

Chapter Five: Coordination and Consultation

Overview

Public comment has been sought both formally and informally throughout the South Denali Implementation planning process, and the plan has been modified as a result of public comments received. Public input was solicited through distribution of newsletters, telephone communications, media announcements, and through a series of public meetings. The following is a brief overview of the extent of public and agency involvement.

CONSULTATION

Consultation with the Public

Scoping is designed to be an early, open public process to determine the scope and significance of issues to be addressed in an environmental document for a proposed action. The scoping process for this *South Denali Implementation Plan* was initiated on February 13th, 2004, with the publication of the Notice of Intent to prepare an environmental impact statement in the *Federal Register*. In February, 2004, a scoping newsletter was distributed to introduce the goals of the project and solicit input on the development of alternatives. During February 2004, public meetings were held in Anchorage, Wasilla, Susitna Valley, McKinley Village, and Fairbanks. In June, 2004, a newsletter summarizing scoping comments was distributed to approximately 450 addresses and posted on the project website www.southdenaliplanning.com.

The agencies met regularly in Palmer, and these meetings were open to and attended by the public. In addition to these meetings, the partners engaged in a number of informal meetings and frequently communicated by telephone and electronic mail to further exchange ideas and information about the project. In November, 2004, the planning team held an informational workshop in Susitna Valley to update the public of our progress and exchange ideas on the project. All constituents, including low-income and minority communities that could be affected by the proposal and alternatives, were involved in the agencies' outreach efforts.

A Notice of Availability for the Draft Plan was published in the Federal Register on September 9, 2005, and public comment was accepted through November 15, 2005. The planning team received 72 comments. See Chapter 6 for a summary and analysis of these comments and the agency responses.

Consultation with Federal Agencies

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, as amended, prohibits federal agencies such as the National Park Service from implementing any

action that is likely to jeopardize the continued existence of a federally protected (i.e., endangered, threatened) species. Further, the act requires that the National Park Service consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on any action it authorizes, funds, or executes that could potentially affect a protected species or its designated critical habitat.

To help meet its responsibilities under the act, the National Park Service has consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to identify those listed plant and animal species that may inhabit the park backcountry. On June 2, 2004, Park Planner Adrienne Hall sent a letter to the Endangered Species Biologist, requesting information on federally endangered or threatened plant and animal species in the planning area. The Endangered Species Biologist indicated that the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service had no endangered or threatened plant and animal species occurring within the planning area (USFWS Reference Number for this letter is 2004 205). Copies of the correspondence are on file at the NPS Alaska Region office.

In February and March 2004, the planning team held discussions with staff from US Army Corps of Engineers, Federal Highways Administration, US Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to discuss the South Denali project.

Consultation with State and Local Governments

Employees of the State of Alaska Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation and Division of Mining, Land, and Water were members of the core planning team for this project. The planning team also held discussions with staff from the following divisions of the State of Alaska to discuss the South Denali project and review planning materials such as natural and cultural resource information: State Historic Preservation Office, Department of Environmental Conservation, Department of Habitat and Permitting, and Department of Fish and Game.

Consultation with Native Tribal Governments

Agency staff met with the President of Cook Inlet Regional Corporation (CIRI) and members of her tourism staff to discuss the project during the scoping phase. Meetings were held March 10 and June 1, 2004. These same staff members were invited, and participated in, site visits to each of the proposed locations for visitor facility development on June 22 and July 11, 2005. In addition to direct communications with agency staff working on the project, CIRI staff members participated in meetings with other tourism related businesses to discuss the project at the scoping and draft plan stage.

During the scoping phase, CIRI expressed concern over the ability of the agencies to truly create a destination experience in the South Denali region. They also preferred the Peters Hills location until they had an opportunity to visit each of the sites. After these site visits, CIRI endorsed the agency Preferred Alternative as its preferred location for visitor facility development.

Additional Consultation

In addition to the publicized public involvement opportunities and consultation with public agencies, the agencies sought comments and responded to requests for meetings, discussion, or informational presentations with a wide variety of organizations throughout the process of preparing the plan. Planning staff met with snowmachine groups, environmental groups, local landowners, and members of the travel and tourism industry to provide updates and solicit ideas and information.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR ISSUES RAISED DURING SCOPING

A range of comments were received on the location for a visitor facility. Comments spanned from requesting no new construction, to supporting the alternative in the Peters Hills, to suggesting several different site locations along the George Parks Highway, many in Denali State Park. The agencies responded by evaluating all site locations suggested by the public.

In general, the public encouraged facility construction that would have minimal impact on vegetation, wildlife, and the wild and rural character of the area. The alternatives were developed with the objective of protecting natural and cultural resources and quality of life in the South Denali region. Mitigation measures were also included in the plan to minimize impacts on these resources.

Funding to operate and maintain new facilities was a concern for many members of the public. The agencies responded by including a cost analysis and implementation schedule in the plan.

Those who commented on the access to a visitor facility favored some form of a shuttle system to bring people from a parking area to the facility, possibly in the form of an aerial tram, rail transport, or energy efficient vehicles. The preferred alternative and the other action alternative that was evaluated in the plan propose a shuttle system to bring visitors from a parking area to the visitor center.

It became clear in the scoping process that trails were an important part of the South Denali recreational experience, particularly winter trails. It was also evident that this is a complex issue involving backcountry trails, community trails, regional trail connections, and trails that are used to access private remote parcels. The agencies included in the plan provisions for trail systems for both summer and winter use and trails that would provide opportunities for visitors with a wide range of abilities.

During the public meetings many people asked the agencies to follow the recommendations in the *2000 Matanuska Susitna Borough Recreational Trails Plan* for the South Denali region. As a result, many of the recommendations in the 2000 plan were carried forward to this implementation plan.

Some landowners in the region commented that trails used to access remote private property frequently become recreational trails used by the general public. Even though many of these trails begin on public land, their destination at private property leads to trespass, noise, and other negative impacts. The agencies included in this plan such measures as signing and education in an effort to enhance the experience of the trail user and route visitors away from private property.

The agencies received some comments regarding trails originating from a new visitor facility. Suggestions included the construction of developed short trails and more primitive longer trail loops. We also heard many suggestions on separating motorized and non-motorized activities to provide for a safer, more enjoyable experience. The agencies included in the plan provisions for trail systems originating from the new visitor center that would provide opportunities for visitors with a wide range of abilities and interests.

Many members of the Trapper Creek community asked that a bike path be built as suggested in the *Petersville Road Corridor Management Plan*. A bike path adjacent to Petersville Road from MP 0 to MP 7 was proposed in both action alternatives and was retained in the Final plan.

In general comments were received that supported enhancements along the Petersville Road from the Parks Highway to the Kroto Creek area. Specific enhancements requested included bear proof trash containers, toilets, wayside exhibits, improved pull-outs and a bike path. Enhancements to Petersville Road and the Parks Highway were included in both action alternatives and these items were retained in the Final plan. Enhancements include bear-proof trash containers, toilets, wayside exhibits, improved pull-outs and parking areas, trail and safety information, and a bike path.

We received a wide range of comments that discussed the pros and cons of the economic benefits that would be sparked by a new visitor destination in the South Denali region. The socioeconomic environment was evaluated as an impact topic in Chapter Four of both the Draft and Final plans.

Many people voiced concern over the possibility of uncontrolled strip development occurring along either the Petersville Road or Parks Highway north of Trapper Creek. Consequently, impacts to quality of life values were evaluated in Chapter Four of both Draft and Final plans, and mitigation measures to control strip development were included in the plan.

Many Alaskans currently enjoy the road accessible wilderness of the South Denali region. The lack of restrictions, prime recreational environment, and accessibility were common definitions of an enjoyable outdoor experience expressed by the public. The agencies received comments that indicated some Alaskans are concerned that their recreational experience may be compromised to accommodate commercial tourism.

These aspects of the recreational experience in the South Denali region were evaluated in Chapter Four.

Many comments were received that suggested the South Denali area is experiencing resource damage from existing use and that future development without regulations would only compound the problem. Impacts to natural resources including soils, aquatic resources, vegetation, and wildlife were evaluated in Chapter Four.

EXISTING COOPERATIVE AGENCY MECHANISMS

In 2004 a cooperative agreement was finalized between the State of Alaska, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and the National Park Service to cooperatively plan for development at specific locations to provide new access and increased recreational opportunities in the South Denali region.

List of Agencies, Organizations, and Businesses to Whom Copies of the *Draft South Denali Implementation Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* Were Sent

ALASKA CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION

Congressman Don Young
Senator Lisa Murkowski
Senator Ted Stevens

**FEDERAL DEPARTMENTS, AGENCIES,
AND OFFICES**

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
Alaska Public Lands Information Center,
Anchorage
Alaska Public Lands Information Center, Fairbanks
Department of the Interior
All Alaska National Parks
Assistant to the Secretary for Alaska
Bureau of Land Management
National Park Service, Alaska Region
National Park Service, Washington office
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Environmental Protection Agency
Federal Highway Administration

**NATIVE ORGANIZATIONS AND
CORPORATIONS**

Ahtna Development Corporation
Alaska Federation of Natives
Alaska Village Initiatives
Cook Inlet Region, Inc.
Doyon, Limited

STATE OF ALASKA

Governor Frank Murkowski
Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Alaska Department of Natural Resources
Alaska Department of Transportation and Public
Facilities
Alaska Railroad Corporation
Alaska State Historic Preservation Office
Alaska State Parks
Division of Governmental Coordination
State Senator Charlie Huggins
State Representative Mark Neuman
State Senator Lyda Green
State Representative Carl Gatto
State Representative Vic Kohring
State Representative Bill Stoltze

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

Anchorage Convention and Visitors Bureau
Matanuska-Susitna Convention and Visitors
Bureau
Talkeetna Community Council
Denali Borough
Greater Palmer Chamber of Commerce
Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce
Matanuska-Susitna Borough
Municipality of Anchorage
Talkeetna Chamber of Commerce
Trapper Creek Community Council

ORGANIZATIONS

Alaska Center for the Environment
Alaska Conservation Alliance
Alaska Conservation Foundation
Alaska Environmental Lobby
Alaska Lands Act Coordinating Committee
Alaska Miners Association
Alaska Natural Heritage Program
Alaska Natural History Association
Alaska Outdoor Council
Alaska Professional Hunters Association
Alaska Public Interest Research Group
Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition
Alaska State Snowmobile Association

ORGANIZATIONS

Alaska Tourism Industry Association
Alaska Wilderness Recreation & Tourism
Association
Alaska Wildlife Alliance
Anchorage Snowmobile Club
Blue Ribbon Coalition
Commonwealth North
Curry Ridge Riders
Denali Citizens Council
Denali Foundation
Denali Visitors Association
Mat-Su State Park Citizens' Advisory Board
Mountaineers Club of Alaska
National Parks and Conservation Association
National Wildlife Federation
Resource Development Council for Alaska, Inc.
Sierra Club, Alaska Chapter
Sierra Club, Alaska Field Office
Sierra Club, Denali Group

ORGANIZATIONS, Cont.

Susitna Valley Association
Talkeetna Environmental Center
Talkeetna Historical Society
The Conservation Fund
The Wilderness Society
Trustees for Alaska
Wildlife Federation of Alaska

BUSINESSES

The Draft Plan was sent to businesses that fall into one of the following categories:

Accommodations
Climbing services
Dog sled tour and freighters
Engineering and consulting firms
Fishing services
Flying services
Hiking services
Hunting services
Leisure services
Mining companies
Mountaineering services
Raft and kayak services
Restaurants, local
Ski tour services
Transportation services

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Alaska Pacific University
Denali Institute
Fairbanks Noel Wein Library
Loussac Public Library
Talkeetna Public Library
Trapper Creek Public Library
Tri-Valley Community Library
University of Alaska-Anchorage

MEDIA

Alaska Snowrider
Airmen's Magazine
All Public Radio and Television Stations
Alaska Geographic
Alaska Magazine
Anchorage Daily News
Denali Summer Times
Fairbanks Daily News Miner
The Frontiersman
Talkeetna Good Times

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In addition, Michael Fisher, economist at Northern
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