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August 19, 1996

Mr. Steve Martin, Superintendent
Denali National Park and Preserve
P.O. Box 9
Denali Park, AK 99755

Re: Draft Entrance Area & Road Corridor Development Concept Plan / EIS

Dear Mr. Martin:

The State of Alaska appreciates the opportunity to review the above-referenced document and provide the following consolidated comments of the state resource agencies. In general, the State advocates providing a wide and varied set of recreational opportunities in the park entrance area, as proposed in Alternative E. We also offer the following specific comments.

Park Entrance Area

The State believes that more visitor facilities are needed than are described in Alternative D, the proposed action. It is largely the responsibility of the National Park Service (NPS) to provide alternative recreational opportunities in the entrance area, or to ensure that private businesses are providing them. A relationship exists between the opportunity to visit the park interior, and the opportunities provided in the park entrance area, since the availability of recreational activity near the park entrance may influence whether prospective visitors are willing to wait up to three days for a permit to enter the interior of the park. Also, the availability of alternative recreational activities may lighten the impacts to surrounding Nenana River corridor lands. NPS decisions to close or phase-out facilities and programs which provide alternatives during the park entrance waiting period can have negative impacts on surrounding lands. We urge the NPS to consider how its decisions affect the businesses and lands outside the park, and to advocate regional planning to mitigate impacts extending beyond park boundaries.

Trails

We support the development of all trails proposed in Alternatives D and E. Trails such as one connecting the entrance area facilities with those north of the park entrance, the Nenana River trail, and the Triple Lakes Trail will give visitors a recreational opportunity beyond just rafting the Nenana River or walking near the visitor center. However, with just a few exceptions, the trails proposed in these alternatives are 1/2 mile or shorter. Given the extreme popularity of hiking trails in Alaska and the State's strong interest in improving trail access through the TRAAK (Trails and Recreational Access for Alaska) initiative, these trail recommendations are deficient. If wilderness designation or park policy precludes a more extensive trail system, this document should acknowledge that informal trails evolve in the park simply through repeated use of obvious routes, and should discuss these trails in that context.

Nenana River Access

We encourage the NPS to develop partnerships with both the private and public sectors, and to work cooperatively with the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, to determine the best location for improved boating access to the Nenana River. The Nenana River is one of the area's main recreational attractions, and is often integral to the park visitor's experience. We consider access issues resulting from heavy use to be important and worthy of attention.

Camping Sites

The proposals for new camping facilities appear to be minimal. It is unlikely that the proposed level of expansion will satisfy current, not to mention future, demand. The plan's modest proposals for walk-in campsites are minimal and constrained by language about phasing based on visitor demand and resource protection. We recommend that the phasing proposal be eliminated and all additional campsites be built as a single effort. We also believe that construction of additional camping facilities in the park entrance area to meet increasing demand should occur.

Kantishna Airstrip

The plan should be revised to reflect that the Kantishna airstrip is used for day-use activities such as flightseeing by lodges in the Kantishna area. Also, there are no

public restroom facilities at the airstrip although there is an obvious need for them before and after flights. At a minimum, a "porta-potty" similar to the one at the east end airstrip should be provided.

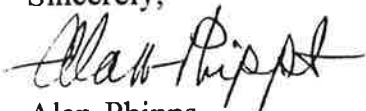
Facilities Along the Parks Highway

There are no restroom facilities or kiosks proposed at existing waysides along the George Parks Highway within the 6.8 mile stretch of road that traverses the national park. The DNR Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (DPOR) has made a concerted effort to develop restroom facilities, waysides, and kiosks between Denali State Park and Anchorage. As part of the TRAAK initiative, more are proposed. However, none are proposed along the Parks Highway between Cantwell and Healy for two reasons: most of the best sites are in federal, native corporation, or other private ownership; and DPOR staff assignments are too distant to economically service such facilities.

The state encourages NPS to consider development of restrooms and kiosks. The turnout at milepost 234 provides an ideal site. It already includes a double-ended turnout and has scenic views of Mount Fellows and Pyramid Peak. Recreational vehicles and tent campers are already using the wayside for camping despite posted NPS signs. In addition, a restroom facility here would reduce traffic and congestion at the only other public restrooms in the area, the visitor access center. A kiosk at this location would provide an opportunity to contact Parks Highway travelers who are not turning into the park entrance.

The State of Alaska resource agencies appreciate the opportunity to comment, and look forward to a continuing productive working relationship with the National Park Service on these and other issues affecting the region. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Alan Phipps
Project Review Coordinator

cc: Frank Rue, Commissioner, DFG
John Shively, Commissioner, DNR
Michele Brown, Commissioner, DEC
Diane Mayer, Director, DGC

Marilyn Heiman, Governor's Office, Juneau
John Katz, Governor's Office, DC