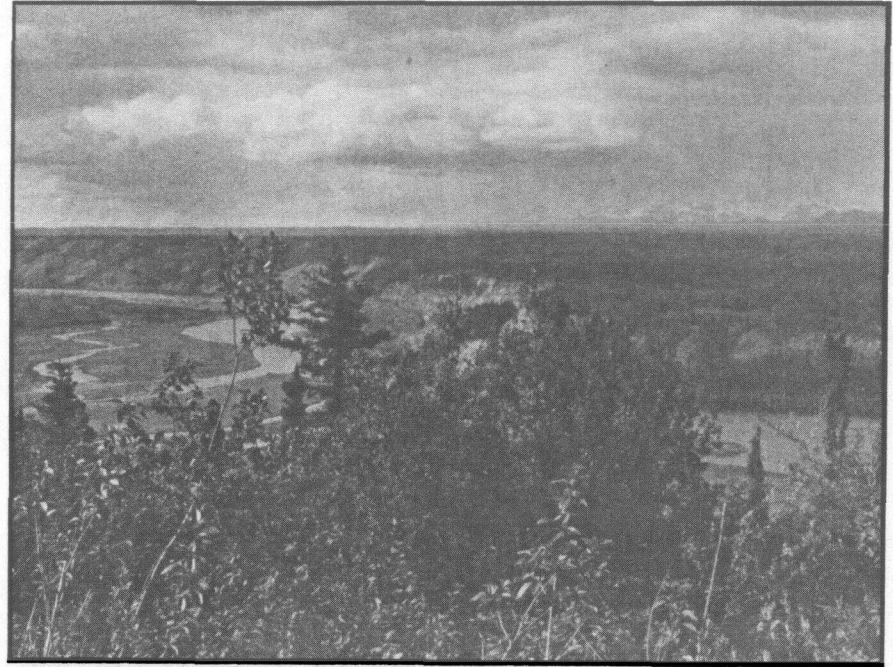


# Tonsina River - Liberty Falls



*Dramatic views of the Copper River and the steep cut banks are characteristic of this part of the Edgerton, but some tree and brush clearing would enhance the views.*

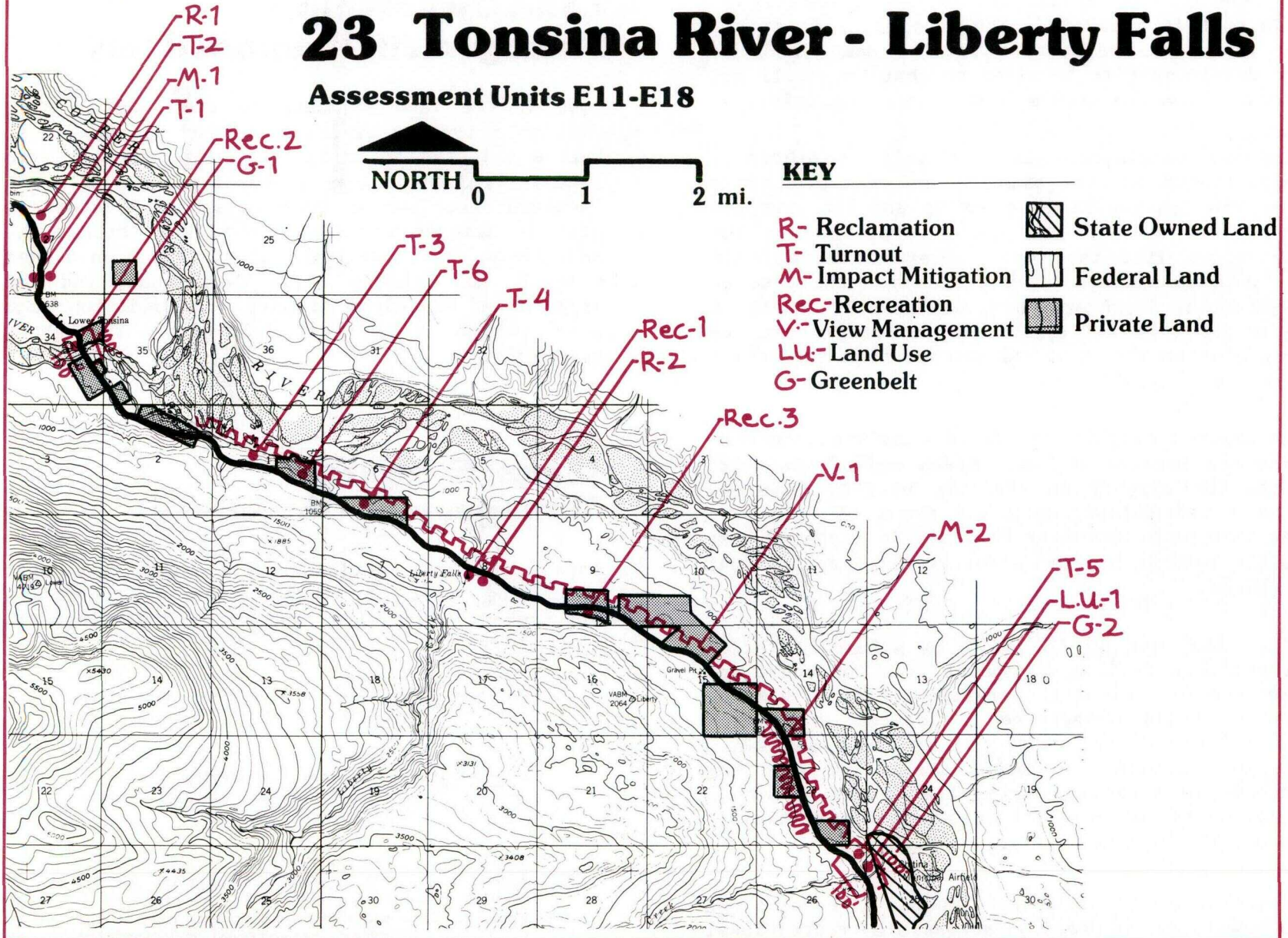
## General Description

This 11.7 mile portion of the Edgerton Road leaves the terraced farmlands near Kenny Lake on the west to cross the Tonsina River and climb the Chugach Foothills, ending about four miles northwest of Chitina. In this management unit, the road parallels the Copper River along the upland terrace. Thus the river, with its braided stream, broad river bed and the steep cut banks that enclose it, plays an important role in the driving experience. The rolling and forested uplands to the east of the Copper River, with their alternating dense stands of spruce and deciduous trees, serve as the foreground for the distant Wrangell Mountains. The Wrangells, and the peaks of Mts. Drum, Sanford, Wrangell, and Blackburn,

dominate the skyline. The scenic quality of this unit is very high, with constantly changing composite views containing the Copper River and the Wrangells, which vary as the road winds its way up the slopes of the Chugach foothills. The foreground vegetation of spruce/hardwood forest and the rolling topography at times frames and at other times blocks views from the road, creating a pleasant sense of sequential diversity. Overall, the scenery and panoramic views in this unit are spectacular, providing many opportunities to experience the variety and drama of the landscape.

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Assessment Units E11-E18



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In general, the visual absorption capability of this unit is moderate. The topography is steep, but the dense vegetation permits some land use and development to be sited so that they will not detract from the area's high scenic qualities.

Land use development in this unit is presently concentrated at the western and eastern ends. Near the Tonsina River crossing and for approximately one mile to the east, several large lot residences line the road. Most of these homes are well-maintained or screened from the road by vegetation. However, there are several locations where old cars and ramshackle buildings near the road clutter the view and detract from the area's high scenic qualities.

The Chitina Airport and DOTPF's Maintenance Station are located at the eastern end of the unit. While the airport is scarcely visible from the road - using topography and trees as screens - the Chitina Maintenance Facility is situated next to the road in an open area, creating some visual problems.

Other land use in the unit is primarily recreational, as this is a popular area for sport and subsistence fishing, rafting, and hiking. Liberty Falls Campground is located on a creek midway through the unit. It is small and well-designed around a dramatic falls, but used far beyond its capacity during the summer. How to accommodate the need for additional facilities is one of the issues this study addresses.

Presently undeveloped, the Tonsina River crossing is used as an easily accessible recreational area.

## **Land Ownership & Management Responsibility**

Most of the land adjacent to the road in this unit is privately owned, with the majority of it Native selected or in Native allotments. Public land is limited to several small parcels of state land near the Tonsina River crossing, a materials site in Assessment Unit E-16 midway through the management unit, two right-of-way sites on either side of the Liberty Falls Campground, and the state-owned Municipal Airport. In addition, the DOTPF manages a 200 foot right-of-way throughout this unit.

## **Visual Resource Management Objectives**

Land management decisions affecting this unit should be guided by three concerns: retention, enhancement, sensitive land use and development.

Retention: To retain those scenic qualities which make this portion of the Edgerton a special driving experience.

Enhancement: To enhance the viewing experience by managing the vegetation to maintain and open additional views.

Sensitive Land Use and Development: To encourage development on selected lands adjacent to the road so that it harmonizes with the area's high visual quality and also helps to meet some of the demand for additional recreational opportunities and quality residential sites.

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## Management Recommendations

### Right-of-Way Management & Impact Mitigation (M)

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Because of adjacent private land ownership and steep topography, many of the management activities affecting the scenic experience along the road will be the responsibility of the State DOTPF. Three activities are of particular importance and each is addressed in turn: maintaining vegetation in the right-of-way, view enhancement, and cut and fill management.

Maintaining Vegetation in the Right-of-Way. In addition to the magnificent views of the Copper River and the Wrangells, the overall character of the Edgerton Road is enhanced by the immediately surrounding natural vegetation, consisting primarily of spruce/hardwood forest on upland hills. DOTPF manages a 200 foot right-of-way through this unit and it should be their policy to maintain as much native vegetation as possible in order to retain the undisturbed quality of the road. Because of the steep topography on either side of the road this natural strip can serve as an effective buffer to future development of private lands since the structures will generally be above or below the line of sight.

Present right-of-way management in the unit is good - low lying plants or high brush meet the gravel road edge. Such sensitive treatment should continue. It is suggested that future

management practices incorporate the following guidelines:

- Maintain vegetation to the road edge.
- Where trimming or cutting is necessary for driving safety, it should be done in a selective manner to obtain a softened, natural appearing edge. Both the depth of the cut strip and the height of the vegetation cut should be varied to avoid hard edges. On curves only the trees on the inside edge of the curve should be trimmed leaving vegetation on the other side free to grow closer to the road.
- Alternate the timing of vegetation maintenance along the road by segments, so all are not in the same stage of regrowth at the same time.
- Cleared areas next to the road should be revegetated in low brush or flowering native plants.
- Remove all slash from cut areas.

View Enhancement. While the right-of-way should be managed to encourage continuous vegetation as close to the roadway edge as possible, in some locations trees should be thinned and brush kept trimmed to open up views to the Wrangell Mountains. The sequential opening and closing of views adds interest to the driving experience. Both the road alignment winding through the Chugach foothills and the dense forest vegetation provide the opportunity for this spatial diversity along the Edgerton Road. Trees can totally, however, obscure or partially block desirable views which careful management can correct. For example, the existing turnout at the Edgerton Historic Marker has a panoramic view of the river and mountains but at the present time, foreground trees make it difficult to appreciate the entire skyline. Cutting these nearby trees would do

much to enhance this viewpoint. Selective locations along the road in this unit would benefit from similar actions. The boundaries of the recommended view management area are noted on the map. (See V-1).

Because of the difficulty of identifying every view here, it is recommended that the supervisor or foreman of DOTPF's maintenance and operation crew work with a staff landscape architect each year to outline the season's maintenance program, identifying cutting and thinning locations and specific practices to guide the cutting.

**Cut and Fill Management.** Building the road on the slope of the foothills and also down the face of the upland terrace created areas of steep cuts. In some locations, these were blasted through bedrock and the rough-hewn rock faces add to the appreciation of local geology and create visually interesting patterns and textures. Some of these cuts, however, are through glacial deposits which, though in dramatic contrast to the rolling terrain are also highly susceptible to erosion if not stabilized. Appropriate slope contouring and revegetation are effective means of stabilization. It appears that some cut banks along the Edgerton are planted - either naturally or human induced - and holding the bank well, yet several banks exhibit severe erosion problems. These require DOTPF's immediate attention for contouring and planting. Erosion control and bank revegetation should become an ongoing part of DOTPF's annual maintenance program.

M-1 The steep cut banks here are eroding and show signs of active sliding. These should be con-

toured and planted to provide bank stabilization and reduce visual contrast.

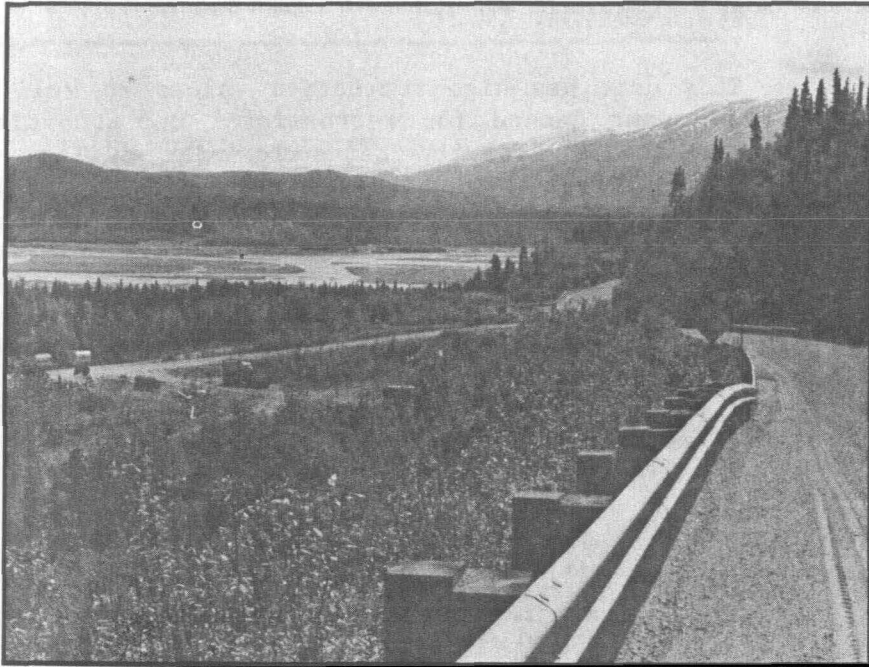
M-2 A series of cut banks requiring stabilization and revegetation to minimize existing erosion problems.

## **Paving**

A chronic problem for recreational use of this road is dust. The high silt content of the gravel surface, dry summers, frequent winds, increased summer traffic, and high speeds combine to make the east Edgerton a very dusty ride. This detracts from the scenic and recreational opportunities - lakes, viewpoints, etc. - which are located at the roadside. This highway should have a high priority for paving to help control this problem. The cost would not be prohibitive since the existing gravel roadbed is in good condition. It would also be important to maintain the existing alignment and narrow paving width, just as that which presently exists on the western Edgerton, to maintain the pleasant, recreational qualities of the road.

## **Land Use & Development (LU)**

The generally steep topography in this management unit places limits on private development. As a result, it will likely be the areas near the Ton-sina River, the airport, and a few scattered areas along the road where any future development will focus. Some private development can be compatible with the highway's scenic qualities and



*This DOTPF maintenance station detracts from the panoramic view across the Copper River. Better site design, screening, or relocation would be appropriate for this highly scenic and extremely open area.*

landowners should be encouraged to keep the following considerations in mind to both minimize the impact of the road on their use and enjoyment as well as to reduce the impact of the development on the road's scenic quality:

- Locate buildings out of view of the road, either behind vegetative screens, or small hills or berms. Driveways should be kept to a minimum number and designed to reduce their visual impact.

- Discourage development on steep slopes, particularly if it involves cutting or filling.
- Encourage large lot, dispersed development to maintain the undeveloped character of the road.
- Encourage recreation-related developments, such as public and private campgrounds at lakes or creeks to help accommodate some of the area's high demand for such facilities.
- Any additional commercial or industrial use should be located close to the airport and well-screened.

One development in this unit requires specific management attention.

- LU-1 Development on public land should set an example for activities on private land. The Chitina Maintenance Station, operated by DOTPF and located immediately adjacent to the road near the airport, is an open dirt pad for storing equipment and two office trailers. This site detracts from a panoramic mountain vista beyond the roadside clutter. Site improvements are essential. If possible, DOTPF should move the facility closer to the airport building, which is reasonably well-screened behind a stand of spruce and aspen. The other option would be to landscape the site and reorganize the use of the area. If not a permanent camp, the site should be reclaimed, regraded, and planted when it is no longer needed.

## **Greenbelts (G)**

The pattern of private land ownership adjacent to the road makes it impossible to effectively implement a greenbelt throughout most of this unit, and the dense roadside vegetation means that appropriate right-of-way management can be an effective strategy for retaining and managing scenic quality. However, there are two areas,

which because of particular scenic sensitivity, should be recommended for greenbelt designation:

G-1 The Tonsina River crossing is a recreational node and a visual corridor to the Copper River. Because it is flat and open, private development would be difficult to screen here. Therefore, it is recommended that there be established a 100 foot greenbelt beyond the right-of-way for 1/4 mile on either side of the river. Within this strip, private development and recreational use can take place, but with additional concern for minimizing clearings and more concern for screening.

G-2 For 1/4 mile on either side of the road to the airport, a 100 foot greenbelt is recommended. This is an area with the first panoramic views after leaving Chitina over relatively flat terrain. Development within this greenbelt could occur but would be encouraged to meet high development standards:

- Minimize cleared areas.
- Screen buildings from the road.
- Align driveways with topography and consolidate access to minimize intersections with the Edgerton Road.
- Retain as many trees as possible within the greenbelt.

Along the rest of the unit it is recommended that all development be set back 25 feet from the right-of-way edge.

Private landowners in these locations are strongly urged to adopt the greenbelt concept and follow the management guidelines. In addition to retaining scenic quality, it would also protect private property from road disturbance and provide privacy. A design and management manual would provide information on the greenbelt concept and identify and illustrate development guidelines.

## Recreation (Rec)

This unit has high recreation values as well as an unmet demand for recreational opportunities. The area's activity tends to peak during the Copper River salmon season each summer. While there are other campgrounds closer to Chitina and the Copper River, this unit offers pleasant forested sites that are not plagued by the winds and exposure characteristic of the other sites. Two locations in this unit merit particular attention:

Rec-1 Liberty Falls Campground. Right off the road and surrounding Liberty Falls and creek, this campground is the nicest facility on the Edgerton. It combines privacy, easy road access, and a lovely setting by the falls. Because of its amenities, the facility is heavily used in the summer. Frequently every available parking area is filled by numerous self-contained recreational vehicles and doubling up in campsites is not uncommon. The question facing land managers is whether to enlarge this facility. The present campground fits in with the landscape in a sensitive fashion; it is scarcely visible from the road and each site has a measure of privacy and orientation to the falls or creek. Expansion here would be difficult if not impossible. However, one of the two right-of-way sites located on either side of the campground could be reclaimed to provide additional camping area. The site to the west is the present trailhead for the Liberty Creek Falls Trail and is presently used for some camping. It would be possible to add five to six sites here. Major expansion in this area is to be discouraged. It is preferable to develop other facilities along the highway to help disperse use and retain the special, personal qualities of this present campground.

Rec-2 The Tonsina River Crossing is also a recreation node, but an informal one, since there are no developed facilities and the land is privately owned. The views, river access, and fishing, camping, and picnicking potential make this an ideal location for a more active recreation

site. There is enough available land on the northwest corner of the crossing to provide overnight camping set away from the river. In addition, a day use and boat launch area could be developed on the southeast or southwest corner of the river where there is level land. (It appears to receive this use informally already). The other corner could be left in its natural vegetation and development on the northeast corner would be helped by some screening. The potential for additional development here merits further study. Since the land here may be Native selected, the area could be developed as a private recreational site. As long as permanent developments were located adequately behind the dense vegetation, they would not constitute a visually disruptive use.

Rec-3 A small lake near the road has private recreation potential as the location for several small recreational cabins or a small private recreation facility. Development density should be limited because this is an exposed site. In addition, some roadside vegetation could be thinned to slightly open the view to the lake.

## **Turnouts (T)**

There are few turnouts within this management unit to meet the travelers' needs for a safe place to pull off the road for a driving break or to take advantage of a view. A number of sites are recommended where safe access, ease of development, and good views make them good turnout candidates:

T - 1 This location has the potential to provide a panoramic valley view, as it has lovely vistas of the Copper River and surrounding landforms and geology. Some information on the land form and character could be included as interpretive information at the site. It is also 1/10 of a mile uphill from five fenced gravesites that are stair-stepped up the bluff and add an element of historic and cultural interest to the drive, especially when driving west from Chitina.

The interpretive sign could note these sites and their historic significance. A gravel pad for a turnout exists here already, thus minimal development is required. This is a high-priority site for development.

- T - 2 Another potential turnout site is located at a higher elevation and also has excellent views of the Copper River. It is an old sand storage site and would require some filling and grading, trimming of foreground vegetation, and the possible addition of a guardrail.
- T - 3 This potential turnout has views of the valley and Wrangell Mountains and is backed by incredible rock faces. The site would require some expansion of an existing gravel pad, grading, and signing. It has good visibility and would make a safe pullout.
- T - 4 This is an existing sand storage site that provides excellent views of Mts. Sanford, Drum, and Wrangell. The site could be reclaimed by contouring, grading and a possible addition of a guardrail. The foreground vegetation should be thinned to open the view.
- T - 5 This existing gravel widening could be graded as a small turnout with an expansive valley view. However, the Chitina Maintenance Station is in the foreground and requires screening or other impact mitigation to make the view as attractive as it could be.
- T - 6 The existing historic marker describing the story of the Edgerton Cutoff is located at one of the more spectacular overlooks of the Copper River Valley and the Wrangell Mountains. The signs' story seems anticlimactic in the presence of the natural scenery. Thus, this site should be developed with an interpretive display of the Wrangells, including a statement on their geologic history and role in the area's development, as well as a map naming the peaks. Foreground trees should be cut and thinned to help open and frame the views.



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## **Reclamation (R)**

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Although not a major problem in this unit, several material sites require some reclamation to minimize their impact on the scenic driving experience. In the future, material sites should be located outside the right-of-way and well screened from the road.

- R - 1 A large sand extraction site here should be contoured and reclaimed when no longer in use.
- R - 2 This large, unattractive gravel pit near Liberty Falls requires screening and/or reclamation when no longer in use. Presently this site is highly visible when driving west from Chitina.

