternative calls for a formal National Designation of the Denali Highway as a National Scenic Highway. Since, as mentioned earlier, a scenic highway consists of a range of possibilities, three representative scenarios will be examined.

Scenario No. 1 - Under this scenario, it is proposed that there be a formal designation; however, the only on-the-ground work would be that of signing.

Scenario No. 2 - In addition to formal designation and signing, upgrading of the road and construction of pullouts and visitor interpretive facilities similar to developed rest stops would be established.

Scenario No. 3 - In addition to those items contained in Scenarios No. 1 and No. 2, this scenario provides for resurfacing and realignment as well as land use restrictions on adjacent federal lands and right-of-way use restrictions.

### III. Affected Environment

Existing scenic, recreational and other resource values of the Denali Highway are discussed in detail in the Study Report (pages 37-45). The area along the Denali Highway is exceptional for sightseeing and photography, not only because of the beautiful views, but also because of the opportunity to see wildlife and to view unique geologic features such as a melting pingo, kettle lakes and eskers. Wildlife in the area includes caribou (Part of the Nelchina herd crosses the area in late August.), moose, bear, beaver, porcupine, ptarmigan and swan. The Denali Highway passes through the Tangle Lakes Archeological District and near the town-site of Denali where gold was discovered on Valdez Creek in 1903. Tangle Lakes and many of the small streams along the Denali Highway offer good fishing. Numerous canoe trails, off-road vehicle trails, and foot trails may be reached from the Denali Highway. The area is heavily hunted in the fall.

For further information on the affected environment, refer to the Study Report, pages 37-45 and the Environmental Assessment prepared by DOT/PF for the Denali Highway (DOT/PF E.A.) pages 16-26.

The social environment is directly affected by the Study. There is overwhelming local public opposition to any form of National Scenic Highway designation, however, AHTNA, Inc., has voiced support for such a designation (Study Report, pages 47 and 62-65).

#### IV. Environmental Consequences

##### A. No Designation

This alternative is the proposed action; thus the Denali Highway area would be managed under existing authorities. The environmental consequences associated with these proposals are adequately addressed in DOT/PF Environmental Assessment for the Denali Highway. These impacts may be summarized as follows:

- a) Vegetation - Losses of vegetation would result from approximately eight miles of realignment. Construction of new turnouts would impact one to nine acres of vegetation per turnout. There are approximately 90 turnouts at present. Several new ones would be constructed, however. Temporary vegetation loss would occur at material source and construction camp sites. (DOT/PF E.A. pages 9 and 16)
- b) Wildlife - According to the DOT/PF Environmental Assessment, impacts upon wildlife are not quantifiable (page 16). Bridge and cutout replacement and put-in construction could increase the silt load and impact the fisheries. This is a short term impact and would be mitigated by construction timing. There would be a long term benefit because of replacement of poorly placed or inadequately sized culverts that presently restrict fish passage (DOT/PF E.A. page 16).

There is a possibility of interruption of Nelchina herd caribou migrations across the Denali Highway. However, due to highway construction timing it is unlikely that construction would occur during caribou migration periods (DOT/PF E.A. page 18).

- c) Subsistence - The DOT/PF environmental assessment does not project any adverse impacts on subsistence use (page 18).
- d) Water - Bridge and culvert replacement, new culvert installation and boat ramp construction would impact the water resources. There would be unavoidable temporary stream siltation. Cutbanks resulting from construction would be resloped and revegetated (DOT/PF E.A. page 19).

Less than one acre of wetlands would be directly impacted by proposed project realignments. Each stream crossing involves less than one acre of wetland (DOT/PF E.A. page 19).

No flood plain development, incompatible with natural or beneficial flood plain values, is expected to result from the project (DOT/PF E.A. page 20, Table 3).

- e) Air - Proposed construction activity would temporarily increase both dust and emissions. Pollutants from construction equipment or from projected traffic would not be sufficient to jeopardize air quality standards (DOT/PF E.A. page 20).

- f) Noise - Project construction would produce a temporary increase in existing noise levels due to equipment operation. No federal, state, or local noise ordinance is or would be violated from vehicle noise emissions of present or projected traffic volumes (DOT/PF E.A. pages 20 and 21).
- g) Visual - An improved roadway surface and construction of adequate turnouts would enhance viewscales. There would be temporary negative visual impacts (e.g., dust, construction equipment operation, surface disturbances) created by project construction activity. These could be controlled to some extent by watering (DOT/PF E.A. page 22)
- h) Recreation - Numerous outdoor recreation opportunities exist along the Denali Highway. Figures indicate that during a 75 day period in the summer of 1975, 6400 groups (averaging 3.2 persons per group) travelled the Denali Highway to gain access to recreation areas. Recreation impacts from project construction activity would be temporary. Recreation benefits would result from safer and more turnouts, put-ins letter barrels, and informational and interpretive signing (DOT/PF E.A. page 23).

#### B. Designation

Scenario No. 1 - Under this scenario it is proposed there be a National Designation of the Denali Highway. The only proposed on-the-ground work would be that of erecting signs. Therefore the impact to the physical environment would consist only of the digging of numerous post holes for the signs. The signs would be designed so as to be aesthetically pleasing. Thus the vegetation where the signs are placed would receive the only impact.

The major impact under this scenario is to the social environment. A National Designation in any form is contrary to local public opinion. The people living along the route are concerned about the "foot in the door" tactic and are wary of future impacts and restrictions in their lifestyle. They cite the Blueridge Parkway in the "Lower 48" which started out as a "scenic highway" as an example. Today there are adjacent land-use, speed, and class of vehicle restrictions. (Study Report pages 62-65).

Scenario No. 2 - This scenario calls for a National Designation and upgrading comparable to that contained in the DOT/PF proposal. Consequently the environmental impacts associated with this scenario are adequately addressed under the "No Designation" alternative. The negative social impacts associated with this scenario are addressed under scenario No. 1 above.

Scenario No. 3 - This scenario may be viewed as giving rise to the most restrictive land-use. The impacts to the environment discussed under the "No Designation" alternative would be applicable. In all likelihood, these impacts may be greater because of the possibility of resurfacing the highway.

Once again, the greatest impact would be to the social environment. This scenario posits the very thing the local residents are so vehemently opposed to. In addition to a formal National Designation, there would be restrictions on adjacent land use. The Secretary could withdraw the lands in order to protect the viewshed. There could be restrictions on the class of vehicle which used the highway. However, optimum protection would be afforded to the scenic resources.

#### V. Comparison of Alternatives

As can be seen from the above discussion, the environmental impacts associated with the various alternatives and scenarios are basically the same except to the socio-economic environment.

There is a significant difference between the No Designation and Designation alternatives, however. This difference lies in the public opinions associated with the two alternatives. (Study Report pages 46 and 47)

Under the No Designation Alternative the resources of the area could be adequately protected under existing authority. (Study Report pages 46 and 47)

#### VI. Consultation and Coordination

This Environmental Assessment was prepared in conjunction with "A Study To Determine The Desirability Of Creating A Denali National Scenic Highway." For the relationship of this action to related plans and studies on adjacent lands, efforts to obtain public involvement, list of preparers and list of agencies and persons consulted refer to that study.