FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

For Construction of a New Multi-Purpose Trail in the Entrance Area of Denali National Park
Denali National Park and Preserve

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) that evaluates a proposal to construct a multi-purpose trail and to install a fiber optic line in the entrance area of Denali National Park. The new trail would connect pedestrians and bicyclists coming from north and south of the park entrance on the Parks Highway to the new park visitor center. The trail would also serve as the utility corridor for a new fiber optic line connection for in-park computer users. The trail would be approximately 1.3 miles long and would be built 10 feet wide and to Americans with Disabilities Act accessibility standards.

The new trail would improve pedestrian safety and circulation by providing a pedestrian and bicycle user facility, separate from the motor vehicle use on the park road, to connect the park entrance to the new Visitor Center (scheduled to open in 2005). A multi-purpose trail is needed in this area because the existing roadside path does not connect to the new paved trail opened this year along the Parks Highway from the Nenana Canyon businesses and the park entrance. The roadside path is also too narrow to accommodate bicycle users, forcing them to use the park road. The fiber optic line would replace and upgrade the existing copper wire line used for park telephone and computer connections.

The NPS preferred alternative **(Alternative 4)** proposes a new multi-purpose trail constructed between the park entrance and the AKRR tracks generally south of the park road. The trail would leave the park entrance area and jog around north and behind the entrance feature to a point approximately 200 feet north of the Jonesville Trail where it would cross the park road to join the existing southside roadside path up to the Visitor Access Center (VAC). That eastern part of the trail would be placed between 30-50 feet from the edge of the road disturbance. Starting across from the VAC a new ten-foot wide trail would be constructed between 30 and 150 feet south of the existing southside utility corridor/roadside path up to the railroad tracks where it would connect up with the existing multi-purpose trail coming from the depot area. All of the trail except the section between the VAC and Riley Creek Mercantile would be separated from the park road by at least a 30 foot buffer of trees. The trail would require a sixteen-foot clearing width, be gravel-surfaced and designed to accessible standards for gradient and compaction.

A fiber-optic line would be installed by the Matanuska Telephone Association (MTA) under the proposed trail, except that it would follow the disturbed area north of and adjacent to the road between the Mercantile entrance and the VAC. The fiber-optic line would also cross under the road immediately west of the tracks and would then follow within a power line utility corridor leading up to the pole farm and existing power/telephone utility corridors. The fiber optic line would be installed by spooling it out from a small bulldozer into a ditch dug by a four-foot long ripper tooth on the back of the machine.

Prior to MTA installing the fiber optic line, the park's trail crew would use a front-end loader to salvage as much of the vegetation mats as is possible during the thawing of the organic mat. This would be accomplished in late Spring. In wetland areas, after the fiber line is installed, the trails crew proposes to cover the exposed ground with 8 inches of solid foam and then 12 inches of

gravel. The gravel would be the base for the compacted surface and the foam would help insulate the ground to minimize thawing of suspected permafrost below the trail.

Public Involvement

A 30-day public review of the EA was conducted from April 9, 2004 to May 9, 2004. The press release announcing the EA was mailed to local media, agencies and groups, and the EA was posted on the park's web site, the national NPS public comment website, and was mailed to 12 organizations, and individuals. Three written comments and a telephone message were received on the EA.

The Denali Citizens Council (DCC) supported a modified version of Alternative 2, and preferred widening the existing trail between the Mercantile and the railroad tracks because it would cause the least amount of new habitat disturbance, would likely see fewer human-moose interactions than a trail farther away from the road, and seemed to be more in keeping with the stated need for a trail as a transportation facility rather than as a recreation facility. The modification suggested would be to construct both a northside and southside trail between the Mercantile and the VAC so that pedestrians and bicyclists traveling between the entrance and the VAC would not have to cross the park road twice.

The DCC also contested the lack of an overall trail plan for the park entrance area and stated that it was difficult to comment on one trail proposal while other proposals are nearly finished with planning but are not available for review. The NPS has conceptually addressed trails in the park entrance area in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan/* Environmental Impact Statement(DCP/EIS). The Multi-Purpose Trail EA and future EAs will evaluate site-specific trail proposals and alternatives as planning and funding issues resolve. Some specific trail proposals will address improved pedestrian circulation around the new visitor center and other facilities currently under construction, while other specific trail proposals will address existing alignments that are awkward from a visitor experience perspective - such as the Horseshoe Lake Trail section that uses the railroad tracks - or from a resource protection perspective, such as the north end of the Triple Lakes Trail. The priority work will be on projects identified in the DCP/EIS, though other trail proposals will also be brought to the public for evaluation.

The Northern Alaska Environmental Center supported the NPS preferred alternative, while suggesting the same dual trail modification between the Mercantile and the VAC proposed by the DCC.

The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) supported the NPS preferred alternative because the separation of the trail from the park road would create a pedestrian facility less impacted by motor vehicles. NPCA also appeared to support the modification to add a northside trail between the Mercantile and the VAC. NPCA also supported a trail between the Riley Creek Campground and the new visitor center that went south of the McKinley Airstrip. The NPS is working on a plan for such a trail, in cooperation with the Alaska Railroad, and should have that plan available for public comment later this summer.

NPCA also wondered why the Jonesville Trail, which connects the Nenana River Bridge to the Riley Creek Mercantile, is not used for bicycle traffic. That trail was based on a shortcut social

trail that crossed steep topography. When NPS formalized that trail the maximum gradient was decreased, but it is still too steep for bicycle use.

The Alaska Railroad Corporation was concerned that Figures 2-5 in the EA showed as permanent a temporary trail that crosses the railroad tracks south of the depot. The NPS agrees that this trail will be replaced by a new connector trail west of the railroad tracks between the new visitor center and the depot by the beginning of the 2005 visitor season. A map is attached to this document to indicate the temporary trail.

Alternatives

Three alternatives were evaluated in the EA, in addition to the NPS preferred alternative. Briefly, those alternatives were:

Alternative 1: No-Action. No new trail segments would be developed between the railroad tracks and the park entrance and no fiber-optic line would be installed. The existing trail system in the entrance would be maintained. A five-foot wide graveled pedestrian roadside path follows an underground telephone line from the railroad tracks eastward past the VAC to the entrance to the Riley Creek Mercantile and Riley Creek Campground. Between there and the park entrance there are no maintained trails. Bicycle use from the tracks to the entrance would continue to be on the park road. A new paved ten-foot wide multi-purpose trail, connecting the businesses in the Nenana River Canyon to the park entrance and constructed by Alaska Department of Transportation, is new in 2004.

Alternative 2: Widened Existing Roadside Path. The existing roadside path between the tracks, VAC and Mercantile would be widened to ten feet to accommodate multi-purpose pedestrian and bicycle use and would be constructed to accessibility standards for gradient and compaction. A park road trail crossing would be designated near the Mercantile, and from there a new northside trail would be constructed in the disturbed area next to the road, and from the lagoon service road a new 10-foot wide trail would be constructed inside the forest to wind behind the entrance feature and connect up with the AKDOT multi-purpose trail. The fiber-optic line would be installed by MTA under the proposed trail addition. Trail construction and fiber-optic installation would use the same procedures as in the preferred alternative.

Alternative 3: Northside Separated Multi-purpose Trail. A new ten-foot wide multi-purpose trail would be constructed to accessibility standards for gradient and compaction north of the park road between the park entrance and the AKRR tracks. From the entrance, the trail would split below the VAC and one path would take the trail around the big parking lot and VAC. Once that path reached the same elevation as the parking lot it would be constructed next to the VAC access road. The other path would be constructed between the VAC and the park road. In order to maintain a 5% grade ascending to the VAC it would be necessary to jog the path going between the VAC and park road further away from the road and then back to it. At a point approximately 250-300 feet east of the tracks, the trail would cross to the south side of the road and connect up with the existing multi-purpose trail coming from the depot area. The fiber-optic line would be installed by MTA under the proposed trail addition. Trail construction and fiber-optic installation would use the same procedures as in the preferred alternative.

Mitigation and Monitoring

Mitigation to be taken in conjunction with implementing the NPS preferred alternative includes:

- **Vegetation** mats that need to be moved from the project area will be saved and moved to areas around the visitor center site that need revegetation. Plywood and other materials will be used to cushion large vehicles that may access the trail site while crossing areas not in the project. Areas disturbed but not part of the finished trail will be restored with native vegetation. Periodic surveys will be conducted to determine the presence of exotic plants.

- Silt fences will be erected along the project area between the VAC and airstrip to protect **wetlands** in the area not directly affected by construction. At least one rest site along the trail will be devoted to interpreting wetland values of the area.

- The NPS and contractors will follow established guidelines in the park's **bear-human conflict management plan**. The plan requires operators to use bear-proof containers for food and refuse and sets up guidelines for temporary closures.

- **Visitors** in the area could use the park road or free bus system until new facilities are opened.

- Some use of heavy equipment will be required during the vegetation salvage operations; **safety** flaggers will be required. Work activities that might impact park operations, such as utility shutdowns, will be scheduled during the off hours or during periods of low visitation. The park superintendent or authorized delegate may authorize scheduling changes.

- If **cultural resources** are encountered during the project, work will not proceed until the Superintendent has been notified.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

Alternative 1 (No Action) is identified as the Environmentally Preferred Alternative because it affects the least wildlife habitat and vegetation acreage.

Environmental Consequences of the NPS Preferred Alternative

The NPS has determined that the preferred alternative can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to the natural or cultural resources as documented by the EA and briefly summarized below.

Vegetation/Wetlands. The clearing of trees, shrubs, other vegetation, and the disturbance to soil on 2 acres would result in a limited adverse impact to vegetation and soil. The vegetation community types occupy extensive areas of upland forest in the Alaska Range. The clearing of 0.9 acres of palustrine forested wetlands for the trail construction would result in a minor net loss of wetlands and wetlands functions in the park entrance area.

Wildlife/Habitat. Wildlife habitat for large mammals, small mammals, and birds would be reduced by approximately 1.9 acres. There would be a minor increase in impacts to local moose calving habitat during late May because the proposed trail realignment would bring a popular

facility within the perimeter of an area of relatively high quality cover. During the construction period noise and human activity would disturb wildlife and cause them to be temporarily displaced from the affected and adjacent areas. There are no known raptor nests along the proposed alignment.

Air Quality. Local air quality would be temporarily reduced by the limited use of heavy machinery during construction activities. Long-term air quality in the park would benefit slightly from the increased use of bicycles for in-park transportation.

Sound Quality. Park sound quality would decrease during the period of construction of the trail and installation of the fiber-optic line, especially during periods when heavy equipment is being used. This impact would be minor because the road corridor sounds are already impacted from vehicular traffic on the park road. Individuals using the trail after construction would have a marginally better natural sounds experience by being on a trail further away from the road than the one currently in use.

Cultural Resources. No cultural resources are known from the areas that the proposed trail would pass through.

Visitor Use and Recreation. Recreational opportunities for entrance area visitors would be temporarily affected by the construction of the new trail. Noise and visual impacts in the construction area entrance area would temporarily inconvenience park visitors, especially during construction near the VAC. Visitor safety would be enhanced by providing a facility separate from the park road for bicycle users and pedestrians. Visitor use opportunities in the developed area would benefit by providing a trail that connects the visitor center/depot with the gateway community. Construction of the trail would not significantly affect the landscape view from either the park road or from the trail. Visitor enjoyment would be enhanced by the inclusion of waysides that interpret wetland functions, among other natural and cultural features.

Park Management. The proposed completion of a separated multi-purpose trail in the entrance area would create safer facilities for both the vehicle operators on the park road as well as for the pedestrians and bicyclists making use of the trail. The installation of a fiber optic line would benefit park administration and researchers by creating a solid high-speed information link to the outside world. The trail route would benefit the fiber optic line installation by removing it geographically from future road improvement projects.

Local Communities/Socioeconomic Resources
The new trail would improve local community resources by providing another transportation link between the gateway community and the destinations within the park entrance area.

Decision
The National Park Service's decision is to select and modify the NPS preferred alternative to include a northside trail between the Mercantile and VAC in addition to the trail south of the road. The decision includes mitigation measures regarding vegetation salvage, wetlands protection and interpretation, and other measures as identified in the FONSI.

Rationale for the Decision

A modified NPS preferred alternative is chosen because it best provides for a safe and aesthetically pleasing pedestrian and bicycle facility to connect the park entrance with the new visitor center area, and does so with minor impacts to park resources. The preferred alternative also allows the park to upgrade its interpretive/communications capability by installing a fiber optic communications line under the trail. Widening the existing roadside path would keep the trail very close to the road shoulder, which, as we have observed since 1990, does not provide an optimal park experience. Creating a northside multi-purpose trail would create a good pedestrian facility but would open up the views of the Nenana Canyon businesses from the park road and VAC. The no-action alternative does not allow for a continuous trail system in the park entrance, forcing pedestrians and bicyclists to use the park road.

The modification suggested during public comment, to include a northside trail between the Mercantile and VAC will add approximately 0.2 acres of habitat disturbance to the preferred alternative. This increased impact will have a negligible impact on vegetation communities or wildlife habitat, including moose calf cover. No wetlands or other resources will be affected, and views of park landscapes from the VAC or park road also will not be affected because no significant amount of forest buffer will be removed.

This preferred alternative is consistent with the 1986 Park General Management Plan, National Park Service Management Policies, and the conceptual planning in the 1997 *Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan* (DCP/EIS). The decision on the DCP/EIS designated the area between the park entrance and former park hotel for increased development which will provide a variety of expanded opportunities for visitors in the entrance area and along the road corridor of the park over the next 15-20 years. The developments are limited to actions in which the NPS has traditionally specialized, such as interpretive centers, environmental education opportunities, trails, resource protection programs, and campgrounds.

Adverse impacts such as the removal of 2 acres of black spruce and white spruce vegetation and realigning the trail along the perimeter of an area of relatively high quality moose calf cover will have a minor affect. These impacts will not result in an impairment of park natural resources fulfilling specific purposes identified in legislation establishing the park or key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park and will not violate the NPS Organic Act.

The preferred alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act and the National Historic Preservation Act. There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810(a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

I find that the proposed action does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Recommended: Paul R. Anderson 5/14/04

Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve Date

Approved: _____ 5/14/04
Acting Regional Director, Alaska Region Date