

Frequently Asked Questions
Denali Park Road Vehicle Management Plan and EIS
July 2008

1) How did you come up with 10,512?

The seasonal road limit was established through the public planning process for the 1986 GMP and was determined by the best means available to park management at the time. The limit allowed some growth while protecting park resources.

The goal of limiting vehicles past mile 15 was to protect wildlife viewing opportunities, wildlife health and habitat, and the wilderness character of the park road. According to the 1986 GMP, total traffic on the Park Road between Memorial Day weekend and mid-September would be reduced 17% from the 1984 level and capped at 10,512.

2) Is the maximum number of vehicles (10,512) going to change? Are you doing this project to justify increasing the number of buses?

It is likely that the action alternatives will propose changes to the 10,512 number, both raising it and lowering it. It is also conceivable that, based on all the road studies and the traffic model, we'll be able to come up with a way to achieve desired conditions on the road by defining carrying capacity in a different way, such as by road segment (paved segment, Savage to Teklanika, west of Tek), or some other means.

3) Why are we doing these things now?

The transportation system has been in place since 1972 and the seasonal road limit has been in place since 1986. The entire transportation system has never been comprehensively evaluated with the goal of answering the question: Are we providing the best transportation system possible -- One that provides the highest quality visitor experience and protects park resources? It is time to answer that question.

There is a growing demand for the park road experience and trends indicate that visitation to Alaska and the Denali area will continue to increase. By evaluating the park road capacity now, we will be able to more effectively handle the projected growth rate in the future. There is also a need to accommodate the changing demographics, interests, and needs of our visitors. Today's visitors are more active than the past generation. As the Baby Boomers retire and come to Alaska and visit Denali there will be increased pressures for additional activities, such as day hiking, within the park.

The park has a lot more information and technology available to it today, and conditions in the park have changed (visitation patterns have changed, the desires of visitors have changed).

4) How will you decide what the carrying capacity should be?

Any new carrying capacity for the Denali Park Road will be based on the following components;

- 1) studies of wildlife movements along the road corridor

- 2) visitor surveys that determine what components of the experience are most important to visitors
- 3) further analysis of traffic patterns
- 4) evaluating the past 20 years of experience with road limits and 80 years of experience managing buses on the park road,
- 5) using a traffic model that will simulate changes in traffic patterns when various factors are manipulated. This model will also predict changes to resources and the visitor experience if we change the number of vehicles on the road.

See also 2007 Road Study Fact Sheet

<http://www.nps.gov/dena/naturescience/upload/Roadcapacity07Su.pdf>

With the Road Study, we are creating a management model so that decisions are made based on sound scientific information to offer a level of consistency regardless of NPS leadership changes.

5) What is carrying capacity?

Carrying capacity is the type and level of visitor use that can be accommodated while sustaining the desired resource and visitor experience conditions in the park (NPS Management Policies 8.2.1). In simpler terms and in this context, at what point does the amount of use and activity along the road spoil the things that make the park road experience special?

NPS Management Policies also direct superintendents to identify visitor carrying capacities for managing public use within parks. This planning process will address carrying capacity for the Denali Park Road visitor experience.

6) What will the EIS do?

The EIS will evaluate the environmental, social, and economic impacts of managing the park road in different ways.

The EIS will evaluate a no action alternative of maintaining the existing vehicle management system on the Denali park road including current bus schedules, vehicle allocation, and road capacity. Action alternatives will consider potential changes to transportation system components including road capacity (traffic volume and patterns), and allocation of vehicle use among shuttle buses, tours, inholders, professional photographers, and administrative vehicles. It will also consider changes to bus scheduling and spacing; the size and type of buses; tour services; educational opportunities and interpretive services; and wildlife viewing opportunities.

The goal is to provide the flexibility to meet the needs of our visitors while retaining our commitment to preservation.

7) What type of visitor experience are you mandated to provide for?

NPS Management Policies (8.1.1) direct us to allow only uses that are appropriate to the purposes for which the park was established that can be sustained without causing unacceptable impacts to visitors or resources.

8) If there is currently a high level of visitor satisfaction, why change anything?

See also #3. We are approaching the seasonal road limit in the next five years and may reach it under the current system. Visitors will soon be dissatisfied if they can't access the park. In the same breath, if the limit is increased without scientific research and a thoughtful planning process, the quality of the visitor experience could be degraded. We are being proactive, trying to ensure that we have the most efficient and effective transportation system possible that meets the needs of visitors while protecting the park resource values they came to experience.

9) Are bus tickets going to cost more?

The EIS will examine how the pricing of bus tickets might change in different scenarios.

10) When will it happen?

The current concession contract for the park visitor transportation and tour system expires in 2012. The schedule for this plan and EIS will provide the opportunity to implement decisions during the bid process for the new contract.

Some changes could happen quickly and others would be implemented over many years. We would use adaptive management to incrementally change the system and assess impacts with each incremental change.

11) Are you going to pave the road?

No. The park road was constructed in the 1930s as an unpaved road. This planning process is not considering paving the road because doing so would degrade this important cultural landscape. It would also be impractical to pave the road. The existing roadbed heaves significantly throughout the year due to its poor sub base; paving would require re-constructing virtually the entire road in order to provide the structurally sound sub-base required for an asphalt surface.

The 2007 Denali National Park Road Design Standards define how the road should be maintained.

12) Will this project address a North Access proposal?

No. The scope of this project is the existing park road only. The park believes it can provide quality visitor experiences along the existing road corridor and with the new South Denali visitor center and associated facilities. Four studies in the past 10 years were less than supportive of a northern access route.

13) Will this plan affect access for park inholders?

Under ANILCA 1110(b) inholders are guaranteed adequate and feasible access to their property subject to reasonable regulations. During this planning process, park staff will work with inholders to look at ways inholder access can be more efficient and effective and meet the goals of this plan.

14) Will this plan address visitor facilities along the Denali Park Road (e.g. the Toklat Bookstore)?

The 1997 Entrance Area and Road Corridor Development Concept Plan provide guidance for facility development along the road corridor. This plan will address the number and type of busses that can travel the road and their "behavior." Any additional compliance for facilities along the road will be done through a separate process. However, this EIS will be used to inform any future planning efforts.