

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

RECORD OF DECISION

South Denali Implementation Plan

Matanuska-Susitna Borough
Planning Administration

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INTRODUCTION

This Record of Decision documents the decision by the National Park Service, in cooperation with the State of Alaska and Matanuska-Susitna Borough to adopt the *South Denali Implementation Plan*. The *Final South Denali Implementation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* (FEIS) was prepared cooperatively by the National Park Service, the State of Alaska, and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough to provide specific direction for expanded visitor facilities and recreational opportunities in the South Denali region until 2021. Proposed actions are guided by established laws and policies that affect the National Park Service, the State of Alaska, and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. South Denali is defined to include the local communities, the Petersville Road corridor, the western section of Denali State Park, the northern part of the Peters Hills, lands east of the Peters Hills to the eastern boundary of Denali State Park, and the Parks Highway corridor from Rabideaux Creek north through the state park. The FEIS evaluates options for expanded visitor facilities and recreational opportunities, and is guided by the following vision:

- Provide a quality visitor experience while protecting resource values in the South Denali region.
- Enhance recreational and access opportunities throughout the South Denali region for the benefit of a wide variety of visitors including Alaskans, independent travelers, and package tour travelers.
- Preserve quality of life values for residents in nearby communities.

This Record of Decision has been prepared by the National Park Service, pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and 40 CFR 1505.2. This record of decision describes:

- the background for the planning effort
- the decision and the basis for it
- other alternatives considered
- the environmentally preferred alternative
- measures adopted to minimize potential environmental harm
- the public involvement process.

BACKGROUND

This *South Denali Implementation Plan* builds on a history of planning to provide for new visitor opportunities in the South Denali region. In general, there has been a shared vision among public land managers that the South Denali region should provide opportunities for greater visitor use. Major planning efforts affecting the South Denali region are summarized below.

The 1986 *Denali National Park and Preserve General Management Plan* calls for development of visitor services and access to the South Denali region to take advantage of the area's dramatically sculptured landscapes and mountain-oriented recreational opportunities. This plan recommends the project be planned and developed cooperatively with the state of Alaska and with involvement from the private sector.

The 1989 *Denali State Park Master Plan* recommends facility construction in the South Denali region: "Tremendous views of the Mt. McKinley massif and the diversity of surrounding areas make the park an appropriate location for a 'South Denali Visitor Complex'. The visitor complex will provide a focal point and staging area for the Denali State Park interpretive program."

The 1997 *South Side Denali Development Concept Plan* is a regional cooperative plan formulated by a team representing the National Park Service, the State of Alaska, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, the Denali Borough, Ahtna, Inc., and Cook Inlet Region, Inc. In the Record of Decision (ROD), the NPS and the State of Alaska decided to construct visitor facilities in the Tokositna area at the western edge of Denali State Park near the end of an upgraded and extended Petersville Road. Developments would include a visitor center, parking, up to 50 campsites, a picnic area, hiking trails, information and safety signage, and associated facilities. The NPS and the State of Alaska also decided to construct new visitor facilities along the George Parks Highway within Denali State Park. Additionally, the ROD calls for facility development at Chelatna Lake and in the Dunkle Hills. The 2006 *South Denali Implementation Plan* further develops some of the concepts presented in the 1997 plan. Other concepts presented in the 1997 plan could be implemented through the planning and environmental compliance processes outlined in that document.

The 1999 *South Denali Citizens Consultation Committee Final Report* recommends modifying the development concepts in the 1997 *South Side Denali Development Concept Plan* while remaining consistent with its goals and objectives: to provide resident and visitor facilities throughout the south side of the Alaska Range to meet a wide range of needs and interests of the region's diverse user groups. The committee recommended that a visitor center be constructed along the Parks Highway and a nature center be constructed within the Denali State Park boundary in the Peters Hills to avoid an extensive upgrade of the Petersville Road through the canyon, thereby minimizing impacts to mining and backcountry uses.

One of the objectives of the 1998 *Matanuska-Susitna Borough Petersville Road Corridor Management Plan* is to enhance the visitor experience of Petersville Road in conjunction with facility development in the South Denali region. Recommendations include interpretive panels, information kiosks, vegetative buffers, and retention of scenic qualities along the road corridor.

The purpose of the 2006 *Final South Denali Implementation Plan and EIS* is to implement the 1997 South Side Plan, and evaluate specific locations for proposed visitor and related administrative facilities including a visitor complex, parking, access road, trail systems, campsites, and other improvements. Objectives include identifying options and opportunities to enhance recreation and access throughout the region.

DECISION (selected alternative)

The National Park Service, in cooperation with the State of Alaska and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, has decided to adopt the proposed action as described in Alternative C of the *Final South Denali Implementation Plan/Environmental Impact Statement*. The South Denali plan, as determined by this decision, serves as an amendment to the 1986 *General Management Plan* for Denali National Park and Preserve.

Description of the Selected Alternative.

The emphasis of the selected alternative is to enhance access and recreational opportunities throughout the South Denali region for a variety of visitors, including Alaskans, independent travelers, and package tour travelers, while at the same time protecting the important resource and community values in the area, including the rural lifestyle of local residents.

A new visitor complex will be constructed on approximately 4.1 acres at the highway site in Denali State Park described in Alternative C of the *Final South Denali Implementation Plan/Environmental Impact Statement*. The total building requirement will be approximately 16,000 square feet. A paved parking area will be constructed on the natural bench across from the Denali View South Wayside near Parks Highway MP 134.6. An access road approximately 3.5 miles in length will be constructed from the parking area to the visitor center. Approximately 13 miles of trails will be constructed in the vicinity of the new visitor center.

The agencies will enhance trails systems throughout the South Denali region in accordance with Appendix C: Plan Implementation of the FEIS by:

- Seeking a dedicated trail easement and construct a primitive trail for the regionally significant Chulitna Bluff/Rabideaux/106 Seismic Trail System.
- Improving the parking area and wayside at MP 121.5 on the east side of the Parks Highway, creating a new parking area on the west side of the highway near MP 122 to accommodate up to 50 vehicles with trailers, and installing toilet facilities and interpretive/educational signage.
- Constructing a parking area on the west side of the Parks Highway near Rabideaux Creek that would accommodate 50 vehicles, and providing toilet facilities, trash receptacles, and interpretive/educational signage.

- Providing safe access to trail systems and parking areas by installing crossing signs near MP 122 of the Parks Highway.
- Constructing an information kiosk near the Parks Highway/Petersville Road intersection to safely route trail users across the roadway and to provide information to visitors to the South Denali region.
- Installing signs on the legally dedicated portions of the trail system in the planning area for user safety. Seasonal signs would be provided for winter-only trails, and permanent signs would be installed along trails that are used year-round.
- Supporting local groups in marking and grooming winter trails in the South Denali region and grooming Petersville Road from Kroto Creek to the Forks Roadhouse.

The agencies will provide other recreational opportunities in accordance with Appendix C: Plan Implementation of the FEIS by:

- Constructing a campground adjacent to the new visitor center parking lot near MP 134.6 of the Parks Highway. The campground will include restrooms, a camp host site, up to 50 tent sites and up to 50 RV sites.
- Determining the feasibility of a docking facility on the west side of the Chulitna River near MP 121.5 of the Parks Highway, and constructing the docking facility if determined to be feasible.
- Creating access from the Parks Highway to the Chulitna River downstream of the mouth of Troublesome Creek.
- Creating a map showing recreational opportunities on public lands west of Petersville Canyon.
- Developing a campground on Matanuska-Susitna Borough land near MP 18.6 (Forks Roadhouse) that would accommodate tent and RV camping with a vegetative buffer separating the two types of camping.
- Constructing a pedestrian/bike path from MP 0 to MP 7 on the north side of Petersville Road.
- Evaluating the need for, and implementing if deemed appropriate, a 45-mph speed zone on the Parks Highway approximately 2,000 feet north and south of the intersection with the Petersville Road.
- Determining the feasibility of left-hand and right-hand turning lanes at the Petersville Road/Parks Highway intersection.

- Developing turnouts at MP 12.8 and MP 16.3 on the north side of Petersville Road with interpretive panels that highlight the intrinsic qualities of the area.
- Redesigning the Kroto Creek parking lot on its existing footprint to safely accommodate more vehicles for year-round use.
- Constructing a Department of Transportation and Public Facilities limited maintenance area for equipment and materials storage near Byers Creek to create efficiencies for maintenance of the Parks Highway, existing State Park facilities, and the new visitor center.

The agencies will protect scenic qualities of the Parks Highway and Petersville Road corridors in accordance with Appendix C: Plan Implementation of the FEIS by:

- Providing technical support and facilitation if local communities request assistance in securing the state and federal Scenic Highway designation for the Parks Highway between MP 105-132.
- Working cooperatively to create a contiguous scenic buffer on agency held lands adjacent to the Parks Highway Right-of-Way from MP 105 - MP 132 for protecting the scenic and natural aspects of the highway corridor. The scenic buffer will provide reasonable access to public and private lands, and allow for appropriate uses consistent with the intent of the buffer. Additionally, the agencies will cooperate in developing context-sensitive design standards that will apply to appropriate agency held lands adjacent to the scenic buffer.
- The Matanuska-Susitna Borough will work with local communities to establish land use controls for private lands along the Parks Highway and Petersville Road.
- The Alaska Department of Natural Resources will work with the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, the local government with zoning authority, to update the current Special Use District in Denali State Park to include controls such as specific setback and design standards, building height restrictions, vegetative buffer requirements and requirements for the use of wildlife-proof garbage storage containers.
- In partnership with local communities, the agencies will seek appropriate methods to retain the scenic and natural qualities of the Petersville Road corridor.

Phasing construction of developments will allow orderly plan implementation over an established period of time that complements funding availability and addresses visitor needs.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

One other action alternative and a no-action alternative were considered in the FEIS in addition to the proposed action (selected alternative); they are described below.

Under Alternative A, no new actions would be implemented to support the 1997 Record of Decision for the *South Side Denali Development Concept Plan* except for those projects already approved and initiated. This alternative represents no change from current management direction and therefore represents the existing condition in the South Denali region. However, this alternative does not guarantee that the existing conditions in the study area will continue. Governmental entities and private landowners may change existing land uses or choose to develop their properties consistent with existing laws and regulations.

Under Alternative B (Peters Hills Alternative), a new nature center would be constructed on approximately 2.5 acres in the Peters Hills inside the southern boundary of Denali State Park. The total building requirement would be approximately 7,500 square feet. A paved parking area would be constructed near the junction of Petersville Road and the proposed access road (MP 28 of Petersville Road) to accommodate private vehicles. An access road approximately seven miles in length would be constructed from MP 28 of Petersville Road to the nature center. Upgrading and widening Petersville Road between MP 9.3 and 28 is a connected action that would be necessary to implement this alternative. Approximately 31 miles of trails would be constructed in the vicinity of the new nature center.

BASIS FOR THE DECISION

The proposed action is selected because: 1) it represents the best option to provide a quality visitor experience while protecting resource values in the South Denali region; 2) it represents the best option to enhance recreational and access opportunities throughout the South Denali region for the benefit of a wide variety of visitors including Alaskans, independent travelers, and package tour travelers; 3) it offers the best option to preserve quality of life values for residents in nearby communities; 4) it is the most feasible of the action alternatives to implement; and 5) it best addresses the major public concerns. Over all, the proposed action best addresses the purpose and need as outlined in the FEIS.

Provide a quality visitor experience while protecting resources.

The preferred alternative will provide a new destination and additional visitor opportunities in the South Denali region. New facilities will offer easily accessible visitor opportunities along the state's main highway between Anchorage and Fairbanks. The visitor center will provide visitors an intimate setting and facilitate their connection to the landscape and natural resources. It will offer a range of opportunities for learning and recreating, and it will provide visitors of various abilities a chance to experience alpine and subarctic tundra environments and opportunities to view Mount McKinley and the Alaska Range. Opportunities to view wildlife exist as well as opportunities to spend a day or more at the visitor center or in the surrounding area. The visitor center will be sited far enough from the highway that it will have a wilderness feel to it. To the extent practicable, development will generally not be visible from the highway and will blend

into the landscape.

The types of adverse effects anticipated with this alternative are similar to those of the other action alternative. One important distinction is that the Parks Highway visitor center and access road will be in Denali State Park, which affords managers greater ability to regulate use. Potentially adverse effects to soil, aquatic resources, wetlands, vegetation, wildlife, and cultural resources will be minimized or avoided through strict adherence to all pertinent laws and regulations, as well as the mitigation measures outlined in the plan.

The No Action alternative would not provide for a quality visitor experience for all user groups, nor would it provide any means to ensure resource values would be maintained. Alternative B would not provide the agencies with the ability to fully protect the sensitive resources along the proposed access corridor since it would be constructed on general state land. All generally allowed uses, including ORV use, would continue to be authorized.

Enhance recreational and access opportunities for a wide variety of visitors.

Developments proposed in the plan offer a wide variety of high-quality recreation opportunities throughout the South Denali region for a variety of visitors. Visitors traveling in groups and those traveling independently can benefit from the options offered. Some, and perhaps all, of the facilities and opportunities should be attractive to Alaska residents who recreate in the South Denali region. The new Parks Highway visitor center will provide information, orientation, interpretive programs, and shelter to visitors. Public use cabins, trail systems for a wide variety of user groups, and camping facilities will provide options for visitors to experience the landscape in remote as well as in easily accessible settings. New trails, parking areas, boat launch, and potential docking facility will provide increased access to rivers and public lands in the South Denali region. Together these developments should accommodate the visitor growth anticipated for the South Denali region over the next 15 to 20 years.

The No Action alternative would not address the growing demand for recreational experiences in the South Denali region that has occurred with the increase in visitation to the area over the last decade. Alternative B would not offer a full range of recreational opportunities to meet the needs of package tourism, independent travelers and Alaskans.

Preserve quality of life values for local residents.

The impacts analysis determined that five quality of life indicators could be affected (either positively or negatively) by developments proposed in Alternative C, including rural character, community cohesiveness, economic characteristics, government interaction, and recreation opportunities. Economic and employment opportunities and potential benefits will be created for local residents through establishment of a new visitor destination. Residents of south central Alaska, in particular, will benefit from improved recreational access with this alternative. Rural character may be negatively affected, particularly for the community of Trapper Creek. Negative impacts will be partially mitigated by measures in the plan to protect the scenic qualities of adjacent road corridors. The agencies will continue to address local interests by seeking public input during future planning and implementation efforts.

The impacts analysis in the FEIS determines that Alternative B would have a major impact on

quality of life indicators, particularly in Petersville and Trapper Creek; in fact, all indicators except self-sufficient lifestyle could be affected. Fewer quality of life indicators would be negatively affected under Alternative C because development and high use nodes would be focused along the Parks Highway, away from the local communities. Alternative B would affect almost all of the quality of life indicators because most of the traffic associated with new facilities in the Peters Hills would be routed through the residential area of Trapper Creek along Petersville Road. The No Action alternative would not provide a coordinated effort by the agencies to address land conservation and preservation of the communities' scenic and natural values.

Implementation feasibility.

The preferred alternative is more feasible to implement than Alternative B because it does not involve an extensive upgrade to Petersville Road to MP 28. The cost of implementing the preferred alternative (\$28 million) is less than the \$99 million it would cost to implement Alternative B. The timeline for facility construction is also much shorter for the preferred alternative than for Alternative B. Operations of the Parks Highway facility will also be easier due to the more favorable weather conditions at the Parks Highway site and shorter distance from existing infrastructure. It will be possible to keep the Parks Highway visitor center open more of the year. For example, the Peters Hills location is at a higher elevation - and snow lingers longer - making it difficult to get to that area at the beginning and end of the tourist season (May and October). Also, the nature center proposed in Alternative B would not be open in winter. Because the winter road maintenance on Petersville Road ends 17 miles from the site of the proposed visitor facility, the Peters Hills site could not be effectively operated in winter. The cost of supplying generator and heating fuel for winter operation would be prohibitive. The only alternative would be above-ground storage of sufficient fuel supplies to last from the time the road typically snows shut until it could be plowed open in spring. There would be no place to hide the fuel tanks and burial is not feasible due to the proximity of bedrock to the surface. Since winter access would require a long snowmobile ride, visitation at the facility would not justify the expense of trying to keep the facility open.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The environmentally preferred alternative is that which causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment, and best protects, preserves, and enhances historical, cultural, and natural resources. Alternative A is the environmentally preferred alternative because, over all, it results in the fewest adverse effects on the resources in the South Denali region.

MEASURES TO MINIMIZE ENVIRONMENTAL HARM

All practicable measures will be taken to avoid or minimize adverse environmental effects that could result from implementation of the selected action. These measures are more fully described in Chapter Two of the FEIS and, are adopted in this decision. These measures include: protecting the scenic qualities of the Parks Highway and Petersville Road corridors; restricting vehicular access on the new access road; restricting construction to the minimum area required; protecting

sensitive wildlife habitat and activities; protecting, to the extent practicable, wetlands and vegetation; implementing best management practices to protect water quality and surface water resources; implementing measures to reduce soil loss; implementing measures to reduce the potential for human/wildlife conflicts; protecting archeological and historic resources, as necessary (Curry Lookout would be evaluated and repaired to ensure that the building is in stable and good condition); and incorporating sustainable design principles and aesthetics into facility design and site selection.

To reduce impacts from ORV use on natural resources in the South Denali region, measures will be taken at new and expanded trailheads and parking areas (including, but not limited to, Parks Highway MP 122) to control access and use during summer. For example, these areas may be gated in the summer to discourage ORV use in areas that attract winter recreation but may not be suitable for motorized summer recreation. Minimum-impact information targeted to ORV users will be provided at all new and existing trailheads, parking areas, and pullouts in the planning area along the Parks Highway and Petersville Road (including the Forks Campground and Kroto Creek parking lot) where agency staff believe signage would be beneficial in protecting natural resources.

If unacceptable resource damage or conflicts occur as a direct result of expanding parking lots or developing campgrounds, the size of the lot or campground will not be increased further until resource damage or conflicts are mitigated.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the agency responsible for wildlife management in the state park, will be an integral part of the design and construction phase of this project to assure that the facilities are sited in such a fashion to minimize the long-term impacts of development on park resources.

Measures will be taken to reduce the potential for bear/human encounters. Visitors will be educated on the proper behavior when recreating in bear country. Wildlife education and interpretation will be provided at the visitor center, campgrounds, and all new trailheads to reduce negative wildlife-human encounters. Use of bear-proof garbage containers will continue to be required around visitor centers, picnic areas, trails, interpretive waysides, and camping facilities in Denali State Park, and use of these containers could be required on private lands within or adjacent to Denali State Park. Backcountry users will be encouraged to carry bear-resistant food containers on state park lands. Trails or trail sections may be closed temporarily or during certain seasons to protect wildlife. As visitation increases, existing trails may be rerouted to further reduce the potential for bear/human conflicts.

NON-IMPAIRMENT DETERMINATION

The alternative selected for implementation will not impair park resources or values because all developments will occur outside of the national park. The analysis presented in Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences of the *Final EIS* demonstrates that no national park resources would be impaired as a result of implementing Alternative C, the Parks Highway alternative and no spill-over effects of any significance would occur in the national park.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public comment was sought throughout the South Denali implementation planning process, and the final plan was modified as a result of public comments received. The following is a brief overview of the extent of public and agency involvement.

Consultation with the Public

The scoping process for this *South Denali Implementation Plan* was initiated in February 2004 [69 FR 72513]. A scoping newsletter was distributed to introduce the goals of the project and solicit input on the development of alternatives, and public meetings were held in Anchorage, Wasilla, Susitna Valley, McKinley Village, and Fairbanks. A newsletter summarizing scoping comments was distributed to approximately 450 addresses and posted on the project website.

The agencies met regularly in Palmer, and these meetings were open to and attended by the public. The planning team also held an informational workshop in Susitna Valley to update the public of our progress and exchange ideas on the project. Additionally, the agencies met with interested groups and members of the public when requested. In February and March 2004, the agency partners held discussions with staff from U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Federal Highways Administration, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to discuss the South Denali project. The State Historic Preservation Office, Department of Environmental Conservation, Department of Habitat and Permitting, and Department of Fish and Game were also consulted regarding natural and cultural resource information.


The Draft Plan and EIS was published in September 2005 (70 FR 55414) and public comment was accepted through November 15, 2005. The agencies received 72 comments. This total includes both written comments and verbal comments made during five public hearings held in Anchorage, Wasilla, upper Susitna Valley, Denali Park, and Fairbanks. Comments were received from agencies, organizations, and individuals. Most of the individuals not expressing a preference for a particular alternative, and most of the individuals who expressed conditional support for Alternative C, asked the agencies to do one or more of the following: adopt land use controls to protect the scenic qualities of the Parks Highway; complete wildlife inventories in the state park; mitigate conflicts between motorized and non-motorized use in the South Denali region; and develop a funding plan for the new facilities. In addition, 28 surveys from miners and interested parties in the Yentna Mining District, and a petition with 2000 signatures, were submitted. Twenty-five out of 28 responses to the survey, and all 2000 names on the petition, indicated an objection to development in the Peters Hills. While public comment indicated conditional support of the preferred alternative, public comment was overwhelmingly opposed to development at Peters Hills (Alternative B). See Chapter Six of the final plan and EIS for a summary and analysis of the public comments and the agency responses.

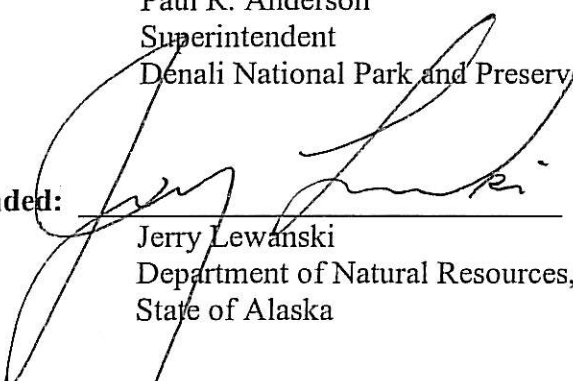
CONCLUSION

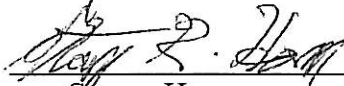
A *Federal Register* notice announcing the availability of the *Final South Denali Implementation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* was published by the Environmental Protection Agency commencing the required 30-day no action period (71 FR 26498).

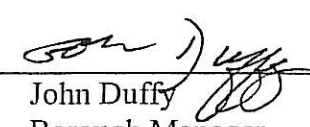
The criteria and considerations presented in this Record of Decision support selection of the preferred alternative in the *Final South Denali Implementation Plan and Environmental Impact Statement*. The final plan is hereby approved.

Approved:  Effective Date: 6/30/06
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Director, Alaska Region
National Park Service

Recommended:  Effective Date: 6/30/06
Paul R. Anderson
Superintendent
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Recommended:  Effective Date: 6/30/06
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Recommended:  Effective Date: 6/30/06
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