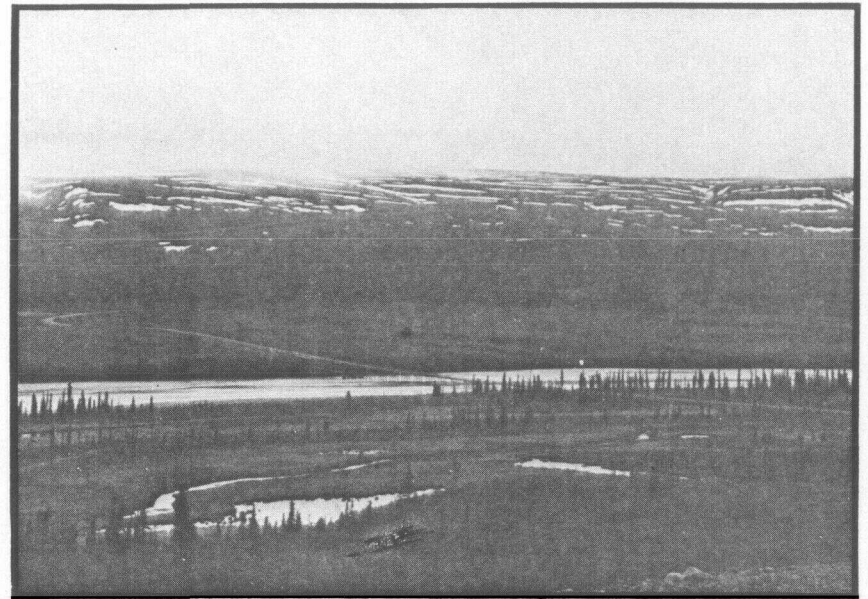


Susitna River Crossing

General Description

Management Unit 4 begins 5 1/2 miles northeast of the Susitna River crossing and extends across the river to approximately 3 miles southeast of the crossing. This is a highly scenic area, full of the anticipation of crossing the "Big Su." The road parallels the Susitna River along its west bank until it turns sharply east to cross the one-lane, canted bridge over the Susitna. (It is the longest bridge on the Denali Road). The traveler's views are strongly oriented toward the river, with opportunities to experience the Susitna from many varying points of view. The alignment of the road also gives the traveler a sense of anticipation in the east-bound direction as there is a dramatic change to a mountain landscape along the southern edge of the Clearwater Mountains.



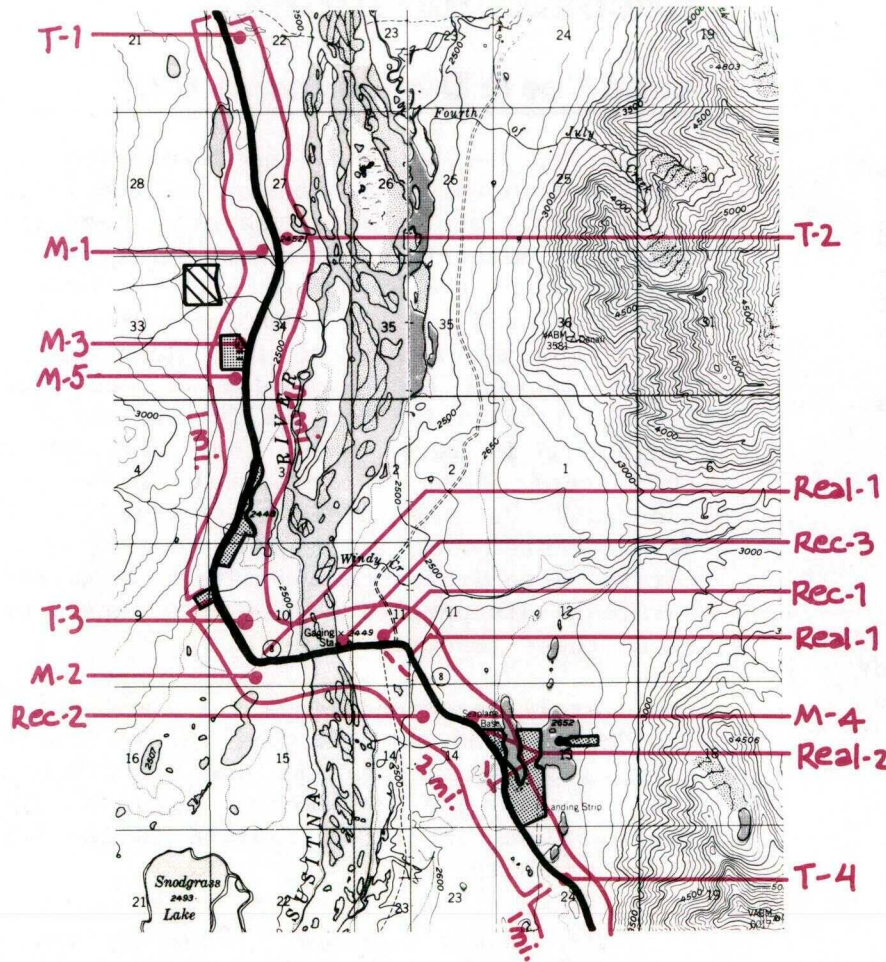
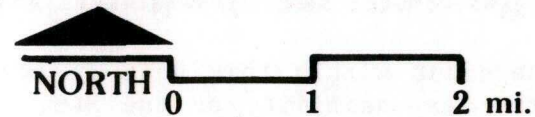
The dramatic Susitna River crossing is a prime recreation area, but the site's low visual absorption capability demands sensitive development to retain the high scenic value.

The historically and culturally interesting townsite and mine of Denali are visible across the Susitna River from within this management unit. However, due to its distance from the highway, it is difficult to decipher any detail in the view without binoculars. The Denali Townsite access road intersects with the Denali Wild and Scenic Road just east of the river crossing.

Other land use and development activities within this management unit are located on both sides of the river and include recreational homesites, lodges, gravel extraction

4 Susitna River Crossing

Assessment Units D23 – D27



KEY

- T - Turnout
- M - Impact Mitigation
- Real - Proposed Realignment
- Rec. - Recreation
- 2 mi. - Greenbelt

-  State Owned Land
-  Federal Land
-  Private Land

sites and an airfield. However, no permanent structures are visible from the Susitna River crossing. At present, there are few established recreational facilities near the Susitna River crossing.

Land Ownership & Management Responsibility

Land management within this unit is predominantly the responsibility of the BLM. There are several (5) private landholdings scattered along the road, however, all of the land immediately adjacent to the Susitna River crossing is managed by BLM. The southwest bank of the crossing has been set aside by BLM as a recreation withdrawal. The DOTPF maintains a 300 foot right-of-way throughout this management unit.

Visual Resource Management Objectives

The management recommendations presented for this unit focus on the themes of retention, enhancement and impact mitigation.

Retention: To retain those characteristics which contribute to the particularly high scenic resource values and interesting driving experience within this management unit.

Enhancement: To enhance the traveler's understanding, appreciation and use of this area through the development of appropriately sited and designed roadside recreational facilities.

Impact Mitigation: To take appropriate action to mitigate adverse visual impacts resulting from previous roadside maintenance and development.

Management Recommendations

Land Use & Development (LU)

Currently, the land use and development activities within this unit consist of two lodges, a small boat launch site, several recreational homesites, material sites and an airfield. It appears that the existing private lands have been developed and any future development would be at the discretion of the BLM, which currently manages the remainder of the roadside lands. In planning for the future use of these lands, it is recommended that development of the scenic and recreational resources be addressed as the highest priority. Other developments such as mining, homesites, commercial establishments and material extraction should be discouraged unless they retain or enhance these resource values.

The overall recommendations for the Denali Wild and Scenic Road outline some general considerations for sensitive land use and development. The following points describe how these management actions should be applied to the Susitna River crossing area:

- Recreational development (both day and overnight use) should be encouraged near the Susitna River crossing as the most appropriate land use within this unit.

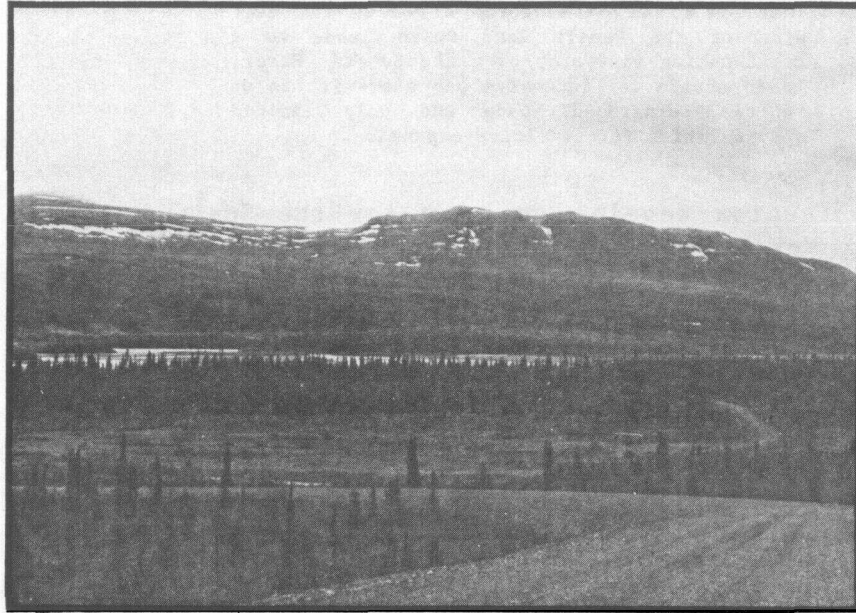
- The land adjacent to the Susitna River crossing and that visible from the recreational sites should be retained for public recreational use only.
- Further commercial and homesite development should not be located within view from the Susitna River crossing and should respond to the greenbelt recommendations for this unit.
- With the exception of recreational homesites, federal land disposals should be discouraged in this unit.
- All mining and material extraction activities should be restricted from locating within view from the road.

Recreation Development (Rec)

The Susitna River crossing is a major recreation focus along the Denali Wild and Scenic Road. However, current use has a low visual impact on the area and the only existing public recreational facility is a small boat launch ramp on the northeast bank of the river. BLM has withdrawn the southwest bank of the crossing for recreational use, but no development has yet taken place.

In order to respond to the existing and future demand for recreational use at the Susitna River crossing, there may need to be several facilities developed within close proximity to the river which provide camping sites, scenic viewpoints, picnic sites, boat launches, river access and hiking trails. The following development opportunities and constraints have been identified:

- The west banks of the Susitna River crossing have very low visual absorption capabilities.



With proper site design and landscaping, this unsightly gravel pit is the recommended location for campground and rest area development (Rec - 1). While it is removed from the river bank, the site has easy access and good screening potential.

- The east banks of the crossing have moderate visual absorption capabilities.
- The existing boat launch site is well-sited, but too small and has no off-road pull-out space.
- There are no established picnic, camping or toilet facilities near the crossing.
- There is a large, former material site approximately .2 mile east of the river at the Denali Townsite road junction. It has development potential as a campsite and day use facility.

- There is a narrow ridgetop drive on the east side of the Denali Road which leads to a breathtaking viewpoint over the Susitna River. It is unsafe for intensive use since it has no vehicle turnaround space and only limited opportunities for sensitive expansion.

A recreation development plan for the Susitna River crossing should be prepared, taking advantage of the site's outstanding amenities while minimizing facility development. Recreational development should be restricted to the east side of the river, where the visual absorption capability is highest and existing landscape alterations are concentrated.

Rec-1 Rest Area and Campground: The former materials site on the east side of the river crossing should be developed as a combined rest area and campground. This existing disturbed area now appears to be used as a parking area by recreationists at the Susitna River. Site development and reclamation should include the following actions:

- Construct a vegetated berm at the roadside to provide partial screening from traffic.
- Regrade the site and establish masses of vegetation within the site according to a landscape design scheme. This will provide some privacy and break up the site's expansiveness.
- Minimize the number of access points. There may be some conflict with the Denali Townsite access road; this needs further investigation.
- Remove or relocate the abandoned trailer on the site.
- Establish a short boardwalk through the spruce grove to the river edge.

- Post information indicating the location of the ridgetop viewpoint to the south as well as recreation-related information for the Susitna River (i.e. fishing, boating, etc.).

Rec-2 Ridgetop Viewpoint: This short drive along the top of a very narrow ridge leads to spectacular views of the Susitna River. This viewpoint should be developed in conjunction with the Rest Area (Rec-1) to provide travelers with an interpretive site for the Upper Susitna River landscape. Since this site has extremely limited space for development, rest area facilities should be provided at the recommended rest area site approximately 1/2 mile to the northwest. The following site development guidelines should be applied:

- Prohibit vehicle access on the ridgetop road. Provide a small gravel turnout (2-3 cars) at the roadside and maintain a foot trail to the viewpoint.
- Provide interpretive information regarding the Susitna River landscape and wildlife at the parking area, leaving the trail undeveloped to experience the full effect of the spectacular panorama.

Rec-3 Boat Launch: The existing boat launch site may need to be expanded to provide adequate space to safely back off the boat ramp without entering the road. If necessary, this should consist of minimal clearing and gravel surfacing in order to maintain the natural character of the river bank. Regular litter control would eliminate visual clutter. The existing trash barrel should be placed in a more appropriate location to minimize its visibility from the road. As an option, a wood slat enclosure for the barrels could be located among some trees at the southeast or northeast corner of the site. Parking should be restricted to the recommended rest area/campground site (Rec-1).

Greenbelts

Within this management unit, greenbelts can be an effective scenic resource management tool for visible lands outside the right-of-way. This unit is characterized by generally open, rolling tundra with scattered masses of trees, so lands adjacent to the road are highly visible. The predominant view orientation shifts from the east to the west side of the road, but the views are generally panoramic. Therefore, a narrow greenbelt would be relatively insignificant in maintaining the scenic resources of this area. The most appropriate greenbelt designation for this unit is a viewshed greenbelt. A viewshed greenbelt does not restrict all use within its width, but rather defines guidelines for sensitive use. The viewshed greenbelt for this unit should extend approximately two miles to the east and one mile to the west of the Denali Road, encompassing those lands with the highest visibility. (The unit map indicates more precisely the necessary greenbelt width). The following development recommendations are aimed at retaining the scenic resources of the area:

- All development should be set back at least 100 feet from the road so distance provides a visual buffer.
- Plans for development or land use other than scattered residential cabins should be evaluated for their visual impact on views from the road.
- Development site design should take advantage of natural opportunities for screening, setbacks and should use materials that blend in with the surrounding landscape.

- No more than 25% of the natural vegetation should be removed within any one site.
- The number of access roads should be minimized by encouraging adjacent developments to share or consolidate access.
- Large scale landscape alterations, such as large mining or material sites or residential subdivisions, should be strongly discouraged within the viewshed greenbelt.

Existing private land is not subject to greenbelt designations. However, private landowners are strongly encouraged to adopt the greenbelt guidelines as a means of maintaining the scenic quality of their home and its surroundings. BLM, on the other hand, should incorporate these recommendations in their land use plan for the Denali Block and formally apply the management guidelines to any future use or development of this area.

Right-of-Way Management

DOTPF manages a 300 foot right-of-way within this unit which serves as the foreground to the many exceptional scenic views from the road. The current management practices for most of these lands is sensitive to the scenic resource values. Both water and vegetation are retained close to the roadside minimizing the visual impacts of the road on the landscape and enhancing the wild and remote character of the area. This type of right-of-way management should be encouraged throughout this unit. The areas in most need of improvement are the cut banks and the gravel extraction sites within the right-of-way. Natural revegetation should be

encouraged in these areas, and this process might be accelerated through the initial seeding of the sites with nitrogen-fixing plants (alder, vetch, lupine). The gravel extraction areas are in need of more intensive management and are addressed under Impact Mitigation.

Turnouts (T)

High scenic quality, many opportunities for exceptional views, as well as the sense of arrival after a long period of anticipation, invite many travelers to stop and enjoy the scenery in this unit. To accommodate those who prefer to make brief stops alongside the road rather than spend more time at a rest area, a series of scenic viewpoint and interpretive turnouts is proposed for this area.

T-1 Existing unmaintained turnout. The following measures are recommended for development and maintenance of this existing site which has an excellent view across the Susitna River to the Denali Townsite and the Alaska Range:

- The turnout and its entrance should be regularly graded to maintain access.
- The existing right-of-way vegetation should be retained to provide partial screening of the site.
- A short foot-trail should be constructed to the top of the hill for a better vantage point.

T-2 DOTPF proposed turnouts/gravel sites. In their realignment plans, the DOTPF has proposed reclaiming two gravel extraction sites for turnouts, one on either side of the road at the same location. The site on the east side of the road is recommended as a good location to develop a turnout. From there, it has good

views of the Susitna River and the potential to develop short foot trails which would provide several different views of the river. This can be partially screened by regrading and revegetation within the right-of-way.

The gravel site on the west side of the road has a high visual impact and views from there are oriented to the gravel site on the opposite side of the road. This site should be actively reclaimed to return it to a more natural character. (See Impact Mitigation, M-1 for reclamation recommendations).

T-3 Existing viewpoint turnout. This existing turnout has views north up the Susitna River to the N.W. Alaska Range. It is recommended that this site be maintained as a turnout and the following measures taken to improve its amenities:

- Remove the excessive amount of refuse that has accumulated at the site and continue regular pick-up.
- Provide a short interpretive information sign describing the view.
- Annually grade the turnout entrance to provide easier vehicular access.
- Establish additional vegetation or construct a vegetated berm on either side of the entrance to reduce the impact of the clearing from the road.

T-4 Proposed turnout. This site is proposed as an interpretive turnout for the talus slopes in BLM's Denali Highway Information Plan. Development of the site would require minimal changes and it has good visibility for entrance and exit. However, it offers no other site amenities, such as views of the surrounding landscape. It is recommended that this site be given a low priority, and instead, development should focus on sites that are oriented to scenic views of the Susitna River Valley.

Realignments (Real)

DOTPF has proposed minor realignments of several curves within the area near the Susitna River crossing. It appears that the purpose of these realignments is to flatten curves and create longer tangents. In general, this type of upgrading is unnecessary in view of low traffic volumes and the function of the road as a scenic and recreational driving experience. Additionally, each of the road segments proposed for realignment currently add to the driving enjoyment through the landscape, and these qualities should be retained.

Real-1 Susitna River crossing approach. The sharp curves on either side of the Susitna River bridge cause definite changes in direction before and after the crossing which lend visual excitement and anticipation to the overall experience. Flattening these curves as proposed appears unnecessary for highway safety or convenience and would detract from the drama of the river approach. It is recommended that the alignment of the existing curves be maintained.

Real-2 Susitna Lodge approach. The existing alignment is a pleasant approach to the Susitna Lodge, providing a series of filtered and framed views that then open to a full view of the lodge and small lake. Flattening the curves would not only detract from the visual experience, but would necessitate extensive fill at the edge of a roadside lake and a steep embankment. It is recommended that the existing alignment be maintained in order to minimize landscape disruption and retain the pleasant quality of the present experience.

Denali Townsite Access Road

The Denali Townsite Access Road currently has little visual impact within this management unit because it is only visible from distances greater than a mile. The proposed road upgrading should attempt to minimize exposed soils on cut banks that would create distinct color or line contrasts, since patterns are more visually discernible from long distances than are details.

Impact Mitigation (M)

The major source of negative visual impacts within this management unit is the presence of many roadside gravel extraction sites. If the DOTPF would mitigate the impacts of these sites it would serve not only to enhance the visual experience, but also to provide private landowners and other public land managers with an example of public efforts being made to maintain the Denali as a wild and scenic road. The following site specific recommendations encompass materials sites as well as one commercial establishment.

M-1 Gravel Extraction Site. As described in turnout (T-2), this long, wide gravel site has a high negative visual impact and virtually no amenities that merit turnout development as recommended by DOTPF. Instead, the site should be screened and reclaimed. Regrading, particularly at the road edge, and construction of a large berm with tall vegetation in the right-of-way is recommended.

M-2 Material Site-Susitna River Approach.

Material extraction at this highly visible site dominates the view of the northwest-bound traveler from the Susitna River bridge. Constructing a berm with tall vegetation 40-50 feet back from the road would help screen the site by directing the view up and over the cut hillside. While the site is still in use, only a single narrow entry/exit should be maintained. Refuse presently scattered at the roadside should be removed. The proposed realignment at this corner would accentuate the impact of this site, making reclamation an even higher priority.

M-3 Gravel Clearings and Associated Clutter.

Concentrated just north of the Gracious House Lodge is a series of gravel extraction sites which detract from the natural landscape and the commercial establishment. This impact is accentuated by an excessive amount of clutter, such as burned out and broken down structures, old barrels, and trash left within the sites. This is a good opportunity for DOTPF to set an example for private landowners by mitigating these severe visual problems. Recommended mitigation measures for this area include:

- Remove all refuse and unused structures from the sites
- Construct berms with tall brush vegetation along the roadside to screen the material sites from view.
- If necessary regrade the sites to provide adequate screening with roadside berms.
- Encourage natural revegetation within these sites by restricting vehicular access.

M-4 Material site. This gravel scar is in high contrast to the surrounding natural landscape. Complete screening of the site would be difficult because of the height of the cut area. However, recontouring the site to a more natural form and encouraging revegetation would mitigate some of the impact. Additionally, a strip of tall vegetation and brush should be established at the roadside next to the site to provide a partial visual screen.

M-5 Gracious House Lodge. The major reason for the site's negative visual impact is the lack of continuity and its overall cluttered appearance. The lodge itself is lost amongst numerous other structures. Repeating colors and materials used for the lodge in other structures on the site (particularly the visually dominative quonset hut/service station in front) would improve visual continuity. Also, removing unnecessary clutter and locating storage areas behind or within structures would improve the overall site appearance.

