

Management Unit 5

Clearwater Mountains Foothills

General Description

East of the Susitna River, the Denali Road climbs the foothills of the Clearwater Mountains and from there skirts the river valley for the full 17.4 miles of Management Unit 5. On the north, the steep, rough rock faces of the Clearwaters dominate the near views, while on the south a panoramic vista takes in the flat terrain of the Susitna basin to the jagged Talkeetna Mountains on the horizon.



The Susitna River is the outstanding visual element in this unit as it meanders through a broad valley densely forested in black spruce. The vegetation changes with altitude. From the river, the road climbs through stands of spruce and high brush to where it stays above tree line and low brush and barren slopes predominate. Foreground elements, such as small lakes and creeks, add visual diversity and are important highlights along the drive. Some of these features would serve as the focus for a turnout or recreation area.



Uniformly wide cut strips prevent the road from blending with the landscape. Instead, the depth of the cut can be varied, allowing trees close to the road near the crest of the rise to frame the next view.

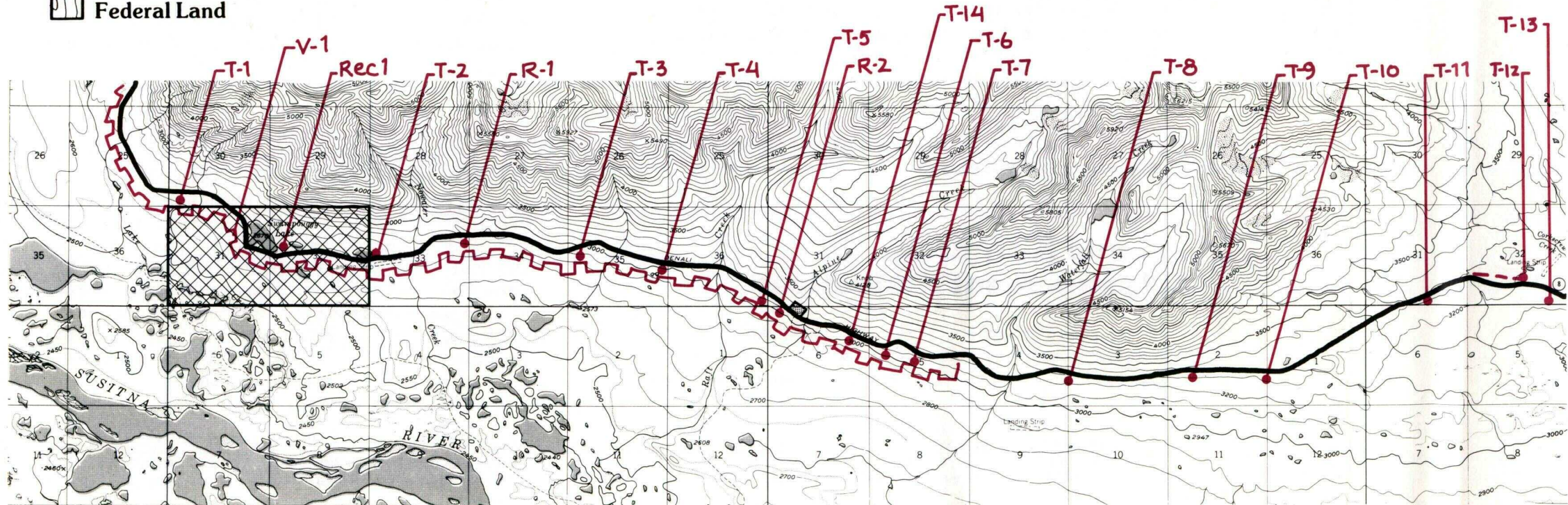
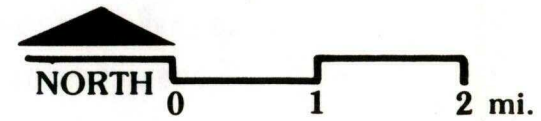
The scenic quality in this unit is very high, offering a more or less continuous panorama of close, steep mountains, the broad Susitna River and distinctive mountain ranges. However, the fact that there are few surprises in this unit because of the continuous views somewhat detracts from the unit's drama. The visual absorption capability of land to the north of the road is low because of its steep slopes, but on the south side below tree line it is higher, which is attributable to the flatter terrain and dense, tall vegetation.

KEY

- T-Turnout
- V-View Management
- Rec-Recreation
- R-Reclamation
- Realignment Proposals
-  Native Selected Land
-  Federal Land

5 Clearwater Mountains Foothills

Assessment Units D28 – D34



Development is insignificant in unit 5. Several mailboxes on the road indicate the presence of cabins, but they are not visible. The most obvious indications of human activity are several material sites adjacent to the road. They have varying impacts on the visual experience.

Land Ownership & Management Responsibility

Almost all the land in this unit is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Two sections of land around Swampbuggy Lake are Native selected and there is one small parcel of private land near the road. The State DOTPF maintains a 300 foot right-of-way throughout the unit in addition to several material sites outside the right-of-way.

Visual Resource Management Objectives

Three goals should guide the management of the scenic resources in this unit: retention, appropriate right-of-way management, and enhancement.

Retention: To retain the high quality of the scenic resources in this unit by managing the land along the corridor as a wild and scenic road.

Appropriate Right-of-Way Management: To manage the land within the right-of-way in a manner that recognizes its importance in maintaining the road's scenic quality and to improve those areas which have suffered from poor management.

Enhancement: To open and improve views through the sensitive management of roadside vegetation and to enhance the recreational use of the area by opening up some areas to public use.

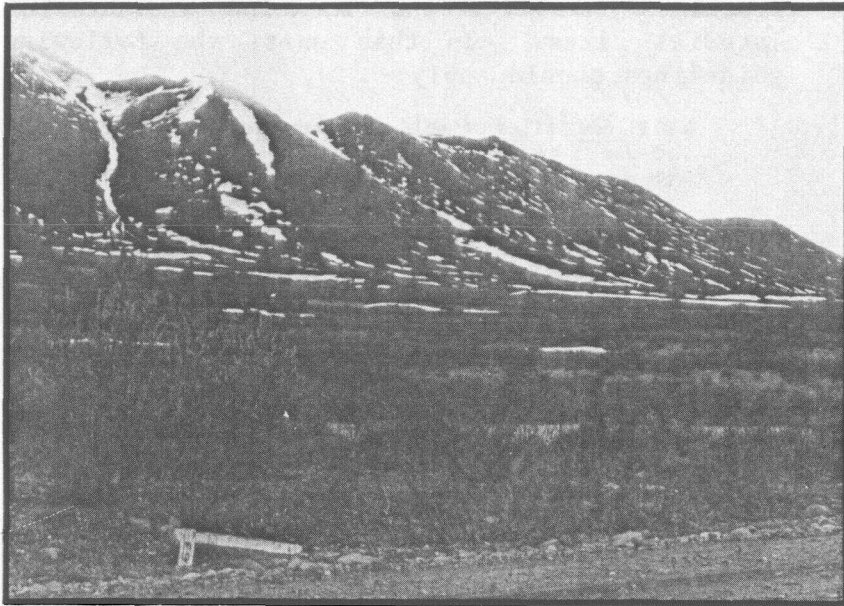
Management Recommendations

Right-of-Way Management

Since the primary management goal for Unit 5 is to promote the wild and scenic qualities of the road, DOTPF's right-of-way management practices, which affect those lands most immediately visible from the road, can significantly add or detract from the overall scenic quality. Below treeline in this unit some roadside brush clearing is necessary to improve road visibility, minimize wildlife-auto collisions, provide for snow removal and road maintenance, and also open views. But along several long stretches of road trees and brush have been removed, cut or knocked over in a swath extending 20 to 25 feet from the road edge. In these areas the road has a ravaged appearance: In some places only bare soil remains. In other places there is only cut stubble with the slash left piled in the trees. Not only is the slash unsightly, it also is a potential fire hazard.

This cutting and trimming can be accomplished so that it does not detract from the scenic quality of the driving experience. To accomplish this, DOTPF maintenance crews should adopt the following practices:

- Minimize the vegetation cut in the right-of-way, leaving as much as possible to keep the natural road appearance.



Without vegetation to screen development on this open terrain, wide greenbelts are important to retain scenic views and the wild road character. Also note the milepost in need of replacement.

Greenbelts

As a management strip beyond the right-of-way, a greenbelt provides an additional means to protect the wild and scenic qualities of the Denali Road. As land manager for most of this unit, it is recommended that BLM establish these greenbelts in their land management plan. To account for the change in screening capacity as the road

climbs above tree line, two greenbelt categories are recommended in three separate combinations:

(1) Assessment Units 28-32—A 500 foot greenbelt is proposed for both sides of the road. Steep slopes near the road on the north side and flat forested land to the south permit a medium width greenbelt to maintain the natural character of this road segment.

(2) Assessment Unit 33—A 500 foot greenbelt is proposed for the north side of the road and a 1 mile greenbelt is proposed for the south side. The road climbs above treeline in this unit, and the landscape opens, requiring a wider management area. The topography is still close to the road on the north side.

(3) Assessment Unit 34: A 1-mile greenbelt is recommended for both sides of the road. The flat, unvegetated terrain necessitates a wide greenbelt in this unit.

The greenbelt designation is not meant as a "no development" zone. Instead, any proposed land use and development should be secondary to the area's scenic value and be guided by practices designed to maintain scenic quality.

- Vegetation clearing should be minimized.
- Access roads through the greenbelt developments should be kept to a minimum and aligned sensitively with the topography.
- With the exception of dispersed recreational cabins, discourage settlement, mining and mineral leasing within the greenbelt.
- Material sites may be located in the greenbelt if well-screened or otherwise hidden from view.

- Vary the width of the management strip through selective cutting to create a softer edge to the corridor.
- Do not strip the corridor of all vegetation. Cut bushes and trees to variable heights so that visibility is maintained, but a feathered edge ranging from low plants to trees is created.
- Vary the timing of roadside maintenance by location. Trim short segments of the right-of-way in one year, leaving adjacent portions for a subsequent season.
- Revegetate stripped areas immediately adjacent to the road with low bushy plants.
- Remove all slash and cut material from the right-of-way and dispose of properly.
- Where it is desirable to open or maintain views—especially around turnouts—selectively clear trees and brush. Adjacent areas should be left in dense vegetation to help maintain a visually diverse driving experience that alternates from an open view to a spatial enclosure. (See V-1 on map).

Material Sites & Reclamation (R)

In this unit, material sites are located at relatively frequent intervals along the road within the right-of-way. Usually, they are located at the closest point off the road where sand or gravel is available, with little regard for visual impacts. In addition, road cuts through morainal landforms in Assessment Units 33 and 34 are being used as gravel sources. This practice leaves large "bites" out of the ends of otherwise contoured cuts that then become rough equipment staging areas. Because they have no screening from the road, they are unsightly and unusable as turnouts. Both types of extraction create open scars that contrast with the natural appearance of their surroundings. DOTPF must adopt policies and

practices to guide the location and use of material sites. In this unit, the following guidelines should apply:

- All new sites should be outside the right-of-way so they can be screened by topography, berms or vegetation. DOTPF should identify appropriate sites in conjunction with BLM.
- If glacial landforms, such as small moraines, are used the material should be taken from the side away from the road.
- In open areas, locate the site on the side of the road away from the predominant views.
- Do not use the ends of road cuts for material extraction.
- Sensitive align access roads to conform to the landform and minimize clearing.
- Screen active sites with berms or vegetation.
- Unused sites should be actively reclaimed and returned to their natural condition, used for turnouts or have access closed and then allowed to revegetate naturally. (Plant regeneration is slow in this area, thus revegetation can be both costly and/or slow).

Only two sites are noted as priorities for reclamation, although others exist and are noted on the Assessment Units. A roadway management program developed by the DOTPF road maintenance crew foreperson and a landscape architect should define detailed reuse or reclamation approaches for material sites along the road.

R-1 This existing gravel pit should be screened now and, once the gravel source is depleted, recontoured to a more natural shape and allowed to revegetate.

R-2 Reclaim and revegetate the sand pit below the road and screen the existing culverts.

Recreation (Rec)

There are few developed public recreation facilities such as campgrounds or picnic areas along the Denali Road near the Susitna River. With the magnificent panoramic views available in this unit, this is a priority area to identify a site that will meet the need for more than just a roadside turnout.

Rec-1 Swampbuggy Lake, immediately adjacent to the road at the foot of the Clearwater Mountains, is a small lake with high recreation potential. Already DOTPF has identified a small site between the road and the lake as an appropriate turnout. Above the lake to the east and 1/4 mile off the road is a 2+ acre gravel extraction site which provides an excellent opportunity to develop an overnight campground. Situated north of the road on a slight plateau, the site has a lovely panorama of the Susitna Valley and the Talkeetna Mountains. An overnight campground could be developed in the gravel pit with trails leading to the lake or up into the Clearwater Mountains. The day use site would be appropriate next to the road, where DOTPF presently plans to develop a turnoff. Boating or canoeing on the lake is a potential use and a small launch could be located part way up the access road to the campsite.

The land around Swampbuggy Lake is a Native selection. If this is not patented to the Natives, this site should be reserved and developed for public recreation by BLM. If it is patented, the Native corporation can be encouraged to develop the area for a private recreation development.

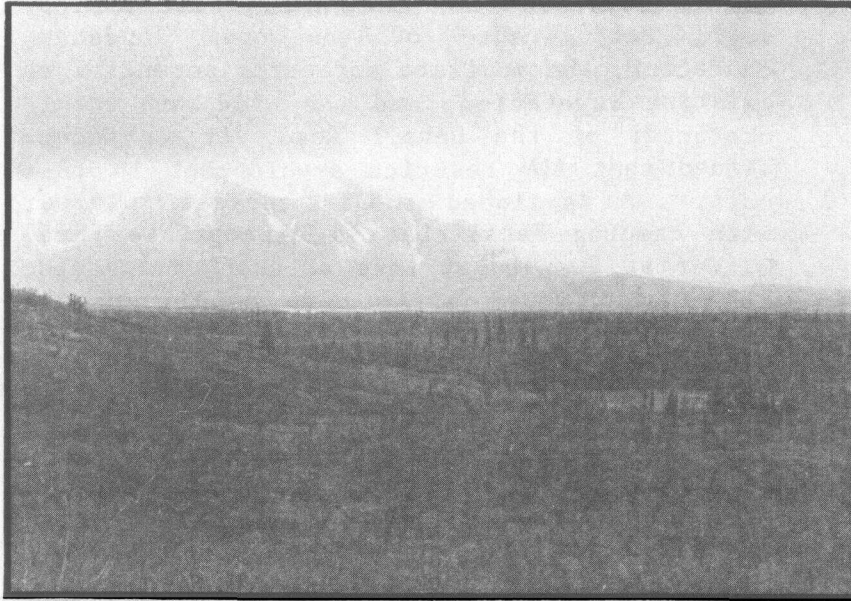
Land Use & Development (LU)

The proximity of Unit 5 to the Susitna River crossing and its associated recreation and development potentials makes this unit a

likely location for some additional development. But, because of the open landscape character, the moderate screening potential of existing vegetation, and the wild and scenic character of the Denali Road, it is recommended that BLM restrict development in this unit. A developed public recreation area, with camping facilities is appropriate here, either at Swampbuggy Lake or another roadside lake which would avail more people of the opportunity to enjoy the special amenities of the Susitna River Valley. In addition, some well-screened and dispersed recreation cabins would be acceptable south of the road and below tree line. Some cabins are already located here and it would be possible to site others with minimal disruption of the area's high scenic quality if design guidelines relating to screening and clearing were followed. Recreational homesites would be highly desirable given the panoramic mountain and valley views. Other development including permanent settlement, mining and mineral leasing is discouraged, especially south of the road, because of the broad open views.

Turnouts (T)

Numerous turnouts and potential turnouts are located in Unit 5, many of which are old gravel sites reclaimed for a pullout. Old gravel pits can provide excellent opportunities to meet travelers rest needs since the cleared, gravel base is good for automobile use and requires a minimum of additional site work. Selectivity should be exercised in developing these sites. Those with safe access/egress, adequate space to accommodate several cars, minimal development or maintenance costs and good views or other



Turnouts provide the opportunity to enjoy unspoiled, panoramic views like this one across the open Susitna Valley to the edge of the Talkeetna Mountain Range.

interesting natural features, should be retained. Other sites should be recontoured or graded to contours more in keeping with the natural surroundings and allowed to revegetate.

Recommended turnouts in Unit 5 include the following:

T-1 Recommended to be retained as a turnout, this gravel widening offers distinctive views of the Susitna Valley, the Talkeetnas and the Clearwater Mountains. It requires only some grading, tree thinning and signing.

T-2 This recommended turnout was also noted by the DOTPF in their plan for realigning portions of the Denali Road. Near a small lake, there is enough space here to locate the site away from the road, partially screened behind existing roadside vegetation. View orientation is toward the lake and the Clearwater Mountains. Access/egress is safe. There is a gravel widening across the road where access should be closed and the site allowed to revegetate.

T-3 This site consists of an old materials site slightly below the road. Only some grading is required to open the turnout, and it is actually large enough to be developed as a rest area. This site has good views of the Susitna Valley. DOTPF included this site in their plan for the Denali.

T-4 This recommended turnout is at the crest of a hill with excellent valley views and a good expression of local landform. No vegetation maintenance is required at this site. Both visibility and access are good.

T-5 Located on a small knoll, this recommended turnout offers views of the broad Susitna Valley.

T-6 This existing gravel widening is a desirable turnout because of its good valley views. There is little vegetation in the foreground to block views and there is no problem for safe vehicular access. DOTPF also recommends this site.

T-7 This recommended turnout is actually two gravel widenings at the crest of a hill located on two sides of a bend in the road about one tenth of a mile apart. Some grading is needed, but size, access, and views are good.

T-8 An old gravel pit slightly below the road surface, this site has the potential to be

reclaimed either as a turnout or a rest area. There is room on site for both toilets and litter barrels. Short trails could be developed to adjacent knolls to take advantage of views to the Susitna Valley. The site needs some leveling and shaping. Automobile access from the road is safe.

- T-9 This recommended turnout is at the crest of a hill where an existing gravel widening is located. This site, too, has good views of the valley.
- T-10 A turnout is recommended here where a portion of the hill has been partially levelled and can be reclaimed as a turnout. The location is excellent with a composite view encompassing the glacial valley, distant mountains and nearby landforms. Surface grading is required, along with additional gravel fill. Some vegetation would help soften the edges.
- T-11 This gravel pad with views of the valley and the mountains across has turnout potential.
- T-12 This small gravel pad will serve as a turnout with views of the Clearwater Mountains and the esker in Unit 6.
- T-13 Located in Unit 5 at the end of the esker, this is an existing rest area that consists of only an open gravel area. It has no screening or landscaping and the present litter barrels are located at random on the site. The edges of the site should be vegetated to create a more irregular, natural shape. Also, the litter barrels should be replaced by barrels in a more unobtrusive color and sited in a more screened location. A short trail could be developed from this site up one of the adjacent knolls for a view of the esker.

- T-14 This is a DOTPF recommended turnout where a gravel pad already exists. The site has good views, but higher priority sites exist nearby.

Roadway Signing.

Throughout most of this unit, the highway signs and mileposts are falling into disrepair or are incorrectly located. All these signs should be replaced and the mileposts recalibrated (in one section, the milepost was off by 1/2 mile). The milepost marking should wait until the proposed alignments are completed.

DOTPF could design a special milepost using wood posts, a special logo, or new color—for the Denali Wild and Scenic Road. In fact, each road in Alaska could have its own milepost design, or color, which would help orient the traveler and also serve as an element of roadside interest.