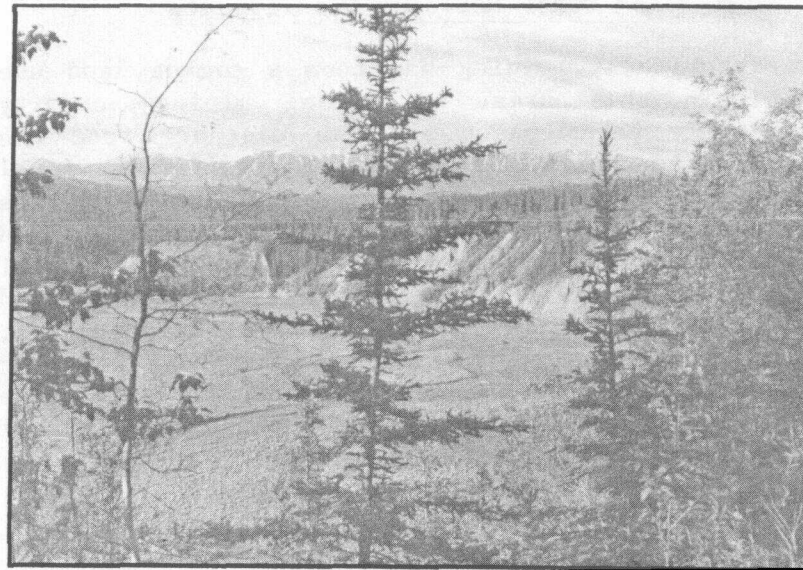


## Gateway to McCarthy Wild & Historic Road



*The Kotsina River floodplain as viewed from the McCarthy Road just east of the bridge over the Copper River. Views such as this contribute to the high scenic resource values within this management unit.*

### General Description

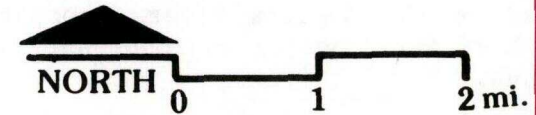
Management Unit 25 follows the old Copper River and Northwest Railroad alignment out of Chitina, crosses the Copper River and winds through the upper terrace between the Chitina and Kotsina Rivers. It is approximately 6.5 miles long. The broad, gravelly floodplains at the confluence of the Copper, Chitina and Kotsina Rivers, the steep walled cliffs and rolling, forested uplands, and the nearby Chugach Mountains are primary features of visual interest within this unit. The Chugach Mountains dominate the horizon to the south and west, while the more distant Wrangell Mountains, particularly Mt. Wrangell, are visible to the

north. The existing road alignment provides a continually changing view of all of these features, resulting in a highly scenic driving experience.

Land use and development activities visible within this unit are limited to seasonal recreational and subsistence fishing, a former dump site and a campground. During the early summer the Copper River's barren floodplains are transformed into a bustling community of motor homes, cars and people dip netting for red salmon.

# 25 Gateway to McCarthy Wild & Historic Road

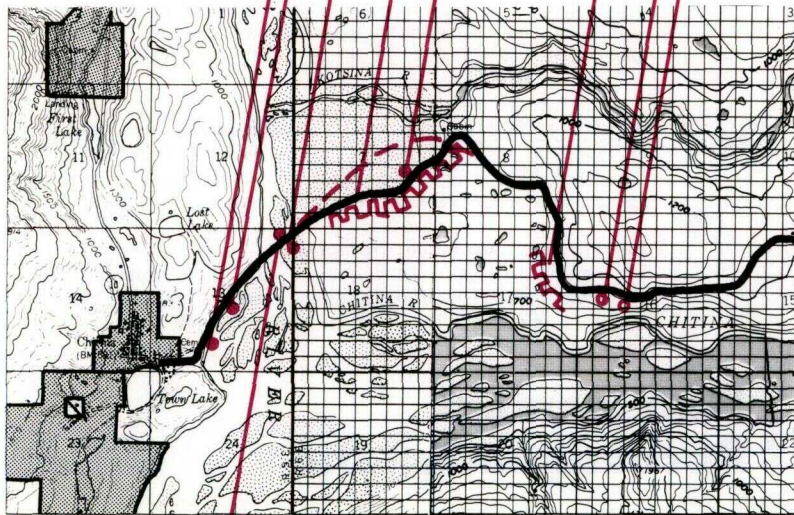
Assessment Units M1 - M4



## KEY

- R - Reclamation
- Rec - Recreation
- T - Turnout
- V - View Management
- IT - Information Turnout
- - - D.O.T.P.F. Realignment Proposals (1973)

-  State Owned Land
-  Native Corp. Land
-  Federal Land
-  Private Land



R-2

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Within Unit 25, the road itself becomes a strong visual element, primarily due to the considerable cutting required to locate it on the variable topography, as well as the unstable nature of many of these cut banks. This results in landslides and steep, unvegetated slopes immediately adjacent to the road. A realignment proposal intended to solve some of these landslide and erosional problems calls for relocating a portion of the road on the Kotsina River floodplain on a long bank of fill, posing an important land management issue.

## **Land Ownership & Management Responsibility**

The DOTPF manages a 200 foot wide right-of-way along the former railroad alignment throughout this unit. Lands adjacent to this right-of-way are predominantly under private ownership, with large blocks of land selected by AHTNA Regional Corporation and Chitina Village Corporation. Land beyond these existing private landholdings and native selections is within the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, administered by the National Park Service. This management unit is, in essence, the gateway or entrance to the west end of the park, even though actual Park ownership begins considerably beyond the road right-of-way.

## **Visual Resource Management Objectives**

The overriding character of this management unit is one of diversity - a diversity of visual experiences from the road coupled with a diversity

of existing and potential activities and uses. Visual resource management objectives in this context should respond to four general themes: entry, retention, sensitive land development and use, and appropriate roadside management.

Entry: To maintain this area - particularly the Copper River crossing - as a dramatic and appropriate entrance into the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park.

Retention: To retain those qualities and experiences which make this portion of the McCarthy Road a particularly diverse and visually rich driving experience.

Sensitive Development and Use: To encourage land development and use on private lands adjacent to the road which are sensitive to the significant scenic resource values found in this landscape.

Appropriate Roadside Management: To take full advantage of the road right-of-way, to respond to the above mentioned objectives and to reduce the visual impact of locating a road through particularly fragile terrain.

## **Management Recommendations**

### **Copper River Recreational Use (Rec)**

The Copper River floodplain receives considerable use for recreational and subsistence fishing during the summer salmon runs. While the river floodplains can absorb considerable use during this time, the area is extremely exposed visually. Given the prevalence of self-contained camping units today the actual river floodplains offer the opportunity to camp next to the river; however, due to the strong wind channeling and the exposed, unvegetated nature of this area, only day use should be encouraged. Overnight use

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should be directed towards the more protected uplands, either the existing sites around Chitina or newly developed public and private camping facilities. The one small campground on the east bank of the Copper River can meet the needs of some who desire to be close to the river; however, it should not be expanded.

An important recreational accommodation needed for this area is more convenient access to the river floodplains - in this way relieving some of the congestion and visual disturbance resulting from vehicles parking on the roadside and the bridge. The road is wide with more than adequate space to allow for stopping and watching the activity and enjoying the scenery; however, longer term use should be encouraged off the road itself.

Two specific sites should be considered for their potential to provide recreational access:

Rec-1 This short, narrow road allows auto access to the west bank of the Copper River. However, the road is very steep, has numerous ruts and holes, and has poor entry and exit visibility. The road needs regrading with a level area at the top large enough for two vehicles to pass. Signage should be provided to point out the entry location.

Further site analysis is recommended to determine if this road is suitable as the primary river access on the west side of the Copper River or if a more suitable route can be developed.

Rec-2 This short road provides relatively good access to the east bank of the Copper River and should be maintained as the primary access to this side. Signage should be provided to locate the point of entry.

## Information Turnouts (IT)

A road information turnout should be located in this unit since it represents the entrance to the McCarthy Wild and Historic Road. The information provided the traveler would include recreation opportunities and facilities.

IT The right-of-way adjacent to the campground could be developed as a two-vehicle information turnout. Development would require filling to widen the road so vehicles can stop outside of traffic lanes. Care should be taken to retain as much of the existing vegetation as possible between the road and the campground, as it provides necessary visual screening.

## Land Use & Development

Due to private ownership, easy access, and the proximity of this area to Chitina, roadside lands within this management unit will very likely be subject to development pressures. In the near future development will most likely consist of residential and recreational homesites, with prime sites having view orientations to the surrounding rivers and mountains rather than to the road. Because of the distinctive views and the role of this road segment as an entrance experience into the national park, it is desirable to minimize the visual impact of new development. This can be accomplished through three means. First, right-of-way management could take advantage of the generally forested nature of the area to screen adjacent developments, particularly around some of the more important vistas. Second, Native corporations could adopt greenbelt and other appropriate management guidelines for their lands adjacent to the road. Third, individual land-

owners could choose to retain as much of the natural landcover as possible and site their structures such that they are not strongly visible from the road.

## **Right-of-Way Management**

Within this management unit, the right-of-way plays an important role in scenic resource values, and will undoubtedly continue to do so as use of this portion of the McCarthy Wild and Historic Road intensifies. The DOTPF is faced with the difficult task of providing safe and convenient access while at the same time creating and maintaining a somewhat distinctive and unique road as a primary visitor entrance to a national park. Right-of-way management within this unit should take into account the following considerations in addition to those already outlined under the general discussion for the McCarthy Road.

**Roadcut Visual Impact Reduction:** Throughout this unit there exist numerous places where narrow cuts were made through low moraines and other small hills. These are, for the most part, steep slopes, resulting in continued erosion and difficulty in establishing vegetation cover - particularly on the north facing cuts. Measures should be taken to reduce steepness, and blend these cuts into adjacent landforms by rounding off tops and minimizing the amount of the cut retained as a flat plane. Revegetation should be prompted initially by seeding, and subsequently by encouraging natural revegetation.

**View Maintenance Around Curves:** In several places, sharp curves and tall brush block the visibility of oncoming traffic. In such instances, the area along the inside radius of the curve should be cleared of trees and tall shrubs to open the view around the curve.

**Vegetation Clearing in Right-of-Way:** Roadside clearing of vegetation should include the removal of all remaining slash.



*Development of turnouts with panoramic views of the Copper and Chitina Rivers would require landform modification and selective clearing of trees.*

## **Greenbelts (G)**

Within the western portion of this management unit where the topography is steep, vegetation sparse and views expansive, greenbelts would not be an effective or appropriate management tool. However, once the road climbs to the higher forested terrace between the Kotsina and Chitina Rivers, greenbelts could be effective in retaining the natural character of the corridor, and at the same time insulate development from the negative impacts of the road itself, such as dust and noise. This is particularly significant because of the relatively narrow road right-of-way (200 feet) and the potential for realignments and road

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widening. Due to the generally high visual absorption capability of this area, a 25 foot wide greenbelt strip, within which vegetation and landform modifications would conform to specific guidelines, is recommended.

Because of the predominantly private land ownership pattern and the location outside of organized local governments, no effective greenbelt implementation procedures exist. However, because Native regional and village corporations are the primary landholders, the opportunity exists for them to adopt greenbelt recommendations and appropriate management guidelines for their lands adjacent to the road. This would provide mutual benefits for both landowners and roadway users.

### **Proposed Road Realignments**

In the 1973 DOTPF Chitina to McCarthy Highway (McCarthy Road) Environmental Impact Statement, an alignment along the Kotsina River floodplain was proposed to replace the existing alignment which follows the edge of the upper terrace. This realignment was proposed to avoid considerable maintenance problems currently associated with the existing extremely unstable banks. The new alignment would place the road on extensive fill resulting in a nearly straight ramp up from the Copper River Bridge, over the Kotsina River floodplain, returning to the existing grade on the northeast face of the upper terrace.

From a visual quality perspective, the existing road would be preferable to the proposed realignment. While the proposed alignment would provide panoramic views, its nearly straight alignment and complete removal from the surrounding topo-

graphy would make the driving experience much less memorable than on the existing road.

Additionally, fill materials for the construction of this road would likely be extracted from the river floodplains themselves, resulting in a potentially high negative visual impact. Finally, this stretch of road creates an entrance into the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. The realignment proposed seems less appropriate and less sensitive to such an entry experience than does the existing alignment.

While the existing alignment would require considerable work to stabilize the slopes and reduce possible hazards and maintenance costs, it is recommended that this be done rather than abandon the road and construct a new one. Due to the intensive use this part of the McCarthy Road receives, some upgrading would be necessary to provide safer access. However it must strive to respond to the overall goals of this as a wild and historic road. Additional guidelines for maintaining the special character of Unit 25 can be found in the the Section on Road Realignments and Upgrading in Unit 26.

### **Turnouts (T)**

Because of the panoramic views possible throughout this area, its high use, and the narrow road, several turnouts should be developed to give travelers the opportunity to safely stop and enjoy the views. The following are recommended.

- T-1 Provided that this stretch of roadway is improved, rather than being replaced by the proposed realignment, at least two small turnouts should be created here. Selective thinning of roadside vegetation may be necessary to open up views.



*The roadside trees and brush invading the right-of-way play a significant role in keeping the visual impact of the road low and retaining the wild, undeveloped character of the landscape.*

- T-2 Remove the mound of soil between the two small cuts through the right-of-way bank to provide one four-car turnout with extended views of the Chitina River valley. Regrading and revegetation should take place to stabilize the soil. Safety devices such as curbs or guard rails can be installed to keep vehicles away from the edge and to help control slope erosion.
- T-3 This small existing turnout occurs at the edge of a sharp curve with a steep drop off on a fairly unstable slope. The views of the Chitina River valley are magnificent, and the point of view breathtaking, but potentially dangerous. The location of the turnout should be retained; however, the safety problems must be addressed.

**ALTERNATIVE ONE:** A substantial guardrail, most visually appropriate if constructed of railroad ties, should be installed around

the outer edge of the turnout. It should be located far enough from the edge to keep vehicles from disturbing the already unstable soil. A distinction between the road surface and the turnout surface would be helpful to direct westbound through traffic. A sign could be posted on the east end directing traffic to keep right as they round the curve. Additional widening in this location would be difficult due to the steep drop off on the outside of the curve and the steep rock wall on the inside.

**ALTERNATIVE TWO:** The road could be realigned slightly through cutting into the rock wall on the uphill side such that a safer curve results. Then the existing road and turnout area could be developed and safe entry and exit provided. This would eliminate the hazards and development constraints associated with the existing alignment and turnout.

## **View Management (V)**

The following site is recommended for specific view management attention:

- V-1 Selective tree thinning at these locations could reveal views of the Chugach Mountains and the Chitina River. Trees and brush should be cleared carefully, and all slash removed. Low shrubs and ground covers should be encouraged.

## **Reclamation (R)**

Reclamation should be encouraged at the following two sites:

- R-1 This former dump site adds an extremely unsightly element to the otherwise natural beauty of the broad Copper River Valley. While no longer officially in use, recreationists evidently still use

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the site because of its convenient location adjacent to the road. Reclamation of the site requires: removal of old auto bodies and other large items, covering with soil so that revegetation can occur, and controlling access so that the site is no longer a convenient location to dump trash. To support these measures, well maintained garbage containers need to be located for recreationists to use. Appropriate locations may be at the entrance of the access roads to the river floodplain. Efforts should be made to see that these containers do not detract from area's visual quality. This may be accomplished by three measures: container design, container location and container area maintenance.

R-2 Slopes adjacent to the road in this area should be stabilized in view of road realignment. See the discussion on the proposed road alignment for this unit for a full explanation of reclamation of this road segment.