NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Alaska Long National Scenic Trail Feasibility Study

Bureau of Land Management | Alaska State Office

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It is the mission of the Bureau of Land Management to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF APPENDICES

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADFG	Alaska Department of Fish and Game
ADLWD	Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development
ADOT	Alaska Department of Transportation
AEC	Alaskan Engineering Commission
AFN	Alaska Federation of Natives
ADNR	Alaska Department of Natural Resources
ALT	Alaska Long Trail
ANC	Alaska Native Corporation
ANCSA	Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act
ANILCA	Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act
APRD	Anchorage Parks and Recreation Department
ARA	ANCSA Regional Association
ARRC	Alaska Railroad Corporation
ATV	All-Terrain Vehicle
BEA	Bureau of Economic Analysis
BLM	Bureau Land Management
CDP	Census Designated Place
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSU	Conservation System Units
DMLW	Alaska Division of Mining, Land, and Water
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
DOI	U.S. Department of the Interior
DPOR	Alaska Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation
FAA	Federal Aviation Administration
FERC	Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIS	Geographic Information System
JBER	Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson
LOC	Library of Congress
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NHT	National Historic Trail
NPS	National Park Service
NRHP	National Register of Historic Places
NRT	National Recreation Trail
NST	National Scenic Trail
NTS	National Trails System
NTSA	National Trails System Act
OHV	Off-Highway Vehicle
OLR	Optimal Location Review
ORSA	Outdoor Recreation Satellite Accounts
P.L.	Public Law
R.S.	Revised Statute
SCORP	Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan
TCC	Tanana Chiefs Conference

THS	Talkeetna Historical Society
UAF	University of Alaska Fairbanks
U.S.	United States
U.S.C.	U.S. Code
USCB	U.S. Census Bureau
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USFS	U.S. Forest Service
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Alaska Long National Scenic Trail (NST) Feasibility Study* is being prepared in response to congressional direction to study the Alaska Long Trail for possible designation as an NST. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Public Law [P.L.] 117-328) requires the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), to conduct the study. The study evaluates the physical and financial feasibility, desirability, and suitability of designating the study routes associated with the Alaska Long Trail as an NST.

According to the National Trails System Act (NTSA), the purpose of an NST is to "provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass."

The Alaska Long Trail is a proposed 500-mile system of routes extending from Seward to Fairbanks, Alaska. Over 200 individual segments totaling over 1,500 miles (collectively, the study routes) were organized into five different analysis zones and evaluated through the study.

The study is not a comprehensive management plan and does not authorize any on-the-ground actions, change existing uses or authorize future uses. If Congress designates the Alaska Long Trail as an NST, the selected federal administering agency would complete a comprehensive management plan and other project-specific implementation level environmental compliance documents. All trail management activity on non-federal land would be strictly voluntary.

The BLM has evaluated the Alaska Long Trail to be consistent with Section 5(b) of the NTSA, which identifies nine studies to be addressed for NSTs under study:

1. The proposed route of such trail (including maps and illustrations).
2. The areas adjacent to such trails, to be utilized for scenic, historic, cultural, or developmental purposes.
3. The characteristics which, in the judgment of the appropriate Secretary, make the proposed trail worthy of designation as an NST or National Historic Trail (NHT).
4. The current status of land ownership, as well as the current and potential use along the designated route.
5. The estimated cost of acquisition of lands or interest in lands, if any.
6. The plans for developing and maintaining the trail and the cost thereof.
7. The proposed federal administering agency.
8. The extent to which a state or its political subdivision and public private organizations might reasonably be expected to participate in acquiring the necessary lands and in the administration thereof.

9. The relative uses of the lands involved, including: the number of anticipated visitor-days for the entire length of, as well as for segments of, such trail; the number of months which such trail, or segments thereof, will be open for recreation purposes; the economic and social benefits which might accrue from alternate land uses; and the estimated man-years of civilian employment and expenditures expected for the purposes of maintenance, supervision, and regulation of such trail.

Section 5 describes each of the objectives in Section 5(b) and specifies how the Alaska Long Trail meets or does not meet them.

None of these findings, however, are binding on Congress.

(Paxton 2007)

SECTION 1 | INTRODUCTION

The *Alaska Long NST Feasibility Study* was prepared in response to congressional direction through P.L. 117-328 to study the Alaska Long Trail for possible designation as an NST. The Secretary of the Interior selected the BLM to conduct the study. The study documents the proposed routes BLM was assigned to evaluate for the Alaska Long Trail in accordance with Section 5(b) of the NTSA, to include recommendations as to the suitability of trail designation as an NST. Refer to 1.3.2 Scope of Analysis for information on Section 5(b) NTSA study objectives.

The purpose of an NST is to "provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass."

As analyzed in the study, the Alaska Long Trail extends approximately 500 miles from Seward, Alaska to Fairbanks, Alaska (Figure 1-1). While the majority of the study route network currently consists of conceptual routes, some segments have already been built and could serve to support the Alaska Long Trail. Route status terms are defined in Section 5.1. Feasibility.

For segments recommended as suitable for designation in the study, a subsequent Act of Congress would be required to designate the trail as an NST and include the trail under Section 5(a) of the NTSA. If designated by Congress, a trail-wide comprehensive plan and project-specific environmental compliance documents would be developed by the National Trail administering agency in coordination with other National Trail managing agencies. The trail-wide comprehensive plan would provide strategic direction and establish the nature and purposes for the National Trail and select a National Trail right-of-way. The feasibility study is not a comprehensive plan, nor does it authorize any implementation actions, changes to existing uses, or approve future uses.

ALASKA LONG TRAIL HIGHLIGHTS

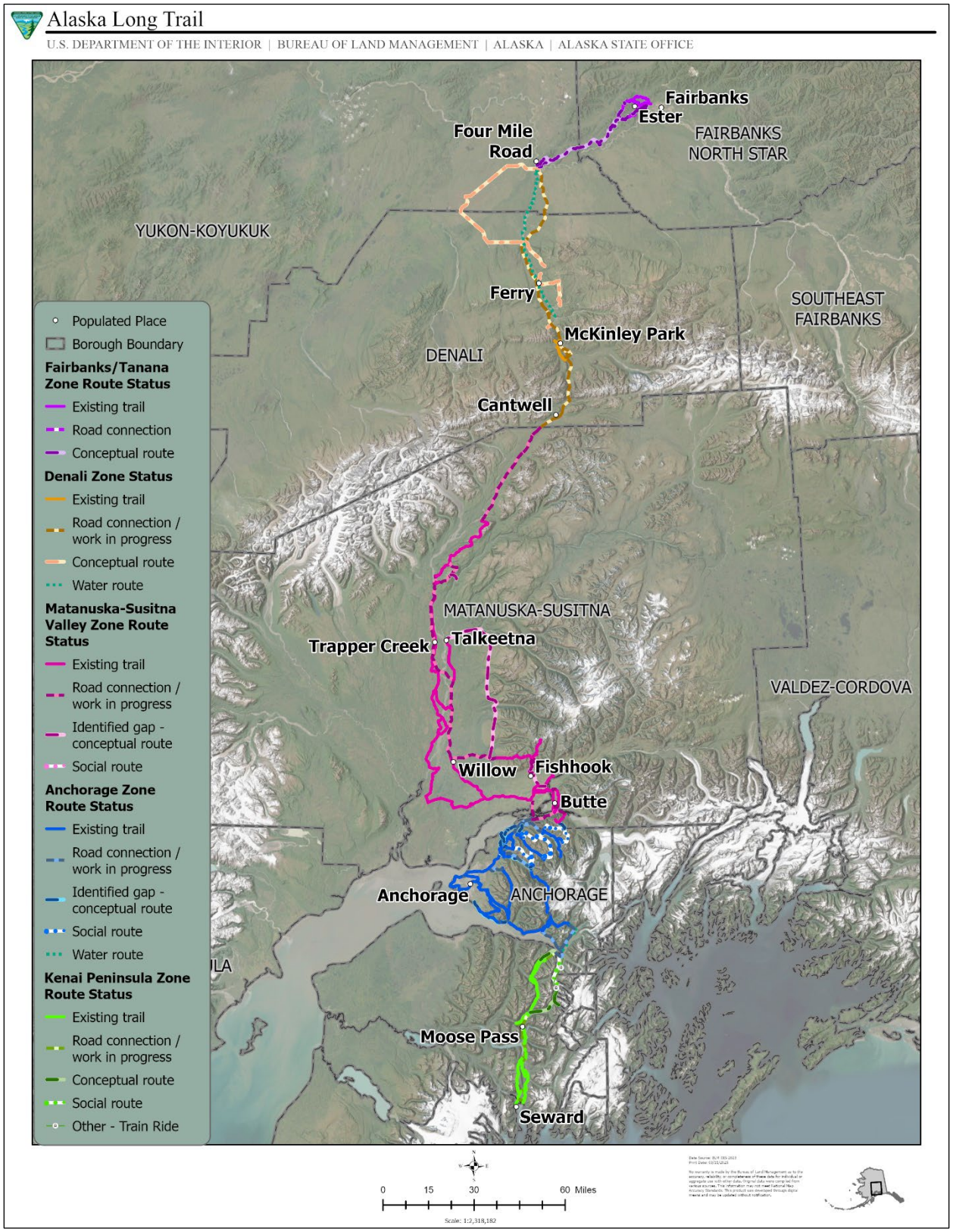
Approximately 500 miles of trail run from Seward in the south to Fairbanks in the north.

Nearly 500,000 people, around 68% of all Alaskans, live within 10 miles of the proposed route.

Approximately 45% of the routes of the proposed trail are already in use.

The feasibility study does not authorize any implementation actions, changes to existing uses, or approve future uses.

Figure 1-1. Vicinity Map and Location of the Alaska Long Trail Study Routes



1.1. Study Purpose

P.L. 117-328 included *Section 502. Alaska Long NST Feasibility Study*, amending the NTSA (16 United States [U.S.] Code [U.S.C.] 1244(c)) to initiate a feasibility study for the Alaska Long Trail, stating:

a) IN GENERAL.—The Alaska Long Trail, extending approximately 500 miles from Seward, Alaska, to Fairbanks, Alaska.

b) REQUIREMENT.—The Secretary of the Interior (referred to in this paragraph as the "Secretary") shall study the feasibility of designating the trail described in subparagraph (A), including evaluating the potential impacts of the trail on rights-of-way, existing rights, or other recreational uses of the land proposed to be used for the trail.

c) CONSULTATION.—The Secretary shall conduct the study under this paragraph in consultation with— (i) the Secretary of Agriculture, acting through the Chief of the Forest Service; (ii) the State of Alaska; (iii) units of local government in the State of Alaska; (iv) Alaska Native Corporations; and (v) representatives of the private sector, including any entity that holds a permit issued by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

The purpose in preparing the *Alaska Long NST Feasibility Study* is to evaluate the feasibility, desirability, and suitability of designating study routes associated with the Alaska Long Trail as an NST. Ultimately the study evaluates the trail's route, costs of administration, potential for public recreational use and historic interest, and other factors to determine whether it is suitable for designation as an NST.

1.2. General Description of Trail

The Alaska Long Trail is a proposed 500-mile system of routes extending from Seward to Fairbanks, Alaska. The Alaska Long Trail hosts an array of scenic destinations, recreational facilities, natural landmarks, and historic sites. Trail users would experience a diversity of Alaskan landscape features—including coastal fjords and unfragmented coastal temperate rainforest near Seward; spruce forests, rugged mountains, glacial-carved valleys, alpine tundra; and interior boreal spruce forests near Fairbanks. Over 200 individual segments totaling over 1,500 miles (collectively, the study routes) were organized into five different analysis zones:

1) Kenai Peninsula

2) Anchorage

3) Matanuska-Susitna Valley

4) Denali

5) Fairbanks/Tanana

Each of these five zones is described in detail in 3.1 Analysis Zones.

Throughout the report, routes are described south to north to be consistent with their description in P.L. 117-328. Trail use, however, is expected to be bidirectional. In maps, routes are described north to south to provide a reference point consistent with typical map orientation.

The proposed trail is a mix of federal, state, local, and private ownership. Federal land managers include the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), BLM, National Park Service (NPS), and U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). State of Alaska lands include those managed by the Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC) and the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (ADNR) through Division of Mining, Land, and Water (DMLW) and Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (DPOR). Private landowners include private citizens as well as Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs). The proposed route would cross multiple rivers and streams, canyons, and other geologic features, and would need to consider health and safety for pedestrians, vehicles, and wildlife.

Detailed maps and a geographic information system (GIS) shapefile that meet Federal Trail Data Standards (BLM 2014) and related national geospatial standards are available on ePlanning for download at https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2030342/510.

1.3. Study Approach

In executing the tasks outlined below, the study team followed a set of principles that reflect the intent of the study's congressional sponsors, BLM planning guidance, and the input of trail stakeholders across Alaska. The principles are as follows:

- Meaningful investigation of the proposed trail system's long-term viability can only occur with the collaborative involvement of a wide range of federal agencies, states, local governments, Tribes, nonprofit organizations, businesses, educational institutions, landowners, volunteers and interested parties.

- Partnerships sustain the National Trails System (NTS). A particular emphasis of the study is to strengthen existing partnerships for trail routing, ownership, construction, maintenance, and stewardship. However, the study does not authorize any new ground-disturbing activities or trail uses.

- Respect for private property rights and valid existing rights is prioritized in assessing the suitability of the proposed trail system.

- Federal condemnation of private land or cessation of state or local government authority will not be considered as an option in establishing or protecting the proposed trail system in the feasibility study.

1.3.1 Public Engagement

In accordance with P.L. 117-328 and consistent with Section 5(b) of the NTSA, the BLM conducted a variety of public outreach activities designed to explain the study process and collect input (refer to Section 4 , Section 5.2.1 Public Reflections on Desirability, and Appendix D Public Input Summary), including:

- Approximately 18,000 notification postcards were distributed to all landowners living along or directly abutting the proposed trail system.
- Efforts were made to consult with municipal leaders and state legislators from each of the towns the proposed trail system passes through.
- In-person public engagement sessions were held in Anchorage (April 8, 2024), Seward (April 9, 2024), Wasilla (April 10, 2024), Cantwell (April 11, 2024), and Fairbanks (April 12, 2024).
- Three virtual information and listening sessions were held on June 11, 12, and 27, 2024 via Zoom.
- Workshops were held with agency stakeholders including the USFS; Ahtna Incorporated; ADNR; Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG); the Denali, Matanuska-Susitna, Fairbanks North Star, and Kenai boroughs; Alaska Gasline Development Corporation; and ARRC. All agencies and groups with which BLM was required to consult were invited to attend individual workshops.
- A website and interactive ArcGIS StoryMap with current information about study process and progress were published.
- Monthly newsletters were distributed to interested members of the public throughout the duration of the project.

The BLM heard from a wide variety of landowners, land managers, and user groups including motorized and non-motorized users. Any future management planning would provide additional opportunities for public engagement, take into consideration input from existing land managers and landowners, and consider methods for mitigating potential impacts.

1.3.2 Scope of Analysis

In accordance with NTSA Section 5(b) and in partnership with affected communities, this feasibility study evaluated the following for the proposed NST study[1]:

[1] Note: The NTSA Section 5(b) has two additional criteria which only apply to NHTs under study, therefore they are not included here.

1. The proposed route of such trail (including maps and illustrations).
2. The areas adjacent to such trails, to be utilized for scenic, historic, cultural, or developmental purposes.
3. The characteristics which, in the judgment of the appropriate Secretary, make the proposed trail worthy of designation as an NST or NHT.
4. The current status of land ownership, as well as the current and potential use along the designated route.
5. The estimated cost of acquisition of lands or interest in lands, if any.
6. The plans for developing and maintaining the trail and the cost thereof.
7. The proposed federal administering agency.
8. The extent to which a state or its political subdivision and public private organizations might reasonably be expected to participate in acquiring the necessary lands and in the administration thereof.
9. The relative uses of the lands involved, including: the number of anticipated visitor-days for the entire length of, as well as for segments of, such trail; the number of months which such trail, or segments thereof, will be open for recreation purposes; the economic and social benefits which might accrue from alternate land uses; and the estimated man-years of civilian employment and expenditures expected for the purposes of maintenance, supervision, and regulation of such trail.

The study is not a management plan. If the trail is designated, a comprehensive management plan would be prepared by the assigned federal administering agency [16 U.S.C. 1244]. Consideration for public and agency concerns listed in Section 5.2.1 Public Reflections on Desirability, namely public recreation use (including motorized and non-motorized use and traditional activities), trail corridor protection, landowner issues, maintenance and community connections, would be addressed in a subsequent management plan. Existing models and alternative concepts for successful long-distance trail management, protection, maintenance, and administration were researched among both designated and non-designated trail systems (Appendix E). Broad management opportunities were conceptualized for long-term management, protection, and trail system maintenance based on a vision for the trail that reflects the concerns of property owners, trail user groups, and other stakeholders.

To accomplish these tasks, the study team established a detailed and current understanding of study routes through desktop analysis as follows:

- The study routes were mapped using GIS and global positioning system technologies, and all landowners whose properties intersect the trail were identified.
- The location of significant natural communities, unique flora and fauna, soils, geology, topography, hydrology, and national and state register-listed historic properties were identified.
- Landownership was analyzed along the study routes, including private, corporate, municipal, conservation, state, and utility.
- The locations of significant features that make the recreational trail system experience unique were identified at a landscape scale, including points of interest, multi-use areas, connecting trails, trail access points, roads, railroads, trailheads, campgrounds, cabins, yurts, and cultural and/or historic features.

1.3.3 Optimal Location Review

The implementation of the siting for a National Trail (i.e., where the trail may actually occur on the ground) is an ongoing process that occurs over decades—even after a potential congressional designation. This would be especially true across an Alaskan landscape that is unlike any other traversed by an NST, where glacial rivers, sparse road access, climactic variations, limited local search and rescue capacity, subsistence uses, and interest in summer and winter motorized recreation are but a few of the siting, construction, and operational constraints to the proposed Alaska Long Trail's feasibility, desirability, and suitability.

Two of the closest comparable NSTs (Pacific Crest and Continental Divide) established under the NTSA and managed for the variability most similar to Alaskan landscapes and uses, also have segments with a brief summer season, inclement weather and environmental risks, and some of the nation's most striking wild, beautiful, and fragile landscapes. These two trails have had their current routes repeatedly and iteratively adjusted to account for these variabilities through Optimal Location Review (OLR).

The Appalachian NST has had route changes up and down the trail from 1937 onward (Appalachian Trail Conservancy 2023). Like the Pacific Crest and Continental Divide NSTs, the Appalachian NST has also seen routes changed prior to and after their designation through OLR.

The OLR process establishes an iterative, systematic, and objective federal framework for determining the best location for NSTs regardless of landownership or construction needs (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] 2011, 2017). Before, during, and after the feasibility study and any potential congressional designation, the OLR process guides ongoing planning, design, management, and maintenance of the routes proposed for consideration or evaluation through the study process, applying the criteria found in NTSA Section 5(b) and through consultation of landowners, managers, and the public. Acquisition of an easement or land surrounding a trail and completion of relocation may require a long or uncertain wait, but this does not necessarily deter

land managers from revisiting the optimal location given that landownership conditions change over time.

The OLR process includes the following objectives for identifying the best possible location for the trail corridor (USDA 2017):

1. Meets the intent of Congress to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential within the scenic landscapes along the potential NST.
2. Ensures a trail location that is sustainable and blends with the environment in a cost-effective manner.
3. Provides separation from motorized uses and residential, commercial, and industrial development.
4. Provides access to water sources.
5. Provides public access.
6. Achieves consistency with design criteria for location outlined in the potential comprehensive plan (if established as an NST by Congress).

Understanding that National Trails involve a continued effort of achieving an optimal trail location, the feasibility study recommends suitable—not optimal locations—of the study route. BLM and partners anticipate that the OLR process would be customized and utilized should the proposed Alaska Long Trail be designated as an NST by Congress. Section

(McCaa 2016)

SECTION 2 | BACKGROUND

2.1. Summary of National Trails System Act

Initially, the NTS consisted solely of NSTs and National Recreation Trails (NRTs). The NST designation allows for uninterrupted travel (typically non-motorized hiking, horseback riding, and/or boating) from end to end through scenic natural landscapes that exhibit significant characteristics of the physiographic regions of the nation. All the NSTs designated by Congress as of 2025 are included in Table 2-1 below.

Congress passed the NTSA with the purpose:

to provide for the ever-increasing outdoor recreation needs of an expanding population and to promote the preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the Nation … (i) primarily, near the urban areas of the Nation, and (ii) secondarily, within scenic areas and along historic travel routes of the Nation which are often more remotely located (NTSA 1968).

Table 2-1. National Scenic Trails as of 2025

Trail	Date Established	Public Law
Appalachian NST	1968	P.L. 90-543
Pacific Crest NST	1968	P.L. 90-543
Continental Divide NST	1978	P.L. 95-625
North Country NST	1980	P.L. 96-199
Ice Age NST	1980	P.L. 96-370
Florida NST	1983	P.L. 98-11
Potomac Heritage NST	1983	P.L. 98-11
Natchez Trace NST	1983	P.L. 98-11
Pacific Northwest NST	2009	P.L. 102-328
Arizona NST	2009	P.L. 102-328
New England NST	2009	P.L. 102-328

Acronyms: P.L. – Public Law, NST – National Scenic Trail.

NRTs, on the other hand, offer a variety of opportunities for outdoor recreation, including motorized recreation, on trails in or near both urban and rural areas. These regional and local trails are designated by either the Secretary of Agriculture or the Secretary of the Interior and do not require subsequent congressional legislation. More than 1,300 NRTs have been designated thus far across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico on federal, state, local, and privately owned land.

On November 10, 1978, Congress amended the NTSA to include NHTs as a trail category. NHTs are "extended trails which follow as closely as possible and practicable the original trails or routes of travel of national historical significance" (NTSA Section 3). The Iditarod NHT, like the Alaska Long Trail study routes, is a network rather than a single end-to-end route. These "connecting or side trails" may be established, designated, and marked by the appropriate Secretary as components of an NST within areas administered by the Secretary of the Interior or Secretary of Agriculture (NTSA Section 6).

2.2. National Trails System Act Study Steps

Only "extended trails" totaling at least 100 miles in length qualify as NSTs or NHTs (Section 3[b]). Since 1968, 47 extended trails have been studied for inclusion in the system, and 32 have been designated. On rare occasions, an existing trail has been designated without a feasibility study[2], such as the Chilkoot NHT that is wholly contained within the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park.

The Alaska Long Trail requires four steps to become designated by Congress:

1. Congress requested a feasibility study through P.L. 117-328, which was signed into law on December 29, 2022.
2. The feasibility study is conducted by the assigned federal agency.
3. The Secretary submits the feasibility study to Congress.
4. Congress determines whether to designate the trail as part of the NTS.

If the trail is designated, the trail's assigned administering agency prepares a comprehensive management plan and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis to outline the roles of partners (including other federal agencies) and management goals for the full length of the trail.

[2] Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, P.L. 117-328, designated the Chilkoot NHT.

At least 13 long-distance trails under study have yet to be or may never be designated by Congress. Most of these have been historic trails.

Trails which have been studied for designation as a component of the NTS are summarized in Table 2-2. While these may lack the stature and funding afforded a designated NST, they nonetheless continue to be constructed, maintained, and operated thanks to a host of federal, state, local, and private partners.

Table 2-2. Trails under Feasibility Study for National Scenic Trail Designation as of 2025

Trail	Date Proposed	Study Completed	Qualified	Recommended	Designated
Long Trail (255 miles from the Massachusetts border northward through Vermont)	1968	1976	Yes	No	No
Mormon Battalion	1968	1975	No	No	No
Kittanning Path	1976	No	No	No	No
Bartram	1976	1982	No	No	No
Daniel Boone	1976	1990	No	No	No
Desert	1976	1980	No	No	No
Dominguez-Escalante	1976	1981	No	No	No
Indian Nations	1976	1981	No	No	No
Jedediah Smith	1983	1987	No	No	No
General Crook	1983	No	-	-	As an NRT in 1979
De Soto Trail	1987	1990	No	No	No
Coronado Trail	1988	1992	No	No	No
American Discovery	1992	1996	Yes, as new category: national discovery trail	Yes	No
Buckeye	2022	TBD	-	-	-
Alaska Long Trail	2022	TBD	-	-	-

Acronyms: NRT – National Recreation Trail, TBD – To be determined.
Source: NPS 2019, Logan Simpson

The existence and popularity of dozens of long-distance trails demonstrates that they are not dependent on congressional designation for their utility. The Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trail, for example, largely existed on the ground for decades prior to their inclusion in NTSA.

2.3. Background on the Alaska Long Trail Study Routes

From a physical and historical perspective, the study routes from Seward to Fairbanks have been used as travel routes for many years. In fact, many National Trails follow indigenous routes that have been utilized since time immemorial. Known as the "Railbelt" of Alaska, this is the route where the Parks Highway, the Alaska Railroad, and the southern section of the Iditarod NHT exist. In addition, the area hosts a high density of existing trail systems in comparison to other areas of Alaska and continues to be one of the most well-traveled areas in Alaska today.

Beginning in 2020, over 40 public and nonprofit organizations developed the *Statewide Trails Investment Strategy,* a comprehensive strategic plan focused on building and expanding trail infrastructure to help the state make the most of its outdoor recreation economy. Their research showed that connecting existing trails and new projects on public lands could form a backbone and workable route for a continuous trail from Fairbanks to Seward (NPS 2022 [3]).

State legislators, including Senators Bill Wielechowski, Kelly Merrick, Click Bishop, Cathy Giessel, and Representatives Zack Fields, Dan Saddler, Laddie Shaw, and Frank Tomaszewski, all lent their support for the trail early in the process. In May 2021 an article was published by the *Anchorage Daily News* stating, "... the idea has gained bipartisan political support and is being endorsed by economic development and tourism organizations throughout the Railbelt that say the trail could become a mecca for hikers and adventurers, encouraging them to stay longer in Alaska and spend money" (Brooks 2021).

The Alaska Long Trail started gaining national legislative momentum in April 2021 when Senator Lisa Murkowski expressed her support for moving the project forward at a trails forum in Alaska. This appearance was simultaneous with Murkowski's announcement that she would propose legislation focused on improving Alaska's trail system, which came in the form of two bills: 1) a bill to designate the Alaska section (approximately 16 miles) of the Chilkoot Trail as an NHT, and 2) a bill that would require a feasibility study be conducted for the 500-mile Alaska Long Trail route connecting Seward to Fairbanks (Murkowski 2021).

In the summer of 2022, the BLM Alaska State Office responded to the Senate Finance Committee regarding the proposed costs associated with the trail Feasibility Study (should it be assigned to BLM). P.L. 117-328, through an amendment of NTSA, then directed the Secretary of the Interior to complete a feasibility study for the proposed Alaska Long Trail. BLM was assigned the responsibility of completing the study.

(McCaa 2007)

SECTION 3 | ROUTE DESCRIPTION

This chapter introduces over 200 individual segments that join to form the study routes across five analysis zones. BLM provided study routes on September 7, 2023 for the project initiation phase based on data provided by the nonprofit organization Alaska Trails. On April 24, 2024, Alaska Trails submitted revised data that proposed alternate trail alignments, as well as the removal of certain trail segments. After conducting agency meetings, on September 30, 2024, the USFS submitted its preferred alignment from Seward to Girdwood. Fairbanks North Star Borough also submitted its preferred alignments, which correspond to its Trails Master Plan. This data was combined in GIS to determine a suitable alignment.

Landownership patterns, regional demographic and economic trends, and the significant resources and qualities are evaluated for each, concluding with a list of the built modifications that detract from the National Trail experience.

3.1. Analysis Zones

Appendix B provides maps for each analysis zone, and Appendix C provides corresponding segment tables.

Zone 1, the Kenai Peninsula Zone, contains study routes that would potentially use existing USFS routes for approximately 100 miles, including portions of the existing Iditarod NHT (Appendix C, Table C-1).

Zone 2, the Anchorage Zone, contains trails on a mix of lands, including Chugach State Park (managed by the State of Alaska), ANC lands, BLM, and DoD lands (Appendix C, Table C-2). Multiple alignments through the Municipality of Anchorage and state parks to the east utilize existing and proposed routes.

Zone 3, the Matanuska-Susitna Valley Zone, is the analysis area between Anchorage to Cantwell, and contains trails on a mix of lands, including ANC, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, ADNR, Denali State Park, and BLM lands (Appendix C, Table C-3).

Zone 4, the Denali Zone, extends from Nenana to Cantwell along the Parks Highway, east of Denali National Park. The study routes in this zone are mostly on Denali State Park land (Appendix C, Table C-4).

Zone 5, the Fairbanks/Tanana Zone, extends from Nenana through the Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area to Fairbanks. This zone primarily consists of state land and utilizes various trails from the Fairbanks North Star Borough Trail System (Appendix C, Table C-5)

3.2. Ecological Setting

The study route passes through six different level III ecoregions (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024). Table 3-1 and Figure 3-1 shows the ecoregions which form the majority landcover associated with trail mileage as of 2025.

Table 3-1. Study Route Mileage by Ecoregions

Ecoregion	Miles	Total Percent*
Coastal Western Hemlock-Sitka Spruce Forests	15.5	1.0
Pacific Coastal Mountains	558.3	35.8
Cook Inlet	456.4	29.3
Alaska Range	247.1	15.8
Interior Forested Lowlands and Uplands	124.0	7.9
Interior Bottomlands	159.0	10.2
Unmapped	0.4	< 0.1
Grand Total	**1,560.7**	**100.0**

* Discrepancies are due to rounding.
Source: EPA 2024

3.2.1 Coastal Western Hemlock-Sitka Spruce Forests

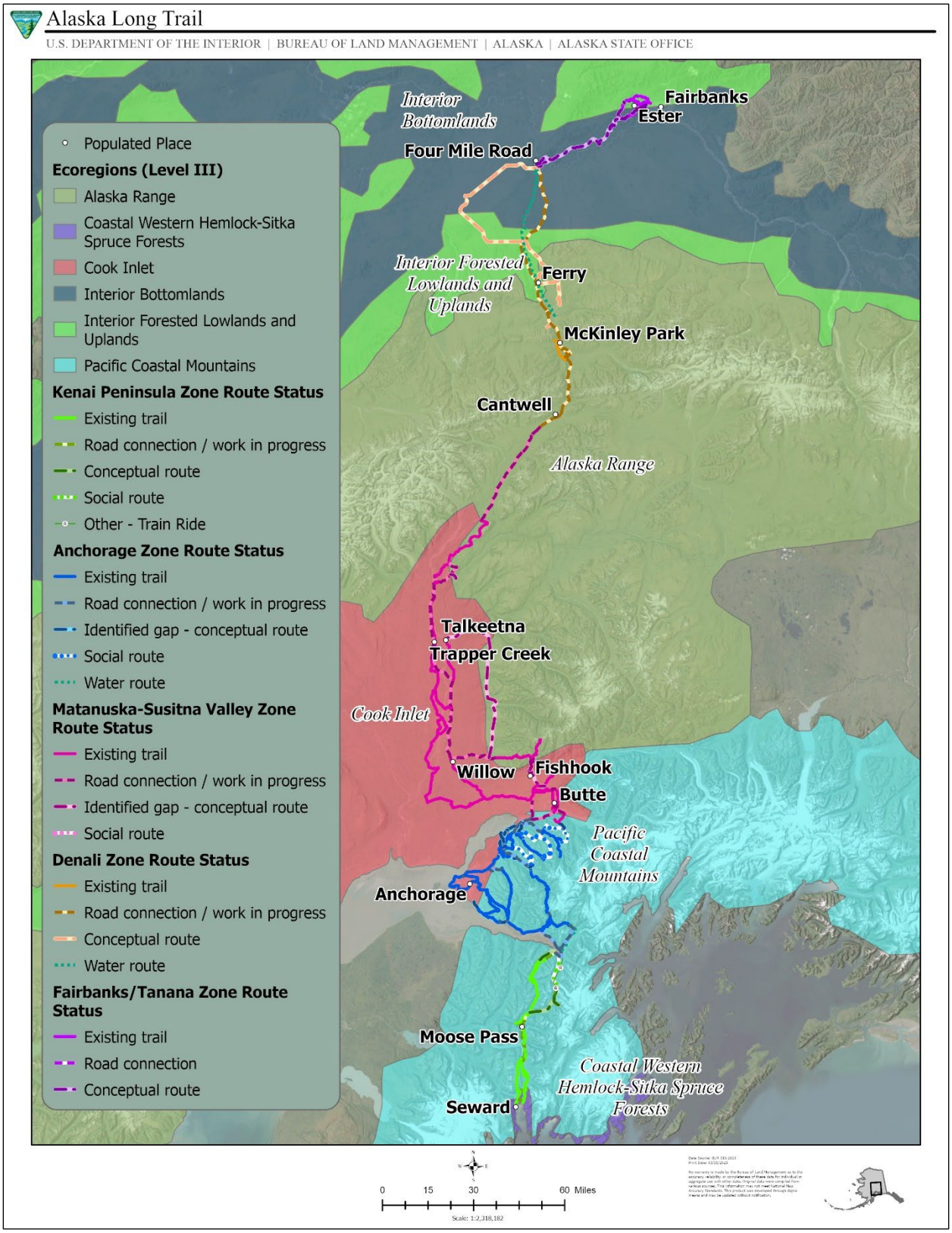
Located along the southeastern and south-central shores of Alaska, the terrain of this ecoregion is a result of intense glaciation during late advances of the Pleistocene. The deep, narrow bays, steep valley walls with exposed bedrock, thin moraine deposits on hills and in valleys, very irregular coastline, high sea cliffs, and deeply dissected glacial moraine deposits covering the lower slopes of valley walls are all evidence of the effects of glaciation. The region has the mildest winter temperatures in Alaska accompanied by large amounts of precipitation, giving rise to one of the few temperate coastal rainforests in North America. Western hemlock and Sitka spruce are the most dominant species. This ecoregion is indicative of the forests surrounding the start of the trail in Seward and in the first half of the Kenai Peninsula.

3.2.2 Pacific Coastal Mountains

This ecoregion covers the Kenai and Chugach Mountain Ranges. The steep and rugged mountains along the southeastern and south-central coast of Alaska receive more precipitation annually than either the Alaska Range or Wrangell Mountains Ecoregions. Glaciated during the Pleistocene, most of the ecoregion is still covered by glaciers and ice fields, which comprise the largest collection outside of the polar region (ADFG 2006). Soils in the mountains form deep pockets of unconsolidated deposits that insulate remaining permafrost soils (ADFG 2006). Some higher elevation areas are barren of vegetation, typically at tree line which occurs between 2,800

to 3,600 depending on slope aspect. Where plants do occur, dwarf and low scrub communities dominate. This ecoregion is indicative of much of the trail within the Kenai Peninsula as it travels through the Chugach Mountains and along Turnagain Arm.

Figure 3-1. Map of Ecoregions (Level III) along Study Route



3.2.3 Cook Inlet (i.e., Cook Inlet – Susitna Lowlands)

Located in the south-central part of Alaska adjacent to the Cook Inlet, the ecoregion has one of the mildest climates in the state. The climate, the level to rolling topography, and the coastal proximity have attracted most of the settlement and development in Alaska. The region has a variety of vegetation communities but is dominated by spruce and hardwood species. The area is generally free from permafrost. Unlike many of the other non-montane ecoregions, the Cook Inlet Ecoregion was intensely glaciated during the Pleistocene resulting in gently sloping lowlands and glaciated valleys. This ecoregion is exemplary of the trail segments found within the Anchorage analysis zone.

3.2.4 Alaska Range

The mountains of south-central Alaska, the Alaska Range are very high and steep. This ecoregion is covered by rocky slopes, icefields, and glaciers. Much of the area is barren of vegetation. Dwarf scrub communities are common at higher elevations and on windswept sites where vegetation does exist. The Alaska Range has a continental climatic regime, but because of the extreme height of many of the ridges and peaks, annual precipitation at higher elevations is similar to that measured for some ecoregions having maritime climate.

The mountains first formed when volcanic activity first started during Paleozoic period 541 million years ago, that created the upheaval to the region while layers of sand, ash, limestone, and sandstone were deposited. Tectonic and volcanic activity became widespread during the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods, when the area was rich with plant and animal life. Fossils of plants, invertebrates, and dinosaurs have been found within the region (NPS 2016). Permafrost in the area is discontinuous and thawing. The range is an extension of the same tectonic forces that created the Aleutian Islands. As a result, the Alaska Range is home to a few active volcanoes, including Mount Redoubt, Mount Spurr, and Mount Iliamna, all located at the western end of the range.

The Talkeetna Mountains are located south of the main crescent of the Alaska Range just west of Talkeetna and lie within this ecoregion. Much of the mountain formation developed during the Mesozoic era with sedimentary deposits of limestone, shale, and sandstone along with volcanic upheavals during the Jurassic period. The range is intersected by several rivers, including the Talkeetna, Chickaloon, Sheep, and Oshetna rivers. The area is also home to several large glaciers at the ends of many existing valleys, with permafrost underlying many of these sections (Wahrhaftig 1965).

3.2.5 Interior Forested Lowlands and Uplands

This ecoregion represents a patchwork of ecological characteristics. Region-wide unifying features include a lack of Pleistocene glaciation, a continental climate, a mantling of undifferentiated alluvium and slope deposits, a predominance of forests dominated by spruce and hardwood species, and a very high frequency of lightning fires. On this backdrop of characteristics is superimposed a finer-grained complex of vegetation communities resulting from the interplay of permafrost, surface water, fire, local elevational relief, and hillslope aspect. No glaciers are present, and the area is underlain with discontinuous permafrost under north-facing slopes and thin permafrost under the valleys (ADFG 2006).

3.2.6 Interior Bottomlands

This ecoregion is composed of flat to nearly flat bottomlands along larger rivers of interior Alaska, sometimes referred to the Tanana Lowlands. The bottomlands are dotted with thaw and oxbow lakes. Sand dunes are found near the northern portion between Nenana and McGrath (Wahrhaftig 1965) and glacial moraines have formed at the outwashes at the base of the mountains and the hills to the north. Streams flow throughout the area, draining in either the Kuskokwim or the Tanana Rivers. Soils are poorly drained and shallow, often over discontinuous and thawing layers of permafrost. Predominant vegetation communities include forests dominated by boreal spruce and hardwood species, tall scrub thickets, and wetlands.

3.3. Scenic, Recreational, Cultural, and Natural Resources

This section identifies scenic, recreation, cultural, and natural features that support National Trail caliber resources, qualities, values, and associated settings.

3.3.1 Scenic Resources

The study routes traverse a visual cross-section of southern to central Alaska, from peat bogs to inlets to mountains to river canyons, and through several types of forest that exhibit significant characteristics of Alaska's physiographic regions.

These scenic attributes of Alaska have been admired for centuries by locals and visitors alike. The fourteen-volume report of the Harriman Expedition in 1899 included this observation:

> "There is one other asset of the Territory not yet enumerated, imponderable, and difficult to appraise, yet one of the chief assets of Alaska, if not the greatest. This is the scenery. There are glaciers, mountains, and fiords elsewhere, but nowhere else on earth is there such abundance and magnificence of mountain, fiord, and glacier scenery. For thousands of miles the coast is a continuous panorama. For the one Yosemite of California Alaska has hundreds. The mountains and glaciers of the Cascade Range are duplicated and a thousand-fold exceeded in Alaska. The Alaska coast is to become the show-place of the earth, and pilgrims, not only from the United States, but from far beyond the seas, will throng in endless procession to see it. Its grandeur is more valuable than the gold or the fish or the timber, for it will never be exhausted. This value, measured by direct returns in money received from tourists, will be enormous; measured by health and pleasure it will be incalculable" (Burroughs et al. 1901).

The Expedition's authors closed with "one word of advice and caution to be given those intending to visit Alaska for pleasure, for sight-seeing. If you are old, go by all means; but if you are young, wait. The scenery of Alaska is much grander than anything else of the kind in the world, and it is not well to dull one's capacity for enjoyment by seeing the finest first" (Burroughs et al. 1901).

The Chugach National Forest and BLM have mapped scenic quality within their respective administrative units. In their prior Land and Resource Management Plan, the Chugach National Forest found that "the combination of forest and alpine vegetation patterns, rocky peaks, glaciers, numerous lakes and waterfall, the ocean, steep mountains and the scale and grandeur of the landscape combine to create a landscape high in attractiveness" (USFS 2002). Speaking specifically of the southernmost Kenai Peninsula Zone, the USFS has documented that:

> "The most prized resource of the State of Alaska and the Chugach National Forest is its scenery. Locals and visitors marvel at its grandeur. The Chugach embodies all the best Alaska's scenery has to offer. From ocean shorelines to snow-covered peaks; dramatic glaciers cascading to the ocean or hanging on mountainsides, crystal clear lakes and rivers as well as the turquoise blue of glacier silt waters; forested mountain slopes giving way to alpine, rock and ice. The Chugach landscape has diversity, complexity and size that take your breath away. It is magnificent and inspiring, yet, at the same time, humbling" (USFS 2002).

Farther north, BLM has inventoried the scenic quality within their field office boundaries (U.S. Department of the Interior [DOI] 2024). Most of the mapped portions of the study route and surrounding areas have moderate to high scenic quality that are sensitive to change. Several proposed study routes are collocated with or adjacent to areas that have been recognized for their scenic quality through special state or federal designations. From south to north, these include:

- Alaska Railroad, which is followed by several proposed study routes from Seward to Fairbanks, is an Alaska Scenic Byway (Alaska Department of Transportation [ADOT] 2025).
- Seward Highway, generally following the Iditarod NHT from Seward to Anchorage, holds three special designations as a USFS Scenic Byway, Alaska Scenic Byway, and All-American Road (ADOT 2025).
- Chugach State Park was established to protect the scenic value of the Chugach Mountains (ADNR 2025a)
- Glenn Highway, from Anchorage to Palmer, is a National Scenic Byway (ADOT 2025).
- George Parks Highway, from Anchorage to Fairbanks, is an Alaska Scenic Byway (ADOT 2025).

This is not to say the study routes cross pristine landscapes. The route through the Alaska Range is mostly along the George Parks Highway, which is also impacted by the Alaska Railroad and encounters several small towns and villages through the mountain pass. North of the Alaska Range, the study routes pass through landscapes less impacted by development and land use. See Sections3.2. Ecological Setting and 3.3.4 Natural Resources for additional descriptions of the glaciers, waterfalls, waterways, and other unique features that contribute to scenery.

3.3.2 Recreation Resources

A new long-distance trail and the landscapes connected to it would offer a wide variety of recreation opportunities. The scenic views, wildlife viewing opportunities, access to historic resources, proximity of local trailheads and access points, and a variety of multi-seasonal and multi-modal forms of trail recreation combine to form a unique recreation experience on the study route. The primary driver of travel to Alaska is the state's natural wonders such as mountains, glaciers, wildlife, and public lands. Wildlife viewing, hiking or nature walks, and fishing are the top outdoor activities (State of Alaska 2023).

Tables C-6 through C-10 in Appendix C show the existing recreation infrastructure along all study segments. These tables are not comprehensive; they only identify a sample of resources and different types of recreational infrastructure and opportunities available to potential NST visitors. Some designated trails are supported by associated facilities along the study routes. Such facilities were identified from consultation and internet searches for recreational facilities within 1 mile of the study segment. While the trail does not exist in its entirety as of 2025, there is substantial recreation infrastructure that exists along conceptual routes.

3.3.2.1 Zone 1: Kenai Peninsula

The Kenai Peninsula Zone offers the highest level of recreational infrastructure among the other trail zones considering that the study route parallels the existing Iditarod NHT and hosts many other existing recreation facilities. Visitors have ample recreation resources at the beginning of

the proposed trail near Seward for camping, accessing the trail, and experiencing the history related to the Iditarod NHT. As trail users leave Seward and travel north, they travel through the Kenai Mountains along Seward Highway, accessing a variety of existing and proposed study routes, including throughout Chugach State Park and Turnagain Arm. The trail continues through an alpine setting with access to lakes and rivers, campgrounds, cabins, and a variety of access points and connecting trails.

3.3.2.2 Zone 2: Anchorage

The Anchorage Zone provides a number of potential study route options with varying recreational opportunities. Some of the proposed study routes travel north of Anchorage—connecting with existing trails that explore more of the Chugach Mountains in Chugach State Park. Other study routes travel along the Seward Highway and through the heart of downtown Anchorage, utilizing the existing Anchorage urban trail system. The Municipality of Anchorage, and the other surrounding areas, like Girdwood and Eagle River, act as a jumping-off point for trail users seeking trail-adjacent recreation activities.

3.3.2.3 Zone 3: Matanuska-Susitna Valley

The Matanuska-Susitna Valley Zone offers an abundance of outdoor recreation opportunities as trail users travel from Anchorage toward Denali National Park. The trail experience offers views of the Talkeetna, Chugach, and Alaska Mountains, along with views of the tallest mountain in North America, Mount McKinley[3]. This valley is a hub for winter trail access for snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, dogsledding, and other winter activities. The valley also offers a wide range of trail-adjacent activities including fishing, hunting, boating and kayaking, and flightseeing tours. The Talkeetna Mountains and Denali State Park offer key recreation access destinations within this zone, including Hatcher Pass and Independence Mine State Historic Park.

3.3.2.4 Zone 4: Denali

The Denali Zone offers panoramic views of the Alaska Range, rolling tundra landscapes, and winding rivers, with Mount McKinley towering in the distance on clear days. Healy acts as a gateway to outdoor recreation opportunities with its proximity to Denali National Park, offering hiking, wildlife viewing, and scenic landscapes. The nearby Nenana River provides opportunities for whitewater rafting and scenic floats. In winter, this area is a hub for snowmachining, cross-country skiing, and aurora borealis viewing.

[3] Executive Order 14172, Restoring Names That Honor American Greatness, issued on January 20, 2025, officially changed the name of North America's highest peak to Mount McKinley.

3.3.2.5 Zone 5: Fairbanks/Tanana

The Fairbanks/Tanana Zone offers a mix of remote wilderness and accessible adventures trail opportunities as the proposed trail travels through vast, remote wilderness with wide-open skies. Summer and winter trail opportunities exist in this region. Trail-adjacent activities include fishing, boating, dog mushing, wildlife watching, and northern lights viewing.

3.3.2.6 Trail Uses

The trail would support a diversity of users. Potential trail uses allowed on designated components of the NTS may include, but are not limited to bicycling, cross-country skiing, day hiking, dog mushing, equestrian activities, jogging and other similar fitness activities, mountain biking, overnight and long-distance backpacking, snowmachining, hunting, subsistence uses, and surface water activities.

If the Alaska Long Trail is designated an NST, the allowed travel mode on specific trail segments would be determined by the realities of terrain and the management policies of individual landowners and agencies. Some sections, for example, would be naturally constrained to only winter travel due to alignments that cross over frozen rivers or lakes. Existing agency policies regarding motorized/non-motorized use for any given trail segment would not change as a result of this feasibility study. For example, any designations for motorized or non-motorized uses on State lands will only be determined through state-led public involvement and subsequent regulatory processes. This includes land use and access authorized under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA; P.L. 96-487) as outlined in Sections 1111 and 1323. If designated, the trail would meet the definition of a Conservation System Unit (CSU), unless specifically exempted by Congress. More information on ANILCA and CSU is described in Section 5.2.1.1.Public Recreation Use.

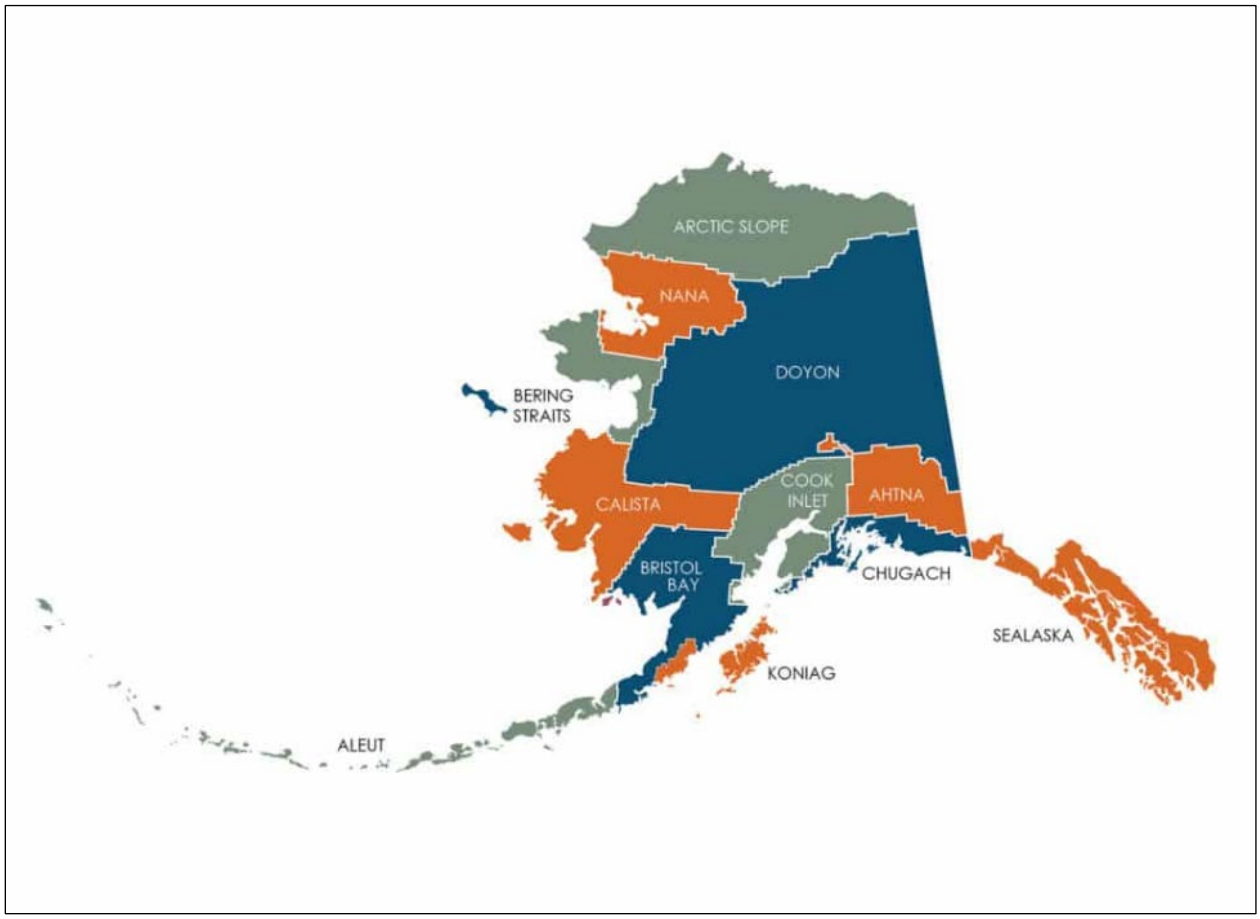
While Section 7(c) of the NTSA states that "the use of motor vehicles along any national scenic trail shall be prohibited," Section 7(j) allows vehicles to be permitted on certain trails. These may include, but need not be limited to, snowmachines, motorcycles, bicycles, four-wheel drive or all-terrain off-road vehicles, and trail access for handicapped individuals. If Congress designates study route(s) as an NST, they can specify acceptable uses on federal lands, including motor vehicle use. Where allowed, NTSA intends for motorized use to occur in accordance with regulations prescribed by the appropriate Secretary in accordance with other federal laws, or any state or local laws.

NSTs may contain campsites, shelters, and related-public-use facilities at existing trailhead locations or could be proposed to be developed based on recommendations or analysis.

3.3.3 Cultural and Historic Resources

Alaska is home to some of the earliest human history within North America, following the initial migrations over the Bering Land Bridge more than 15,000 years ago and the first permanent settlements appearing around 4,000 years ago (Native Lands 2022). Alaska is presently home to a diverse array of Native cultural and linguistic groups, accounting for 229 federally recognized Tribes.

Figure 3-2. Map of Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act Regional Corporations (ARA 2024)



The study route primarily crosses historic territories for three main language groups, including from south to north: the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq, Iñupiat/Eskimos, and the Dena'ina and Tanana Athabascans (Native Lands 2022). Of the 12 regions established by the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971, the trail passes through four regions: Ahtna, Chugach, Cook Inlet, and Doyon (ANCSA Regional Association [ARA] 2024) (Figure 3-2). Shared among these four regions is the common ancestry of the Athabascan, with the trail passing through many villages and federally recognized tribes. The trail also passes through an area of cultural significance with Denali (also known as Mount Mckinley), meaning "The Great

One," which stands as an ancestral legend and homeland for several Athabascan groups (NPS 2024). Trail users can learn about the cultural history of these Alaska Native groups at various locations along the study routes including the Alaska Native Heritage Center and the Anchorage Museum in Anchorage and the Museum of the North at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF).

Alaska also contains a significant amount of more recent history, from the "discovery" of Alaska by Russian explorers in the mid-18th century, to the 1880s – 1890s gold rushes, and more recently civil and native rights movements leading to sweeping cultural changes. Such changes include the formation of the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) to protect native lands, and the first sweeping civil rights law prohibiting discrimination based upon race (the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1945) (AFN 2025; Alaska State Archives 1945). The study route passes by many historic landmarks and follows the same path as the southern portion of the Iditarod NHT. The following overview for each section highlights key historic towns/villages and prominent historical sites listed on either the State of Alaska's register of historic places, or National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) within a 0.25-mile buffer of the proposed trail.

3.3.3.1 Zone 1: Kenai Peninsula

Iditarod National Historic Trail

The study route and the Iditarod NHT would share the same southern terminus. The Iditarod NHT began in Seward, Alaska to transport mail and goods during the winter to the recently discovered gold mines along the Iditarod River (Seward 2024). The Seward Commercial Club hired the famous Japanese Alaska pioneer musher Jujiro Wada around 1908 to blaze a new dogsled trail connecting 2,400 miles of trails and distant towns to ocean trade routes that could be accessed in winter (Seward Historic Preservation Commission 2024). While marked off by an official government survey, in many places it followed preexisting native trails of the Tanana and Ingalik communities in the interior of Alaska (BLM 2024) (Figure 3-3). In 1925, the trail became a lifesaving route during severe outbreaks, transporting diphtheria treatments to the distant village of Nome (BLM 2024). The trail was designated as an NHT in 1978 and has a monument in Seward marking the original start of the trail. The study route would follow the same path as the historic Iditarod Trail for approximately 100 miles.

While several NHTs (like the California, Mormon Pioneer, Oregon, and Pony Express NHTs) share similar alignments owing to natural and historical paths of least resistance, it is rare that a NST and a NHT share the same route, as they each possess a different nature and purpose. Similar overlaps do occur though, for example, where the Potomac Heritage NST overlaps portions of the Star-Spangled Banner, Washington-Rochambeau, and Captain John Smith Chesapeake NHTs. Sharing an alignment would not change the designated nature and purposes for either trail but does provide opportunity to deepen and enrich the interpretive significance of both trails.

Figure 3-3. Iditarod National Historic Trail Starting Point in Seward, Alaska

Seward, Alaska

Seward was founded in 1903 on Resurrection Bay as the southern terminus of the Alaska Railroad and is considered one of the oldest communities in Alaska. Settlers picked Seward for its strategic port potential, as the only deep-water port within Alaska that does not freeze over during the winter months. This economic advantage allowed Seward to grow into a business center at the turn of the 20th century and was especially attractive for trade around the gold rush of Alaska. Though many of the historic buildings that were preserved in Seward were lost during the 1964 Good Friday Earthquake, a robust history still stands in the small port village. Seward boasts nine sites listed on the NRHP and 46 state or locally recognized historic sites that can be visited along the Seward Historical Walking Tour, which the study route would follow. A selection of historical sites within the trail corridor includes (Seward Historic Preservation Commission 2004, Library of Congress [LOC] 2024):

- **Government Cable Office** – The original 1905 telegraph office operated by the military, which connected Seward to Chicago. The office was the main connection line from Seward until an earthquake in 1934 severed the telegraph line and radios became the preferred form of communication.
- **Van Gilder Hotel** – Originally built in 1916 as an office building, it was converted to a hotel in 1921 and still operates as a 23-room hotel today.
- **Swetman House** – Designed by the architect Gerhard "Stucco" Johnson and constructed in 1916, this house's revolutionary but modest artistic design highlighted the region's popular exterior of stucco.

- **Brown & Hawkins Store** – The oldest continually operated store in Seward and the State of Alaska since 1904.
- **Urbach's Clothier** – This locally recognized family business was started in 1916 and has been in its current location since 1942. The Urbach family was known for posting bulletins of national news as they owned the only long-range radio receiver for many years.

3.3.3.2 Zone 2: Anchorage

Chugach State Park

Established in 1970 to preserve the wilderness outside of Anchorage from further development, Chugach State Park was the beginning of a greater grassroots movement to establish public access to Alaska's many natural areas (Alaska State Parks, 2017). Chugach State Park is one of the four largest state parks in the U.S. and is the most visited public land area in the state of Alaska (Alaska State Parks, 2025). Chugach State Park contains remnants of Alaska's railroad history, with the Potter Section House, an NRHP-listed site, acting as the park's headquarters and visitor center (Alaska State Parks, 2017).

Anchorage, Alaska

Following congressional authorization of the Alaska Railroad in 1914, Anchorage was established in 1915 as the tidewater head of the railroad Cook Inlet (Anchorage History n.d.). Settlement was sparse around Anchorage at this time, and with the prospect of thousands of people moving to the region for railroad and prospecting jobs, the town had to be built from scratch. The Alaskan Engineering Commission (AEC) developed a 240-acre town plan, and the newly designated post office decided on the name Anchorage. The town stayed relatively small until World War II created a boom, with the establishment of two military bases. From there, Anchorage became an economic pillar in Alaska and now is a major oil and tourism base for the whole state (Anchorage History n.d.). Anchorage is home to many national- and state-designated historic sites, with the study route passing by 15 places listed on the NRHP (LOC 2024). Those include:

- **Fourth Avenue Theatre** – 1940s Art Deco movie theater (Callow 2019).
- **Kimball's Store** – 1915 General hardware and grocery store, first in Anchorage.
- **Anchorage City Hall** – Original municipal reserve and then City Hall, originally built in 1936.
- **Oscar Anderson House** – One of the oldest homes in Anchorage, built in 1915.
- **Crow Creek Consolidated Gold Mining Company** – Main mine outside of Anchorage, hydraulic gold mining operation established in 1896.

- **Pioneer School House** – First school house, built in 1915 by the Anchorage Woman's Club.
- **Federal Building U.S. Courthouse** – First federal complex completed in 1940s as a modern, cast-in-place reinforced concrete building (U.S. General Services Administration 2024).
- **KENI Radio Building** – Art Moderne building built in 1948, which housed the second radio station in Anchorage.
- **Wendler Building** – Built in 1915, the first permanent building constructed in Anchorage; now the oldest building still standing.
- **Leopold David House** – House of a 1930s craftsman.
- **AEC Cottage No. 23 and 25** – Original cottages built during the AEC construction of Anchorage in 1915 to 1916.
- **Loussac-Sogn Building** – 1947 Modern commercial building.
- **Anchorage Hotel Annex** – Built in 1916, the first two-story wooden building in Anchorage.
- **Anchorage Depot** – 1942 center station for the Alaska Railroad system.
- **Oscar Gill House** – 1913 original house within the historic townsite of Knik, Alaska.

Spring Creek Lodge

The first building built in the community of Chugiak, the Spring Creek Lodge, was constructed in 1948 as a restaurant along the Old Glenn Highway (LOC 2024). Chugiak was a rest area along the journey between Anchorage and Palmer, as it sat at the halfway point along the highway. The restaurant was in operation from 1949 to 1969, when the owner closed it after the new highway bypassed the town. Though the town lies 20.5 miles away from Anchorage, it was annexed into Anchorage in 1975.

Eklutna Village – Eklutna Historical Park

Dating back to 1650, Eklutna village is the oldest continuously inhabited Athabascan settlement in Alaska (Alaska.org 2024). The village was primarily a hunter-gatherer settlement before the arrival of Russian settlers and missionaries in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Many of the native populations and the Eklutna Village inhabitants were converted to the Russian Orthodox religion in the 19th century, and the original Old St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox

Figure 3-4. Eklutna Spirit Houses (Boetticher 2022)

Church still stands in Eklutna adjacent to the village cemetery (Boetticher 2022). The admixture of native traditions and the Orthodox church led to the unique burials seen in Eklutna, spirit houses, which are intricate, multicolored houses positioned over graves and built to allow their spirits to continue to "the high country" (Boetticher 2022) (Figure 3-4). The Eklutna Native Village government office was organized in 1961 by the traditional people of Eklutna Village to protect land rights (Eklutna Tribal Government 2019). By then, the 326,000-acre Eklutna Reservation had been reduced over the years to a mere 1,819 acres. The village became federally recognized under the Indian Tribal Governmental Tax Status Act of 1982 (Eklutna Tribal Government 2019).

The study route would pass through the historic town site, which contains two sites listed on the NRHP:

- **Mike Alex Cabin** – Athabascan Indian cabin built in 1925 by the last traditional chief of the Eklutna people.
- **Old St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church** – Built about 1870, the small spruce log cabin is one of the oldest standing buildings in Alaska.

3.3.3.3 Zone 3: Matanuska-Susitna Valley

Palmer, Alaska

Formed as an agriculturally based community during the Great Depression, Palmer was established in 1935 as part of the New Deal created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to end nationwide unemployment (City of Palmer 2024). Many descendants of the original settlers remained in Alaska, and some are operating original family farms today, with the fertile land around Palmer producing world record-sized cabbages and pumpkins annually (Mat-Su Visitors Bureau 2024). The study route passes by one site listed on the NRHP in Palmer (LOC 2024):

- **Palmer Depot** – Built in 1935 to support the community, this train depot was built to add a stop along the Alaska Railroad for families and for the exporting of farmed goods from the community.

Wasilla, Alaska

Founded in 1917 as the growth of mining and the railroad bypassed major towns of the area, Wasilla was established as a "gateway" to the nearby Willow Creek Mining District, providing better supply staging routes to the region (City of Wasilla 2024). Once Palmer was established, Wasilla began to lose its place as the primary supplier in the region (City of Wasilla 2024). Wasilla was reestablished as a key commercial center and recreation hot spot when the new Glenn Highway bypassed Palmer and allowed weekenders from Anchorage to more easily visit the valley's largest hub. The study route passes several of Wasilla's historical landmarks, including the town museum and four sites listed on the NRHP (LOC 2024):

- **Wasilla Elementary School** – The oldest preserved building in Wasilla and its original schoolhouse built in 1917.
- **Teeland's Country Store** – The original general supply store built in 1917.
- **Wasilla Depot** – Built in 1917 with the founding of the town, the original town railroad depot.
- **Blanche and Oscar Tryck House** – The first residence in the new town of Wasilla built in 1917.
- **Old Wasilla Townsite (Local Historic Site)** – Local historians began to note how much of the town's history was being lost to development, thus in the 1970s a local effort to preserve several structures established the Wasilla Museum and townsite, which includes: Wasilla's 1917 one-room schoolhouse, the Herning-Teeland-Mead house, the Paddy Marion cabin, Shorty Gustafson's barn, the Blacksmith shop, Wasilla's second Post Office, and the Capitol Site building.

Independence Mine State Historical Park

Originally established as two mines in the early 1900s, Independence Mine became a joint mining operation in 1938, establishing itself as the second most productive hardrock gold mine in Alaska (Alaska State Parks 2024 [2]). When the U.S. entered World War II, most gold production was deemed unessential to the war effort and production at the mine halted. Once the mine closed, the value of its infrastructure was recognized by local communities, which converted the area into a ski area along with other recreation opportunities (Alaska Lost Ski Areas Project n.d.). The ski area was closed, and the mine was preserved in 1970s as the state established Independence Mine State Historical Park, and the mine itself was added to the NRHP in 1974 (Alaska State Parks 2024 [2]).

Talkeetna National Historic District

Dating back thousands of years, the area of Talkeetna was utilized as summer hunting grounds by local groups of Dena'ina Athabascan Indians (Talkeetna Historical Society [THS] 2024). Known as K'dalkitnu, which means food-is-stored river, the area was rich in natural resources despite a harsh climate. Talkeetna was discovered by Western explorers far later than other regions of Alaska, with the arrival of the first prospectors in 1897 (THS 2024). The Town of Talkeetna was established in 1916 with the expanding Alaska Railroad bringing a district headquarters and a station to the region (THS 2024). World War II stopped the growth of the region with the slowing of the mining industry and railroad use, and Talkeetna worked to switch to tourism between the 1950s and the 1990s. Talkeetna's downtown was placed on the NRHP in 1993, along with three additional NRHP sites to preserve the history of mining and railroad history that started the town (THS 2024) (Figure 3-5). The study route would pass through the historic town site, which contains the following sites listed on the NRHP (THS 2024):

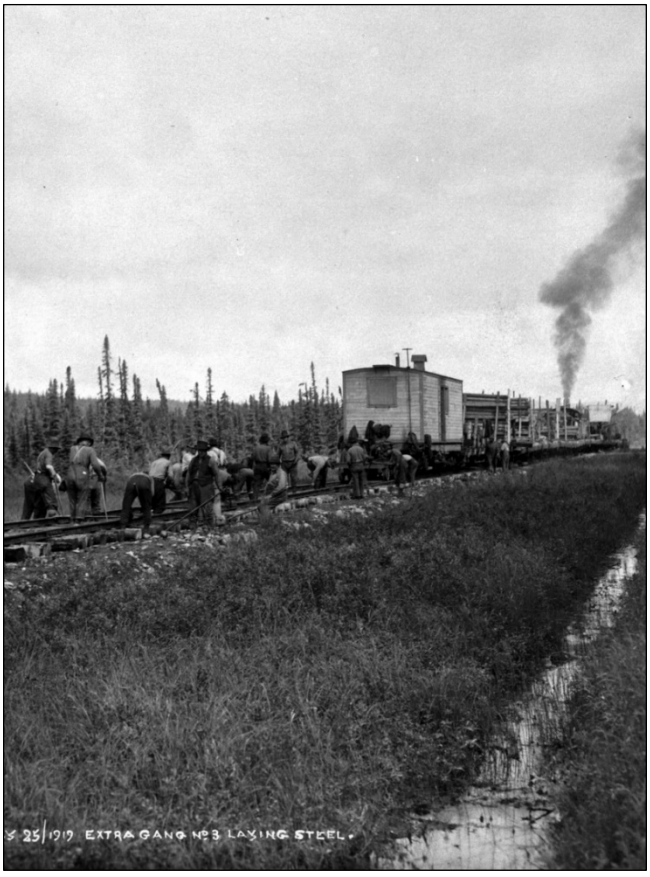


Figure 3-5. Development of the Alaska Railroad (THS 2024)

- **Talkeetna Schoolhouse** – The first school built in 1936, during the territorial days of Alaska.
- **Frank Lee House and Barn** – The cabin and barn built by Frank and his brother, Ed Lee, in 1916. It was known as the largest house built at the time in Talkeetna.
- **David St. Lawrence/ Harry Robb Cabin** – 1920s cabin built by the town blacksmith.
- **Weatherell-Taraski House** – 1920s to 1930s cabin utilized by local miners.
- **Hajalmer Ronning House** – The historic home for Helmer Ronning, a local woodworker who constructed several buildings in Talkeetna.
- **Mike Trepte House** – 1936 house of Mike Alvin Trepte.
- **Ole Dahl #1&2** – Old Dahl's first home was built in 1916 and is the oldest building still standing in Talkeetna. He built a second home (Old Dahl #2) when he married and had children in the 1920s.
- **Nagley's Store** – The first mercantile store in Talkeetna built in 1917.
- **Red John's Cabin** – A miner's cabin built in 1936.
- **Black John's Cabin** – 1930s cabin built by John Zulich, a local miner.
- Fairview Inn – One of the first inns built in Talkeetna in 1923.
- **Talkeetna Airstrip** – The original grass/gravel airstrip built in 1938 during the boom of air travel in Alaska.
- **Curry Lookout** – Located 20 miles north of Talkeetna, this 1923 shelter cabin was built during the tourism boom following the construction of the railroad through Alaska. This shelter was utilized by visitors to the Curry Hotel, a popular vacation spot north of Talkeetna.

3.3.3.4 Zone 4: Denali

Home to traditional native hunting grounds for bear and caribou, the Denali Zone takes hikers through the preserved wilderness utilized by the Native Dena'ina people (Alaska State Parks 2024 [1]). With North America's highest peak overlooking this portion of the trail, many natural landmarks are cultural landmarks for the many native tribes that lived in this area. Though there are no designated national or state monuments, or historic sites and places through this portion of trail, hikers can experience the wilderness landscape and natural landmarks native Alaskans used, including:

- **K'esugi Ridge** – K'esugi means "Ancient One"; the Dena'ina used this ridge as caribou hunting grounds.
- **Denali** – The Athabascan legend tells the origins of Denali was from a dispute from Alaskan Indian Yahoo and Raven Chief with Yahoo taking the chief's daughter as his wife and creating two mountains along a great river, protecting him from the Raven Chief. Denali divided the land and many territories of native tribes who looked upon the mountain as guidance with their hunting and movement around the region (NPS 2024).

3.3.3.5 Zone 5: Fairbanks / Tanana

Nenana, Alaska

The Nenana Valley is the site of one of the earliest archaeological sites in North America dating back 12,000 years (Tanana Chiefs Conference [TCC] 2024). This valley contained many settlements of Tanana Athabascan people until the discovery of gold brought prospectors to the region in 1902. However, the Native people were used to help explore in the region, having traded with Russian fur traders since the early 1800s (TCC 2024). The location of the future Town of Nenana was first home to an Athabascan Native village called Tortella. The townsite was surveyed in 1916 and incorporated as a city in 1921. The construction of the Alaska Railroad through the town in the early 1920s solidified Nenana as a trade stop for the valley (City of Nenana 2024). Nenana contains many cultural and historical experiences for tourists and hikers, including:

- **Nenana Depot** – The original train depot, built in 1922 and placed on the NRHP in 1977, now serves as a train museum.
- **Alfred Starr Nenana Cultural Center** – An educational center to learn about the cultural history of the region.
- **Nenana Ice Classic** – A more than 100-year-old competition to guess the date and time of the Tanana River ice break in the spring.
- **Mears Memorial Bridge** – Original truss bridge for the Alaska Railroad, built in 1923.

Fairbanks, Alaska

Founded following the discovery of gold in the area in 1902, Fairbanks was incorporated as a city the following year in 1903. The town was located at the furthest point that a steamboat could travel up the Chena River, en route to the adjacent goldfields. Fairbanks quickly became the main economic hub for central Alaska (City of Fairbanks 2024). The city grew quickly with the prosperous nearby mines and became the final destination of the newly constructed Alaska Railroad in 1923 (City of Fairbanks 2024). The study route ends outside of Fairbanks, allowing hikers to explore the many museums and historic sites it has to offer. The proposed trail alignment passes by one site listed on NRHP, located on the UAF campus:

- **Rainey's Cabin** – Built in 1936 for Froelich G. Rainey, the first professor of anthropology at UAF, this log cabin has been utilized for staff and student housing since the 1940s and overlooks the campus.

3.3.4 Natural Resources

3.3.4.1 Geology and Glacial Geomorphology

The geology of Alaska, as seen along the study route, is an ensemble of geologic processes and tectonic forces, coupled with the impacts of glaciation in the region. Tectonic stress created

where the North American Plate and the Pacific Plate meet near the Aleutian Islands resulted in the formation of fault lines, creating the upheaval that formed the mountains in the Alaska Range (Figure 3-6).

Many of these lifts formed during the Jurassic period due to volcanic activity, which continued through the Cretaceous period, building land mass and mountains that would form Alaska's main land base. During Cenozoic era, these geologic forces formed the Aleutian Islands. Meanwhile, glaciers molded and shaped the mountains and valleys throughout the Alaskan landscape, carving out the valleys that would eventually serve as floodplains to its many rivers, creeks, and lakes. The study route would travel from the Pacific Mountain Systems to the south, through the Kenai and Chugach Mountains, Talkeetna Mountains, and Alaska Range, to the Intermontane Plateau System to the north in Interior Alaska.

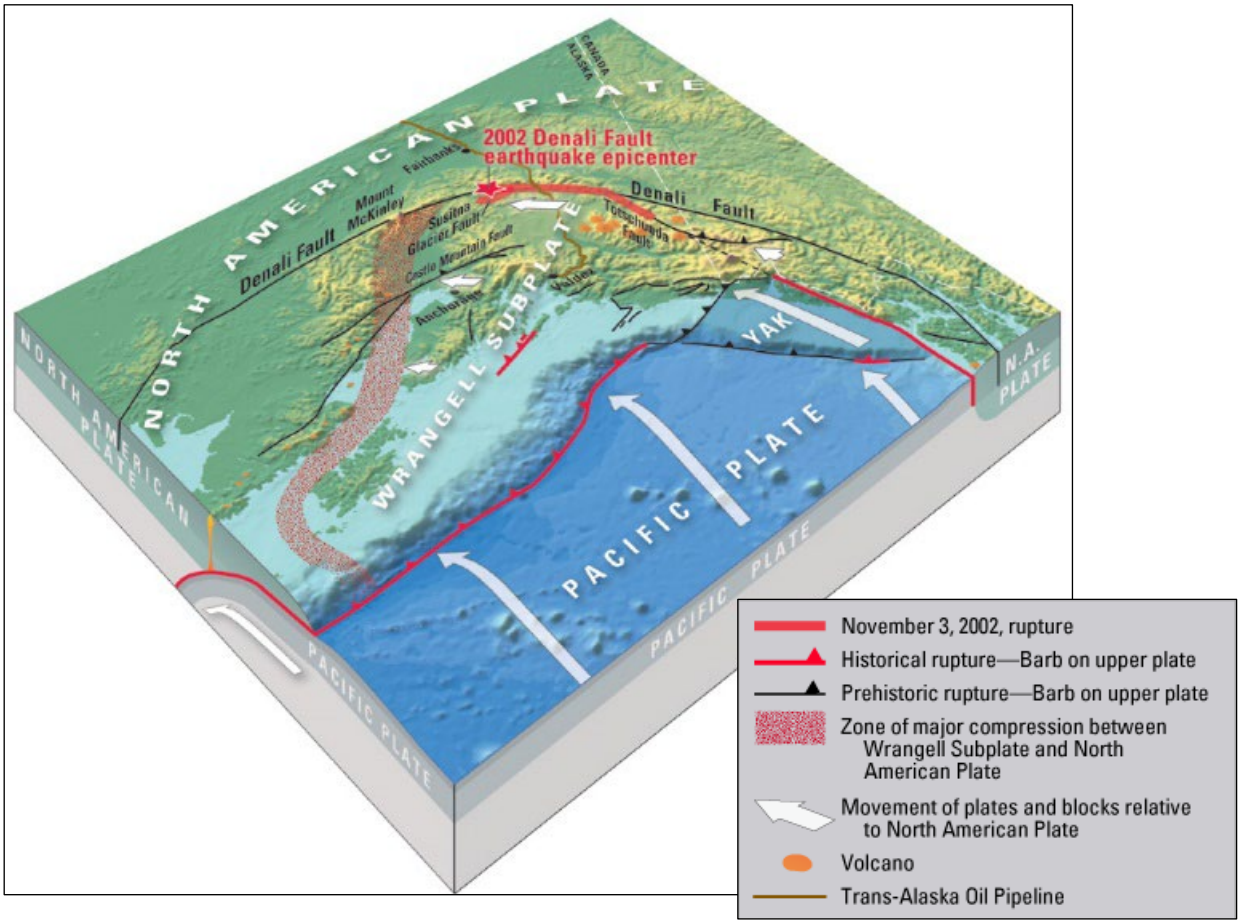


Figure 3-6. Diagram of Tectonic Plate and Fault Lines along the Gulf of Alaska (Source: USGS 2003)

More than two-thirds of Alaska's glaciers are located in the Pacific Mountain Systems, where they have shaped and formed the mountain valleys, rivers, and lakes scattered across the

landscape (Molina 2008). Many of the glaciers found in Alaska first formed during Pleistocene and while more than 95% of those found below 5,000 feet in elevation are retreating or thinning, higher elevation glaciers are advancing. The study route would provide hikers with numerous opportunities to view and hike to various glaciers along the route. In Seward, some segments provide views of Bear Lake Glacier and one alternate segment along Trail Creek provides the opportunity to hike to Spencer Glacier and Bartlett Glacier in the Chugach National Forest.

Further, the segment along Turnagain Arm provides a long-distance view of Skilak Glacier, which is part of the Harding Ice Field, located in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. A number of alternate study routes would provide opportunities for hikers to visit and view a number of prominent glaciers. One potential segment along the Eagle River would provide additional views of Eagle Glacier, while the segment around Blueberry Hill in the Chugach National Forest provides the opportunity to see Twentymile Glacier.

In the Anchorage Zone, trail users can catch views of the Blockade, Capps, or Triumvirate glaciers located in the Tordrillo Mountains of the Alaska Range across the Cook Inlet, along with the occasional view of Mount McKinley on clear days. In Chugach State Park, alternate or connecting routes would take hikers to Eklutna Glacier and long-distance views of Knik Glacier in the east. Just outside of Palmer, as hikers begin the trek along the Talkeetna Mountains, additional views of the south and north branches of the Trimble Glacier may be seen to the west along with Kahiltna Glacier to the north.

Finally, the trail segment through Denali State Park can provide viewing opportunities for Ruth and Eldridge glaciers to the north, along with a long-distance view of Yarnest Glacier to the east of Denali Village before the trail descends out of the Alaska Range to the north.

The region's geological history contributes to its paleontological importance as well. Some of the earliest fossils found in Alaska are from the Paleozoic period between 550 to 250 million years ago when the state was largely submerged underwater. The Talkeetna Mountains have served as a key area for paleontological discoveries, where several Cretaceous species, including dinosaurs and invertebrates have been unearthed. The geologic history of these mountains is only furthered by their paleontological significance as several fossils from the Cretaceous period have been unearthed in the region, including the Talkeetna Mountains hadrosaur (Pasch and May 1997), the Edmontonia skull (Gangloff 1995), Albian ammonites (U.S. Geological Survey [USGS] 1960), and the remains of an elasmosaur (Bakker 2015).

The Alaska Range is also rich in fossils, where prehistoric forests and wetlands were once widespread, and dinosaurs once roamed. Denali National Park, located off the trail, can provide hikers with the opportunity to see some of the notable formations that informed the geological history of the region.

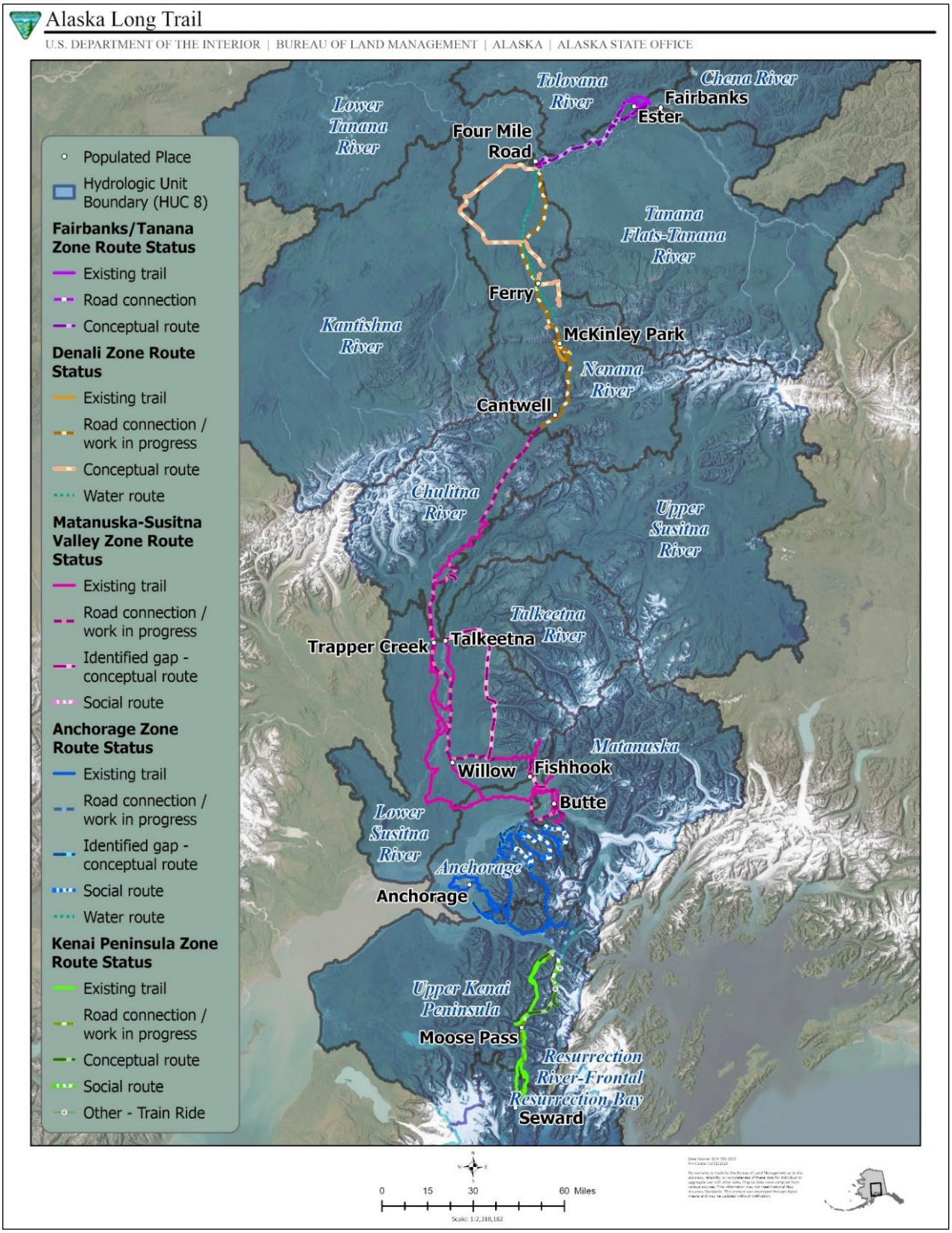
3.3.4.2 Hydrology

More than 40% of U.S. surface water resources can be found in Alaska (ADFG 2015), and around three quarters of that water is stored as glacial ice. Alaska has more than three million lakes, 12,000 rivers, thousands of streams and creeks, and an estimated 100,000 glaciers (ADFG 2015). Groundwater aquifers are also valuable, providing water for close to 83% of Alaska's public drinking water systems (Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation 2008). Melting glaciers combine with snowmelt to produce roaring rivers and swollen creeks that provide habitat to numerous species of aquatic invertebrates and vertebrates and terrestrial wildlife species.

The study routes follow several river courses, past glacially formed lakes. The changing nature of these features throughout the year can dictate whether the trail is available for use. Portions of the trail that may be usable in the winter rely on the formation of solid ice over the river, or even in the river valley to provide adequate support for trail use during that season. Conversely, those same portions may be rendered impassable during the spring and summer, when the ice thaws, or when the increase in snowmelt swells these rivers into impassable obstacles. Understanding the hydrologic dynamics that influence the waterways within Alaska is important to understanding the safety and feasibility of establishing and maintaining a trail for public use.

Below are the main watershed basins and major rivers, lakes, and creeks found along the proposed route. Their official hydrologic unit codes are listed as well. Each are divided based on the analysis zones outlined in Section 3.1. Analysis Zones. Figure 3-7 shows the watershed basins along the study route.

Figure 3-7. Watershed Basins Along Study Route



Zone 1: Kenai Peninsula

Resurrection River and Frontal Resurrection Bay (19020202)

The Resurrection River and Frontal Resurrection Bay watershed covers the southern coastline of the Kenai Peninsula. Seward, Alaska is located at the northern end of Resurrection Bay and at the mouth of the Resurrection River. The study route would also bypass Bear Lake, and the South Fork of the Snow River.

Upper Kenai Peninsula (19020302)

The Upper Kenai Peninsula watershed covers the northern portion of the Kenai Peninsula, and includes most of Turnagain Arm, and the southernmost portion of the Chugach Mountains. The proposed study route travels north along the Snow River, and along the banks of the Kenai and Trail Lakes. One segment would travel along Trail Creek to Placer River, while another segment splits to travel along Johnson Creek Pass to Granite Creek. Once these segments cross the eastern end of Turnagain Arm and Portage Creek, one segment continues along the coastline of Turnagain Arm, crossing Glacier, Indian, Bird, and McHugh creeks, while others travel through various passes into Chugach State Park. They travel along numerous tributaries, including along Twentymile River and Glacier Creek.

Zone 2: Anchorage

Anchorage (19020401)

The Anchorage Watershed covers much of Anchorage and Chugach State Park. The study route includes various segments in Chugach State Park, including routes along Eagle River, Eklutna River, Peters Creek, and Thunderbird Creek. In Anchorage, urban trails along Campbell Creek and Chester Creek can take users out to Cook Inlet, Knik Arm, and the mouth of the Knik River. The watershed also includes Wasilla and many of the rivers, creeks, and water bodies found on the northern side of the Knik Arm. The study route winds past Wasilla, Lucile, and Johnson Lakes, and through the Meadow Lakes area, with branches that cross Big and Flat Lakes and another that travels north towards the Lower Susitna River watershed.

Zone 3: Matanuska-Susitna Valley

Matanuska (19020402)

The Matanuska Watershed connects all the waterways that connect with the Matanuska River and covers much of the area surrounding Wasilla. The watershed also sits at the confluence of the Matanuska and Knik rivers. The study route would cross the western portion of this watershed as it travels up to Palmer, crossing and traveling along the Knik and Matanuska rivers into Hatcher's Pass.

Lower Susitna River (19020505)

The Lower Susitna River Watershed covers the wetlands, rivers, and creeks that feed the lower reaches of the Susitna River. This includes the Little Susitna River, Lake Nancy, and the Delta Islands. The study route may cross Willow Creek or may travel along the creek into the Talkeetna Mountains to Hatcher's Pass. One segment would cross Peter's Creek, Little Willow Creek, the Kashwitna River, and Sheep Creek as it travels along the foothills of the mountain range. Another segment uses the Matanuska-Susitna Borough's winter trails and would travel along the Susitna River towards Talkeetna.

Talkeetna River (19020503)

The Talkeetna River watershed lies east of Talkeetna to encompass the northern portion of the Talkeetna Mountains that drain into the river. The study route cuts across the western foothills of the mountains, eventually winding down towards the confluence of the Sheep and the Talkeetna rivers, before following the Talkeetna River past Chunilna Creek into Talkeetna.

Upper Susitna River (19020501)

Only short segments and portions of the proposed study route enter the Upper Susitna River Watershed, which is sandwiched between the Talkeetna River and Chulitna River watersheds just north of Talkeetna. One short segment of the trail leaves the route along the George Parks Highway over Curry Ridge to the Susitna River to the Curry Landing Strip.

Chulitna River (19020502)

From Talkeetna, the study route continues north along the Chulitna River Watershed, before heading east along Troublesome Creek until it meets and follows Curry Ridge. The trail eventually drops down along Little Coal Creek back to the Chulitna River before entering Broad Pass and the Nenana River Watershed.

Zone 4: Denali

Nenana River (19080308)

The Nenana River Watershed is the main drainage for the Nenana River, that originates off the Tanana River. This river cuts through the Alaska Range, creating one of the few passes through the Range used by the George Parks Highway. The trail continues along the middle fork of the Chulitna River to the Nenana River, which winds through the Alaska Range between Denali National Park and Denali State Park. The trail continues along the Nenana through the Range, past several drainage creeks, lakes, and ponds, before exiting the range at the north end. Just south of Anderson, the study route splits, with one segment heading northeast around the Clear Space Force Station, or west towards the Teklanika River. The northeast segment would follow the Parks Highway, crossing Julius Creek then generally following Fish Creek, before rejoining the Nenana River where it meets the Tanana River.

Kantishna River (19080310)

The Kantishna River watershed covers much of the central Tanana-Kuskokwim Lowlands north of the Alaska Range, where the Kantishna, Bear Paw, and Tolkat rivers wind through the valley, feeding various creeks, wetlands, ponds, and marshes common to this area. The study route passes through this watershed at the northeastern end as one route heads west from Nenana towards the Teklanika River and continues until Totek Lake before cutting back northeast to rejoin the other segment in Nenana.

Lower Tanana River (19080311)

The Lower Tanana River Watershed covers its namesake river from Nenana towards the northwest where it meets the Yukon River near Mission. The study route that heads west toward the Kantishna River, eventually crosses into this watershed as it travels north toward Dune Lake, before returning back into the Nenana River Watershed.

Zone 5: Fairbanks/Tanana

Tanana Flats-Tanana River (19080307)

The Tanana Flats-Tanana River Watershed covers drainages from the Alaska Range toward the Tanana River, which winds near the northern border of the watershed along the Little Goldstream and Bonanza Creeks. In this area, the trail winds mostly through the watershed, sometimes crossing briefly into the Tolovana River Watershed (19080309), but largely staying on the Tanana River side of the ridge before entering the Chena River Watershed.

Chena River (19080306)

The Chena River Watershed covers much of the City of Fairbanks, where the trail eventually ends. The Chena River, which is a tributary of the Tanana River, flows from the White Mountains in the west and drains into the Tanana near Fairbanks International Airport. The study route drops into the watershed, with segments along Ester Dome Road to the north side of Ester Creek and Cripple Creek and the Chena Ridge along the southern side of Ester Creek. A third segment travels along Happy Creek towards Ester Crossing before entering Fairbanks and meeting the end of the trail at the UAF.

3.3.4.3 Vegetation

The study route covers a diverse range of Alaskan ecosystems as it travels from coastal rainforests forests, through riparian hardwood forests, sedge-dominated meadows, coniferous swamps, alpine shrublands, and high-elevation talus fields to interior boreal forests that surround Fairbanks. The trail provides a unique view of the environmental and geologic influences that support a wide array of plant communities found in the region.

In Seward, the coastal rainforests of Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis)* line the perimeter around Resurrection Bay before transitioning to towering boreal stands of mountain hemlock (*Tsuga mertensiana*) and white spruce (*Picea glauca)* as the trail climbs in elevation within the Kenai and Chugach Mountains. Along Turnagain Arm, stands of spruce and alder (*Alnus* sp.) shrublands intermix with hemlock and spruce forests while tidal marshes along the inlet nestle among salmonberry (*Rubus spectabilis)* shrublands and bluejoint (*Calamagrostic canadensis*) meadows.

In Anchorage, urban trails and roads take hikers through remanent white spruce, paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*), and aspen (*Populus tremuloides)* stands to the coastal marshes and tidal flats where the Knick Arm meets Cook Inlet. One potential segment crosses tidal marshes of the Knik River through boreal dwarf shrublands into aspen and black spruce (*Picea mariana*) forests in the Matanuska Lakes area. The trail would cut west through boreal forests of birch, aspen, and white spruce that surround glacially carved lakes and eventually transition to boreal swamps and fens as the trail meets the Susitna River. Most segments would travel north along the Susitna River through boreal marshes, bluejoint and sedge meadows, spruce-hardwood forests, swamps dominated with black spruce, birch, and alder until the trail reaches Talkeetna. In many portions of this area, closed canopy black spruce stands may make trail construction and use difficult. Black spruce tends to grow in wetter, nutrient poor soils underlain by permafrost. These stands are typically dense with smaller diameter and shorter trees that may be weakened by permafrost thawing, causing them to fall over or reduce their growth in response to warmer weather (Nicklen et al. 2021).

Much of the trail through the Alaska Range cuts through shrublands of alder, willow (*Salix* sp.) and copperbush (*Elliottia pyroiflora)*, intermixed with boreal white spruce forests and alpine meadows and climbing to meet bare fields of high elevation talus rock before dropping back down Little Coal Creek to the Chulitna River. From there the landscape is dominated by boreal shrublands and stands of white spruce and paper birch with pockets of shrub-dominated peatlands.

The study route continues north along boreal white spruce forests and woodlands, bordering alder, birch, and willow shrublands and swamps before the route could split to the west towards the community of Clear or to the west toward the Teklanika River. The route up and through Clear would cut east towards Windy Creek through boreal mesic black spruce woodlands and stands of birch, aspen, and willow before entering the dwarf birch (*Betula nana)* and black spruce dominated fens and peatlands on the way to Nenana. The other route would cut through boreal spruce forests and the dwarf birch-dominated boreal shrublands and swamps before crossing the Teklanika River towards Totek Lake. From there, the trail crosses shrublands of dwarf birch, willow, and bog bilberry (*Vaccinium uliginosum)* to Dune Lake before cutting back east toward Nenana.

From Nenana, the trail heads east away from the Nenana River towards Fairbanks through boreal mesic forests of paper birch, aspen, white spruce, poplar, and black spruce. The region is flatter

and drier than the forests and woodlands near the southern terminus and gives hikers the opportunity to experience the interior forests of Alaska at the northern end.

3.3.4.4 Wildlife

The diversity of ecosystems along the study route, from the coastal rainforests surrounding Seward to the interior boreal forests near Fairbanks and the meadows, rivers, and marshes in between, are home to an estimated 1,200 vertebrate species (ADFG 2015). Alaska's diverse wildlife is valued not just for its game species but for the impact that all plants and animals have in supporting the diversity of Alaska's resources and environments. In addition to commercial and private fishing and hunting industries, wildlife is also vital to tourism, subsistence, and ecosystems essential to the Alaskan economy.

Many different wildlife species reside or migrate across the landscape throughout the range of the proposed trail, including, but not limited to, moose, caribou, brown and black bears, Dall sheep, ox, Canada lynx, gray wolf, red fox, wolverine, and many small mammals and avian species. The marine and coastal environments at Seward and along Cook Inlet in Anchorage are home to sea otter, Steller sea lion, orca, and humpback, gray, and beluga whales. The plethora of wildlife species is part of the draw that brings many tourists and recreational enthusiasts to Alaska. The proposed study route would provide opportunities to see many species in the habitats the trail would cross.

The proposed trails would not be located within any habitat or potential habitat for species listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

Key Wildlife Habitat Areas

Coastal Temperate Rainforest – Alaska is one of only six or seven places in the world where coastal temperate rainforests occur. The combination of milder marine climates, warmer winters, and abundant precipitation give rise to hemlock and spruce forests that occur along the Alaskan coasts in the southern part of the state. Many of these forests are considered old-growth stands. Several species are found in this habitat type, including 53 species of mammals, 231 species of birds, and five species of amphibians and reptiles. Due to the absence of a dry season and the abundance of island ecosystems in this habitat type, many species are endemic to these rainforests. The marbled murrelet is a sentinel species for this habitat type as a seabird that relies on mossy nesting areas in the upper canopy of these old-growth forests (ADFG 2015). Woodpeckers rely on large diameter snags while the Rufous hummingbird uses moss and lichen for their nests. Raptors, like the northern goshawk, hunt for small mammals and birds in the understory, while the brown creeper forages in the bark of old growth trees (ADFG 2015). The climate is also ideal for wood frogs. This forest type is found at the southern end in the Kenai Peninsula Zone.

Boreal Forests – Boreal, or "taiga" forests, describe the interior forests of Alaska which stretch from the Kenai Peninsula to the Brooks Range. Birds represent the largest class of vertebrates in

the boreal forest, the majority of which are migratory species that spend the summer breeding season in the region. Flycatchers, thrushes, and wood warblers travel to these forests from Central or South America for breeding and rearing, which makes this an important land type for species where habitat fragmentation and loss has impacted their range. Deciduous forests support the largest number due to their high productivity and close association with riparian resources, while spruce forests support lower bird densities and varieties, such as boreal chickadee, white-winged crossbill, and great horned owl. Shrub habitats intermixed within such forests are also important for foraging and cover for species like gray-cheeked thrush, fox sparrow, and white-crowned sparrow. This habitat type is common from Anchorage through Fairbanks.

Freshwater Wetlands – Wetlands occupy around 43.3% of Alaska, nearly eight times more than in the contiguous U.S. (ADFG 2015). In Alaska, wetlands can be classified as bogs, grass wetlands, sedge wetlands, or salt marshes. Bogs describe older wetland habitats with peat deposits, acidic waters, and thick layers of sphagnum moss from large accumulations of decomposing grasses and mosses. Black spruce and shrubs are the most abundant woody plants due to the persistent wet and cool climate. Wood frog, olive-sided flycatcher, solitary sandpiper, and greater and lesser yellowlegs are commonly associated species. Grass wetlands are dominated by water tolerant grass species intermixed with sedges. Northern harrier, short-eared owl, wood frog, and aquatic insects are associated with such habitats. In contrast, wetlands are dominated by sedge species and lack trees and shrubs. Red-necked grebe, horned grebe, Alaska blackfish, and stickleback are common in such wetlands. All these freshwater habitats are common in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley Zone.

Salt Marshes – Salt marshes are intertidal habitats with brackish water common along the coastal habitats in the Anchorage Zone, such as Turnagain Arm, Knik Arm, and the Cook Inlet. Common species include copepods, pteropods, amphipods, ctenophores, short-eared owl, merlin, lesser yellowleg, stickleback, broad whitefish, pacific sand lance, and the capelin. They provide important spawning and rearing habitat for several marine invertebrates and fish and are home to several species of zooplankton that are major food sources for larger marine and terrestrial species.

Intertidal Habitats – Intertidal habitats occur between the high tide mark and low tide mark. These habitats are found in Seward, along Turnagain and Knik Arms, and along the coastline of Anchorage. These include rocky intertidal zones, mudflats, and beaches. The dynamic nature of these areas provide habitat for species like Pacific littleneck clam, butter clam, and geoduck. They are also used seasonally to rear key forage fish species, such as the Pacific sand lance, capelin, sculpins, and pricklebacks. The marine species and tidal influence make them key forage areas as well for shorebirds, such as black oystercatcher, bristle-thighed curlew, and marbled godwit. Rocky intertidal zones foster the growth of macroalgal species due to the abundance of daylight in the spring and summer. These species are important food sources for snails and

urchins, while also providing food for barnacles, and filter feeding species after they have died, being a key food chain component between shore and marine ecosystems (ADFG 2015).

Freshwater Aquatic Habitats – Freshwater ecosystems are some of the most abundant across Alaska, as they are found from the temporal coastal rainforests to the boreal forests of interior Alaska (ADFG 2005). They include rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds. Riparian habitats can range from ephemeral streams to large braided glacial flows that weave across the landscape, including headwater streams, pools, riffles, side channels, oxbows, and backwater habitats. The hydrological flows are largely influenced by glacial melt, snowmelt, precipitation, and springs and upwelling areas for groundwater flow. The variation in the substrates that form these aquatic habitats range from glacial silt, flour, and clay, to bounders, cobbles, and bedrock. Such habitats are divided based on whether they are formed and influenced more by glacial inputs or from precipitation and groundwater recharge. Rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds where glacial inputs are dominant result in channel and floodplain formed by glacial forces, such as the Susitna and Tanana, and experience large fluctuations in flow volumes and often carry large amounts of clay and silt, giving the waters a gray to blue opaque color. For lakes and ponds, glaciers can form dams behind which water can build up. These also represent significant flooding hazards as changes in the glacier's structure can cause a release of water across the landscape. Common species in glacially influenced water bodies are rainbow smelt, eulachon, longfin smelt, and pygmy whitefish. Clearwater rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds by contrast, are more influenced by changes in groundwater and precipitation, resulting in lower sediment content and narrower channels. Such water bodies are more supportive of invertebrates, Alaskan blackfish, several species of lamprey, broad whitefish, and sticklebacks. They are also more supportive of bird species, such as Artic and Aleutian terns, rusty-blackbird, and osprey.

Conservation Areas - Approximately 53% of the state is legislatively or administratively designated in federal or state conservation units, including national parks, sanctuaries, and refuges with an emphasis on landscape-scale conservation in recreation areas, marine parks, state forests, and other multiple-use lands (ADFG 2015). The ADFG maintains several legislatively designated special status areas for wildlife, including wildlife refuges, habitat areas, and wildlife sanctuaries. The following areas can be found along the proposed study route:

Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge (Seward) – This refuge runs along the southern coast of Alaska and stretches from the Aleutian Islands to the Inside Passage and the Chukchi Sea. It provides habitat for marine mammals and over 30 species of seabirds (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2024). The refuge extends into Resurrection Bay along the coast of Seward, where the trail starts. This refuge is a federally designated area and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for marine habitat. The refuge covers over 2.64 million areas of coastal and marine habitat with 81,340 acres of designated wilderness. The trail starts close to the Refuge at its terminus in Seward, giving users an opportunity to see and learn about the unique sea life in the area.

Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge (Anchorage) – This refuge extends from Potter's Creek south of Anchorage and around the coast to Point Woronzof, north of the Ted Stevens International Airport. It includes extensive tidal flats, marsh communities, and alder bogs that support a wide variety of birds around Anchorage with 130 different bird species. Potter's Marsh, which runs along Seward Highway south of Anchorage, provides boardwalk trails for wildlife viewing. The Refuge is also home to moose, muskrat, beaver, coyote, mink, river otter, brown bear, and red fox. Fish are also common in the many creeks that drain into the Inlet as many support pink, coho, chinook salmon, and Dolly Varden char (ADFG 2024). The study route would cross into much of the refuge along Seward Highway into Anchorage and along the trails that run along the eastern coast of the Cook Inlet in the Anchorage Zone.

Palmer Hay Flats (Palmer) – Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge was created in 1975 in the northern reach of the Upper Cook Inlet in the Knik Arm, just south of Wasilla. The refuge covers coastal and freshwater wetlands, tidal mudflats, lakes, streams, and birch forests. The area protects a wide array of animals. It serves as migratory and breeding grounds for three kinds of geese (Canada, greater white-fronted, and snow); mallard; northern pintail; green-winged teal; and American wigeon. Several species, including Wilson's snipe, several plovers, and sandpipers feed and nest in the refuge for longer periods. The wetlands and marshes also provide cover for moose, beaver, and muskrat, attracting predators like black bear, coyote, and fox to the refuge. Brown bear and wolves are occasionally observed, but infrequently. Because the refuge lies at the mouth of the Knik and Matanuska Rivers, it provides habitat for several species of resident and anadromous fish. Small runs of coho, sockeye, and chinook, chum, and pink salmon make their way through the refuge to the ocean while populations of sculpin, stickleback, blackfish, and Dolly Varden char remain year-round (ADFG n.d.).

Matanuska Valley Moose Range (North of Palmer) – The Matanuska Valley Moose Range was established in 1984 to conserve 130,000 acres of habitat for moose and other wildlife species north of Palmer and east of Hatcher Pass Management Area. The range provides habitat for several wildlife species, including moose, Dall sheep, caribou, black and brown bears, ruffed grouse, chinook, coho, and chum salmon, bald eagle, and peregrine falcon. The area is designated for multiple uses, with areas for recreation, hunting and fishing, timber harvesting, grazing, and mining. The range provides protected areas for moose calving, mineral licks in the spring. The trail segments in the Hatcher Pass Management Area pass through the Western and Jonesville Management Units of the Range (ADNR 2023).

Willow Mountains (Talkeetna Mountains) Critical Habitat – The Willow Mountain Habitat Area lies east of the George Parks Highway along the western foothills of the Talkeetna Mountains in a mix of mixed and lower alpine forests. The area is around 23,000 acres and was established in 1989. It supports the largest population of moose in the state and covers an area of ideal post-rut habitat, which occurs in the fall when males and females must replenish energy after mating or "rutting" before the winter. The area provides early winter food and areas for

migration. The habitat is also home to wood frogs, ptarmigan, spruce grouse, and provides migratory habitat for several migrant songbirds, raptors, nesting shore birds, wolves, and brown and black bears. Streams within the habitat support chum, coho, chinook, and pink salmon, providing spawning and rearing grounds (ADFG n.d.).

Minto Flats State Game Refuge (Fairbanks) – The Minto Flats Game Refuge was established in 1988 and covers over 500,000 acres of habitat located just north of the proposed trail near the Tanana and Chatanika rivers. The area provides high quality waterfowl habitat and supports nesting ducks and breeding trumpeter swans along with geese, sandhill cranes, loons, eagles, peregrine falcon, grouse, and ptarmigan. Other mammals such as bears, beavers, muskrats, otters, wolverine, lynxes, fox, and marten are also found in the refuge. The area serves as migratory routes for chinook, chum, and coho salmon as well as habitat for northern pike, burbot, grayling and blackfish.

Creamer's Field State Migratory Waterfowl Refuge (Fairbanks) – The refuge sits on an 1,800-acre historic dairy farm in the middle of Fairbanks. The open fields and grain attracted migratory birds in the region and when the property was offered for sale in 1966, the state purchased it with support from the community to maintain it as a migratory refuge. Today, the refuge is a mix of forests, wetlands, and fields that provide shelter, stopover, and nesting habitat for a variety of wildlife species. Geese, pintail, and plovers are common along with sandhill cranes, shovelers, and mallards. A wide array of mammals, including woodchuck, shrew, red fox, brown and black bears, ermine, and voles are also found on the property

3.4. Regional Demographics and Economics

Each of the 21 communities that the study route passes through has its own relationship to existing trail components. Existing trail infrastructure has agencies and organizations involved with managing and maintaining the proposed trail system. Support for planning, designing, constructing, and stewarding a new long-distance trail would require existing and new trail groups' involvement to sustain the proposed trail system. See for a list of existing agencies and organizations involved with the proposed trail feasibility study.

3.4.1 Population

The study route travels through some of the most densely populated and developed areas of the state, while also crossing large swaths of rural and remote landscapes.

The trail corridor passes six cities and 15 Census Designated Places (CDPs) (Table 3-2). The cities of Anchorage, Fairbanks, Palmer, Wasilla, Seward, Houston, and Nenana make up the majority of the population, not only along the study route, but also across the state. Approximately 339,478 people reside in these seven cities. The smaller surrounding communities of Ester, Four Mile Road, Ferry, Healy, Denali Park, Cantwell, Trapper Creek,

Talkeetna, Willow, Meadow Lakes, Sunrise, Moose Pass, Crown Point, Primrose, and Bear Creek account for approximately 18,533 people or 5% of the population of the cities and CDPs along the trail corridor (U.S. Census Bureau [USCB] 2024). Because the study route passes through some of the most populous areas of the state, the trail provides substantial outdoor recreational opportunities for a significant number of people in Alaska.

Table 3-2. Population Statistics along the Study Routes

Geography	Most Current Population Year	Population
Anchorage (City)	2023	286,075
Fairbanks (City)	2023	31,856
Wasilla (City)	2023	9,945
Meadow Lakes (CDP)	2022	8,773
Palmer (City)	2023	6,378
Ester (CDP)	2022	2,989
Seward (City)	2023	2,735
Houston (City)	2023	2,146
Willow (CDP)	2022	1,952
Bear Creek (CDP)	2022	1,283
Talkeetna (CDP)	2022	1,044
Healy (CDP)	2022	865
Denali Park (CDP)	2022	817
Nenana (City)	2023	343
Trapper Creek (CDP)	2022	303
Moose Pass (CDP)	2022	199
Cantwell (CDP)	2022	117
Primrose (CDP)	2022	84
Crown Point (CDP)	2022	62
Ferry (CDP)	2022	26
Sunrise (CDP)	2022	14
Four Mile Rd (CDP)	2022	5
Total	**-**	**358,011**

Acronyms: CDP – Census Designated Place.
Source: Alaska Demographics, (USCB 2024)

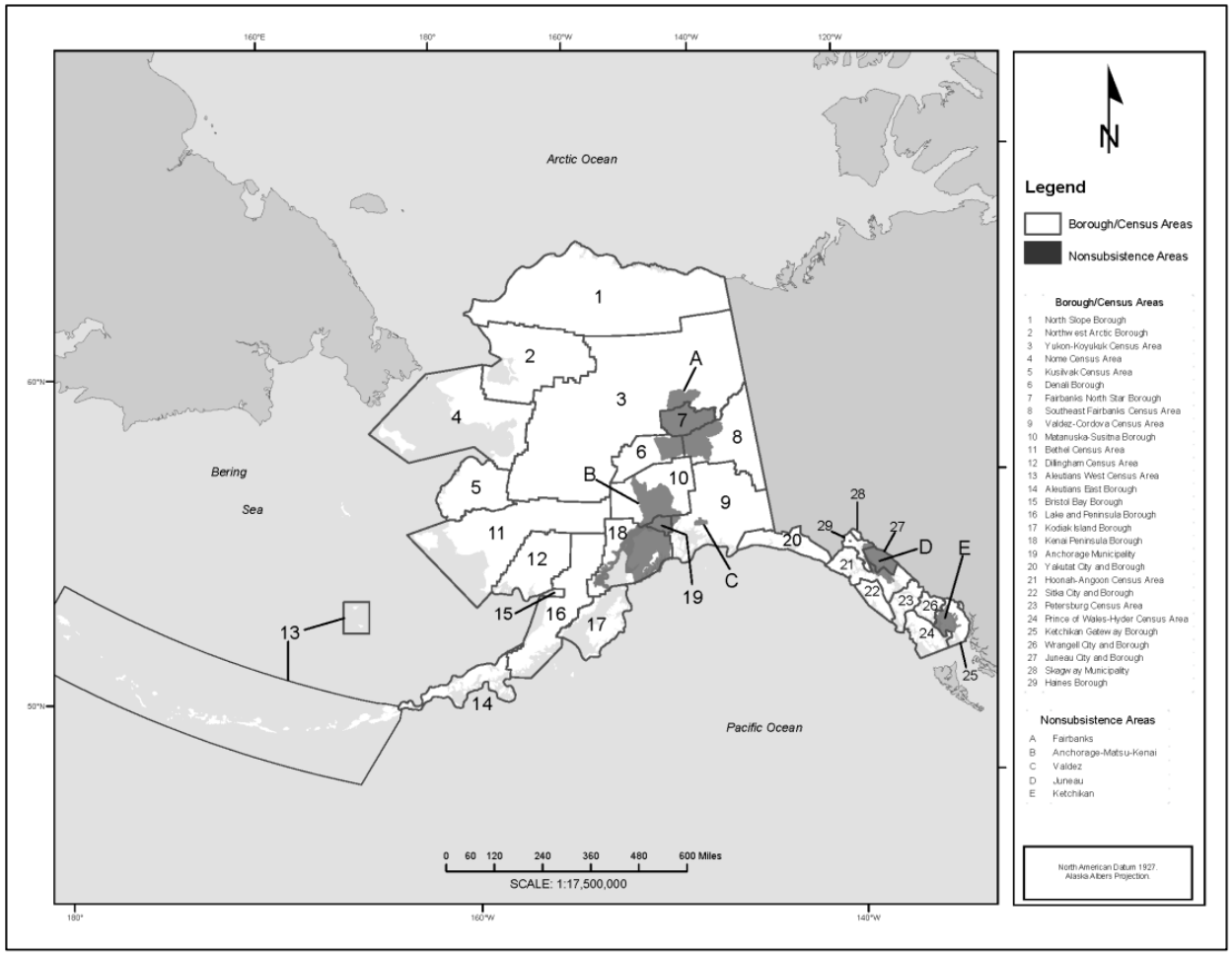
Since 1980 the population of Alaska has grown from just over 400,000 to 733,000 today. According to the ADFG, nearly all that growth has been in urban areas, while populations in rural areas have been stagnant (ADFG 2019).

The study routes pass through Alaska's two largest cities, Anchorage and Fairbanks, and into areas that are rural and primitive in character. The trail's proximity to urban and rural areas enhances logistical manageability for both residents and visitors to travel the entire length or even segments of the trail, with reasonable expectations for support along with unique opportunities for remote wilderness experiences.

Parts of the trail area are notable for their remoteness. As identified by the ADFG, most of the state, including sections of the proposed trail, are labeled as "subsistence areas." These subsistence areas are defined as "an area or community where dependence upon subsistence

[uses of fish and wildlife resources] is a principal characteristic of the economy, culture, and way of life." Figure 3-8 below shows Alaska's subsistence areas in white, which make up the majority of the state by land area.

Figure 3-8. Map of Alaska Census Areas and Non-Subsistence Areas



Source: ADFG. 2019. Alaska Population Trends and Patterns, 1960 – 2018

3.4.2 Economics

Statewide outdoor recreation is a significant part of Alaska's economy. According to a 2023 Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) report, outdoor recreation contributes approximately $2.6 billion annually to the state's gross domestic product (GDP), which is 4.0% of Alaska's GDP. This is nearly twice double the 2.2% average national contribution of outdoor recreation to state GDP. That spending on outdoor recreation results in 20,515 jobs statewide, which is 5.9% of all jobs in Alaska.

The BEA uses Outdoor Recreation Satellite Accounts (ORSA) to measure economic activity as well as sales or receipts generated by outdoor recreational activities, such as fishing and

recreational vehicle usage (). These statistics also measure each industry's production of outdoor goods and services and its contribution to U.S. GDP (BEA 2024). Table 3 shows the economic value of select ORSA activities.

Table 3-3. Economic Value of Select Outdoor Recreation Satellite Accounts Activities by Year

Activity	2021	2022	2023
Boating / fishing	93,533	108,605	118,375
Climbing / hiking / tent camping	34,010	40,541	43,917
Hunting / shooting / trapping	26,766	33,071	38,659
Snow activities	19,757	25,545	30,263
Motorcycling / ATVing	12,029	15,289	15,450
Equestrian	6,993	6,289	6,569
Bicycling	6,338	5,921	5,859

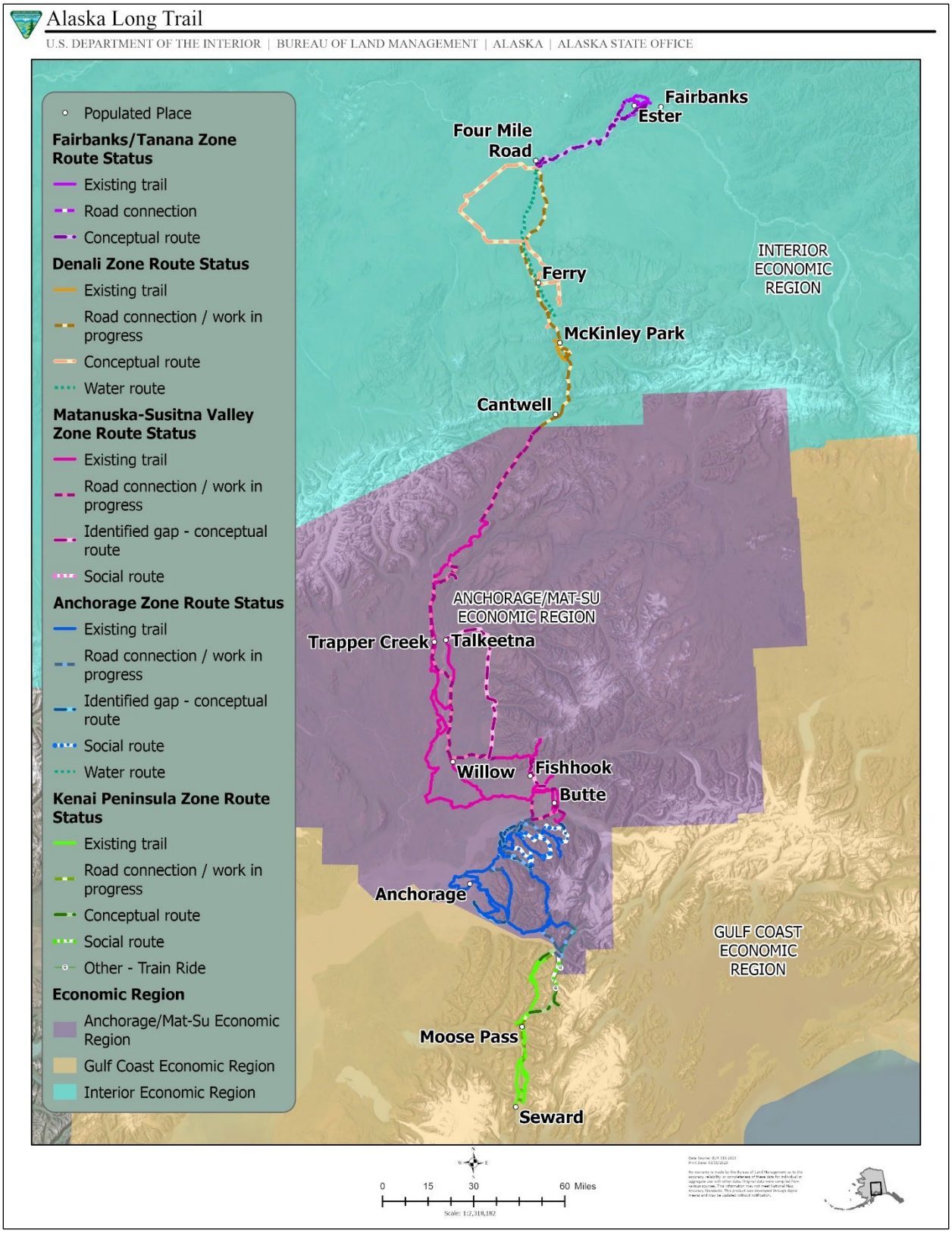
Acronyms: ATV – All Terrain Vehicle, ORSA – Outdoor Recreation Satellite Accounts.
Source: BEA 2024

In terms of tourism, the study route travels through some of the most visited sections of the state. With out-of-state visitation on the rise, this area is expected to experience more demand for outdoor recreational opportunities. Alaska's tourism industry is experiencing a rebound from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and continues to be a major economic driver in the state (Alaska Travel Industry Association 2023). Visitation to Alaska during the summer of 2023 represented a 20% increase from pre-COVID-19 levels in the summer of 2019 (Anchorage Parks and Recreation Department [APRD], 2021).

In a 2021 survey by the APRD, 55% of Anchorage respondents reported using trails more often than before COVID-19 and 62% said they value parks and open space more since COVID-19.

On a regional economic level, the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development (ADLWD) divides the state into six economic regions, in which the proposed trail system passes through three, as seen in .

Figure 3-9. Map of Alaska's Economic Regions



Source: USCB 2024

The study routes would pass through the Interior Region, the Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna Valley Region, and the Gulf Coast Region. The ADLWD characterizes the economic regions as follows (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024):

- **The Gulf Coast Region –** Although parts of the Gulf Coast and Southeast regions are isolated and rural, they contain a mix of jobs that are not dramatically different from statewide trends. For example, coastal areas have more jobs connected to fishing and fishing-support sectors, maritime transportation, and boat building, but strong healthcare growth has occurred wherever there are stable or growing populations. Similarly, the mix of government and private sector support jobs in retail, hospitality, construction, and transportation do not differ markedly among areas with population centers of 10,000 or more (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024).

- **The Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna Valley Region** – The Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna Valley Region is Alaska's population center and one of the only areas where workers commute from one borough to another daily. Approximately 55% of Alaska's total population live in this region. Although their population trends have diverged for decades, with the Matanuska-Susitna Valley experiencing strong growth and Anchorage remaining relatively flat (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024).

  The two parts of this region, the Municipality of Anchorage and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, have followed noticeably different paths during and in the aftermath of the state's 2015 – 2018 recession. Some of that difference is attributable to significantly cheaper housing in Matanuska-Susitna Valley, although the gap has narrowed in recent years. The type of housing is also a key factor with larger, newer options on bigger parcels of land being more available in Matanuska-Susitna Valley (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024).

  Anchorage has been noticeably slower than other parts of the state to emerge from the state's approximately three-year period of job loss. Unlike the state, which grew at a rate of 0.5 percent in 2019, in that year Anchorage had a fourth consecutive year of job losses and was forecasted to grow at only a small rate of 0.1 percent in 2020 (U.S. Department of Labor 2020). Matanuska-Susitna Valley continued to benefit from relatively low housing costs and lifestyle preferences that have made it the fastest-growing part of the state for more than a decade.

  In terms of its economy and job market, the Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna Valley region is more integrated than other Alaskan economic regions, with a mix of employment that's typical for medium-sized U.S. cities. The main difference is the importance of white-collar oil and gas jobs in Anchorage, the headquarters of in-state operations. Those high-paying jobs have fallen from a peak of 3,900 in 2015 to around 1,500 in 2023, which has been a challenge for Anchorage to absorb (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024).

Longer term, the Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna Valley region's status is tied to the same drivers as the state, including oil and gas, federal government (including the military), and tourism. The region depends less directly on the state's world-class fisheries than other parts of Alaska and more on an air cargo sector that benefits from Anchorage's proximity to Asian markets and good airport facilities and support services (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024).

- **The Interior Region** – The Interior Region has a mix of resource industries—large coal and gold mines, for example—and is home to Denali National Park, which generates a substantial number of seasonal jobs and a much smaller number of year-round jobs. Fairbanks, with a borough population of a little less than 100,000, depends on the military and the UAF. The arrival several years ago of two new squadrons of F-35 fighter jets to Eielson Air Force Base was one of the bright spots in Alaska's economy in the years before COVID-19, creating population growth and spurring ongoing residential construction. Fort Wainwright, an Army post, and Eielson are home to more than 8,400 active-duty military personnel and 10,000 dependents. UAF also plays an important economic role in the region, with a recent enrollment of a little more than 9,300 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024).

3.5. Landownership Patterns

The study route crosses a mix of federal, state, local, and private ownership (Table 3):

- Federal land managers include USFS, BLM, and DoD.
- State of Alaska lands include those managed by ADNR through DMLW and DPOR.
- Local government lands include those managed by Kenai Peninsula, the Municipality of Anchorage, and the Matanuska-Susitna, Denali, and Fairbanks North Star boroughs.
- Private landowners include private citizens as well as ANCs.

Table 3-4. Land Ownership of Study Routes in Miles and by Percentages

Landowner	Total Miles	Total Percentage*
Alaska Native	**68.8**	**4.4**
Alaska Native Allotment	0.3	< 0.1
Alaska Native Lands Patented or Interim Conveyed	68.5	4.3
Federal	**220**	**14.1**
USDA: USFS	139.9	9.0
Dept. of Defense: Air Force, Army	16.2	1.0
Dept. of the Interior: BLM, NPS	62.6	4.0
Dept. of Transportation: DOT, FAA	0.7	< 0.1
Other Federal	0.6	< 0.1
Local Government	**112.8**	**7.2**
Private	**63.9**	**4.1**
State	**998.1**	**64.0**
AK Dept. Fish & Game	0.7	< 0.1
AK Dept. Transportation	339.0	21.7%
AK DNR-Div. Forestry	0.1	< 0.1
AK DNR-Mental Health Trust	26.8	1.7%
Alaska Railroad	18.2	1.2%
Alaska-DNR	435.3	27.9%
Chugach State Park	102.6	6.6%
Denali State Park	54.9	3.5%
Hatcher Pass Management Area-East	12.2	0.8%
Independence Mine State Historical Park	0.2	< 0.1
Summit Lake State Recreation Site	1.3	0.1%
University of Alaska	6.8	0.4%
Water (State of Alaska)	**97.1**	**6.2**
Total	**1560.7**	**100.0**

* Discrepancies are due to rounding.

Acronyms: BLM – Bureau of Land Management; DOT – Department of Transportation; FAA – Federal Aviation Administration; NPS – National Park Service; USDA – U.S. Department of Agriculture, USFS – U.S. Forest Service.

Source: DOI 2024 [3]

The largest group of trail landowners is the State of Alaska—accounting for 64% of the total length of the proposed trail. The federal government is the next largest landowner with 14.1% of the trail. USFS manages the majority of the study routes on federal lands (approximately 64%).

The study route covers approximately 1,560.7 miles and crosses 2,139 parcels (i.e., portion of land that is identified and described based on legal boundaries, ownership, and land use) owned by a variety of landowners. Table 3 provides miles and number parcels traversed by the study route in each zone.

Table 3-5. Study Route by Zones

Zone	Miles	Number of Parcels
Kenai Peninsula	191.9	97
Anchorage	448.6	700
Matanuska-Susitna Valley	530.3	901
Denali	284.2	135
Fairbanks/Tanana	105.7	306
Total	**1,560.7**	**2,139**

3.5.1 Existing Land Uses Along Study Route

In addition to the natural and cultural features observable along the study route, the proposed path of the Alaska Long Trail reflects the diversity of modern land uses that characterize the history and development of Alaska. If designated as an NST, the compatibility of diverse land uses would be determined through the subsequent comprehensive management plan and its companion NEPA and OLR processes.

The protection of significant trail-related resources is carried out through special use designations (Congressionally or administratively) and agreements with public agencies, land trusts, private landowners, and others to influence land and water protection along the trail corridor. Trail "protection" generally refers to efforts to establish or preserve the right for the trail to exist in a certain location and have public access. Most of the protection present along the existing trails of the study route is due to federal and state agencies that manage the trail route.

Unique Hydrologic Features

Aufeis – Translated as "ice on top," an aufeis is a sheet of ice that forms during the winter along rivers, streams, or in river valleys. They form due to an upwelling of water behind ice dams or from groundwater upwelling, resulting in separate layers of ice forming on top of each other. Aufeis can block stream and river channels, causing the floodplain to widen and fill with ice as water flows around the solid formation and freezes. Aufeis can be extremely dangerous as they may remain along rivers well into the summer months, blocking boat travel and limiting plant growth.

Bore Tides – Bore tides are a unique hydrological phenomenon that can be seen most prominently along Turnagain Arm as a result of the tidal influence of the marine environment. Bore tides occur when a single uniform wave travels down the inlet from the ocean as a result of tidal currents. While tidal changes occur daily, the difference between low and high tide elevations can create a large rush of water, sometimes in the form of a large wave that can also reverse the direction of the current in the area. These differential changes are most prominent during a full moon or a new moon. In Turnagain Arm, the bore tide can reach between 6- to 10-feet-tall and can reach speeds of 10 to 15 miles per hour when the tide differential is around 27 feet, which is one of the biggest in the world. The tide is observable from the trail route that borders Seward Highway and if timed right, trail users can watch as the tide enters the area, sometimes bringing the occasional seal with it.

Ice Break-up – Ice break-up occurs in the spring and affects rivers and creeks. During the winter, the prolonged exposure to below-freezing temperatures causes many of the rivers and creeks in Alaska to freeze over, creating a thick solid layer of ice. In many areas, the ice is thick enough to support vehicles, along with hikers and mushers, which can make the rivers and creeks the clearest routes for travel through some portions of the interior. When temperatures increase in the spring and summer, the ice will thaw and crack and break large chunks on the surface. At

the same time, the snowpack on the mountains begins to melt, increasing the amount of water that flows into the drainages that feed into the rivers. This increase in water causes rivers to rise and widen while large flows of frozen ice are simultaneously traveling down the river. This ice can sometimes accumulate in areas, causing flooding in surrounding communities until the ice melts enough to allow for water flow, which can sometimes take a few days. During this period, many of the rivers and creeks may be impassable and dangerous to be near due to flooding, unstable ice on the river, and increasing flows.

Thermokarsts – Thermokarsts are isolated lakes and depressions that form as a result of permafrost subsidence. As temperatures warm, permafrost soils, which are subsurface soils that remain frozen most of the year, can thaw making the ground unstable. As the ground settles, it can create uneven pits, sinkholes, and caverns. These depressions then fill with water. These formations are common in the tundra, but can also form in boggy and marshy areas, such as those found in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley along the trail.

Waterfalls – The numerous rivers, streams, and waterways that weave through the mountains along the study route provides users with opportunities to see some of the unique waterfalls in the region. Winner Creek Gorge and Virgin Creek, McHugh Creek, and Bird Creek falls are located within the coastal rainforests along Turnagain Arm and Girdwood. South Fork Falls, also known as Barbara Falls, are located on the study route that passes through the Chugach State Park along Eagle River. Users can view these falls from an overlook above them on the South Fork Eagle River Bridge. Thunderbird Falls is located near the mouth of the Knik River in Eklutna Canyon pouring water over a 200-foot rock outfall. In the winter, the falls freeze and produce unique ice sculptures visible from the trail. Pioneer Falls can be seen on a short 1-mile trail located off Old Glenn Highway along the Knik River near Palmer. For those taking a side trip to Denali National Park, the trail shuttles from Denali Park to the Savage River Trail where the small cascading falls of the Savage River in the high alpine wilderness are visible.

3.5.1.1 Mines

Because of the diversity of mineral and resource rich geologic areas in Alaska, mining and mineral extraction have long been important economic industries within Alaska. Since the late 1890s, when the Alaska Gold Rush brought scores of people to the state in hopes of striking it rich, mining has remained an active practice throughout the state. Mining operations focused on gold, copper, zinc, platinum, and coal have continued to the present day. As a result, it can be hard to explore Alaska without running into evidence of this industry. Towns like Girdwood, Wasilla, and Fairbanks were established because of gold mining operations nearby, and the Iditarod NHT owes its identity in part to historic, smaller-scale mining. While exploration of old and abandoned mines can offer users a glimpse into mining history in the region, current mining operations may be of less interest to some users.

Mining is still active throughout Alaska, Mines often operate in isolated areas, away from heavily populated areas. Notable operations include the Usibelli Coal Mine near Healy. Such facilities are regulated and monitored by the DMLW under the ADNR to ensure they maintain proper environmental practices. However, the look of these operating facilities may detract from the experiences trail users may seek within the natural habitats and communities in Alaska.

3.5.1.2 Renewable Energy

Alaska is developing renewable energy infrastructure. Solar and wind turbine fields are increasingly seen throughout the state to support not just the metropolitan areas of Anchorage and Fairbanks, but also some smaller communities. The most notable renewable energy project, the Fire Island Wind project, is located just off the coast of Anchorage and can be seen from Anchorage along the Cook Inlet across from Ted Stevens International Airport. The project is owned by the Cook Inlet Region, Inc., and provides energy to the Chugach Electric Association. Other operations are still in development and could be visible from the trail, detracting from the experience in more remote settings.

3.5.1.3 Military Bases

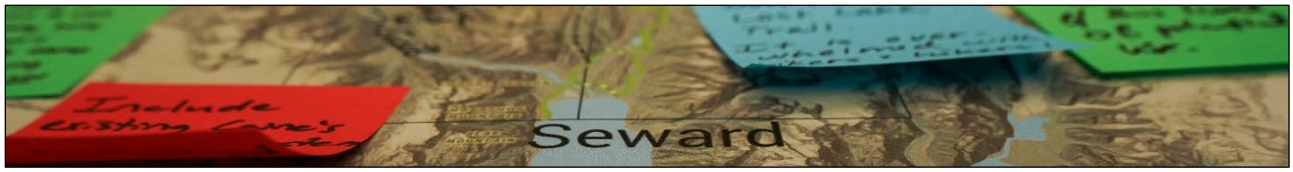
The U.S. military has had a presence in Alaska since the region was purchased by the U.S. government from Russia in 1867. As the westernmost and easternmost U.S. state, it is a strategic asset. Currently, there are nine military bases located throughout Alaska, with several key strategic outposts that house more than 21,000 active-duty military personnel. The study route passes by three active bases and military facilities and one decommissioned base. Such facilities require large areas cleared of tall vegetation to improve visibility and provide adequate training grounds and facilities.

Elmendorf Air Force Base is the current headquarters for Alaskan Air Command, Alaska North American Aerospace Defense Command, and the Eleventh Air Force. It merged with the Fort Richardson Military Reservation in 2010 to become the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER). The base was constructed in 1940 and served as a major military base during World War II following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Fort Richardson is a U.S. Army Installation located west of Anchorage, and forms part of JBER. The Fort is named for Brigadier General Wilds. P. Richardson, who served three tours of duty in Alaska from 1897 to 1917. Currently the facility is home to the Alaska National Guard and the U.S. Army, Alaska.

Clear Space Force Station is a remote military installation located outside of Fairbanks, Alaska. The facility was recently renamed from Clear Air Force Station as the U.S. Air Force installations at the facility currently support space operations with Space Force Guardian personnel. One route on the proposed trail would travel around the eastern boundary of the facility at the northern end of the Denali Zone.

Point Campbell Military Reservation is a decommissioned base that currently serves as Kincaid Park in Anchorage. The area was initially withdrawn from the Chugach National Forest and established as a submarine observation post during World War II. After the war, it served as the Nike-Hercules surface-to-air missile battery. This site was decommissioned in phases starting in 1979 and eventually conveyed to the Municipality of Anchorage.



(Braker 2024)

SECTION 4 | CONSULTATION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

This chapter summarizes agency consultation and public participation. The BLM closely considered agency and public comments in developing the study. BLM met with the public to share project related information and data, discuss ideas, and collect the public's early and continued feedback on the proposed project to inform the study. Issue themes from consultation and public participation are summarized in Section 5.2.1 Public Reflections on Desirability. Stakeholders included the public, constituent groups, cooperators, partners, the media, and Tribal, local, state and federal agencies.

One of the central purposes of the NTSA is to encourage public and private partnerships and volunteerism:

The Congress recognizes the valuable contributions that volunteers and private, nonprofit trail groups have made to the development and maintenance of the Nation's trails. In recognition of these contributions, it is further the purpose of this Act to encourage and assist volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, development, maintenance, and management, where appropriate, of trails (NTSA Section 2).

State, local, Tribal, private organizations, and nongovernmental volunteer organizations can plan, develop, maintain, and manage a subject trail in cooperation with the agencies responsible for management of the trail area (NTSA Section 11).

Public involvement activities undertaken during the public engagement process include the use of the BLM's ePlanning website and an ArcGIS StoryMap of the project, mailed postcards to all landowners along or within a half mile of the study routes, a frequently asked questions document, monthly email newsletters, two rounds of in-person and virtual public engagement sessions held across the length of the trail, and ePlanning commenting and online map engagement tools.

Figure 4-1. Public and Agency Engagement Sessions

A series of public engagement sessions occurred prior to drafting the feasibility study to give the BLM an opportunity to incorporate ideas from the public into the study routes and report design (Figure 4-1). Of the five in-person meetings, three virtual meetings, and the 80-day comment period hosted by the BLM, 341 people participated in meetings and 405 comments were collected (see Appendix D for the full public input summary). Issue themes are summarized in Section 5.1 Feasibility and Section 5.2 Desirability below.

As outlined in Section 502 of P.L. 117-328, the study was conducted in consultation with five entities: "1) the Secretary of Agriculture, acting through the Chief of the Forest Service; 2) the State of Alaska; 3) units of local government in the State of Alaska; 4) Alaska Native Corporations; and 5) representatives of the private sector, including any entity that holds a permit issued by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.''

There were multiple opportunities to consult on the feasibility study, which included in-person and virtual meetings. The organizations listed in Table 4-1 below participated in the agency consultation portions of the feasibility study process.

Other entities, not included in Table 4-1, were invited to consult but did not respond. These groups include the Municipality of Anchorage, State of Alaska Office of History and Archeology, ADOT, all other ANCs along the route not listed in Table 4-1, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) permit holders (Cogency Global, Turnagain Arm Tidal Energy, Littoral Power Systems, Nestar Energy Corp, and Nushagak Electric Cooperative). The BLM included these agencies as part of its outreach efforts for the study, but did not receive responses. Should the trail be designated, these entities should be included in developing a comprehensive management plan for the trail.

Table 4-1. Consultation Entities

Consultation Entities	Organizations
Secretary of Agriculture, through USFS	Chugach National Forest
State of Alaska	ADNR (including DMLW and DPOR), Alaska Railroad, ADFG
Units of local government in Alaska	Denali Borough, Fairbanks North Star Borough, Kenai Peninsula Borough, Matanuska-Susitna Borough
ANCs	Ahtna, Incorporated

Acronyms: ADFG – Alaska Department of Fish and Game, ADNR – Alaska Department of Natural Resources, ANC – Alaska Native Corporation, DMLW – Alaska Division of Mining, Land, and Water, DPOR – Alaska Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, FERC – Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, USFS – U.S. Forest Service.

Many other agencies and organizations were also engaged in the feasibility study process at varying capacities. These organizations include:

- Alaska Gasline Development Corporation
- Alaska Geographic Association
- Alaska Huts Association
- Alaska Survival
- Alaska Trails
- Alaska Travel Industry Association
- The American Society of Landscape Architects (Alaska Chapter)
- Anchorage Chamber of Commerce
- Anchorage Daily News
- Anchorage Park Foundation
- Anchorage Trails
- Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
- Blue Ribbon Coalition
- Chickaloon Native Village
- Chugach Backcountry Freeriders
- Chugach State Park Citizen Advisory Board
- City of Palmer
- City of Seward
- Contango Ore
- Delta Powersports Fairbanks
- Eagle River Valley Community Council
- Eklutna Valley Community Council
- Explore Fairbanks, Alaska
- Fairbanks Cycle Club
- Fairbanks Parks and Recreation
- Friends of the Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge
- Friends of State Parks, Mat-Su
- Girdwood Trails Alaska
- Greater Wasilla Chamber of Commerce

- Iditarod Historic Trail Alliance
- Interior Alaska Trails and Parks Foundation
- Interior Trails Preservation Coalition
- Interior Trails Quarterly
- Kenai Mountains Turnagain Arm – National Heritage Area
- Kenai Peninsula Back Country Horseman
- Latitude 61, Friends of Girdwood Valley Trails
- Mat Su Trails and Parks Foundation
- Matanuska-Susitna Convention & Visitors Bureau
- Mountaineering Club of Alaska
- Mat-Su Ski Club
- Mat-Su Health Foundation
- Nordic Ski Club Fairbanks
- One Voice for Off-Road Motorized Recreation
- Off-Road Business Association, Inc
- United Four-Wheel Drive Association
- Seward Chamber of Commerce
- Seward Iditarod Trail Blazers
- Seward Nordic Club
- Seward State Parks Citizen Advisory Board
- Seward Bike Shop
- Singletrack Advocates
- United Snowmobile Association
- USA United Snowmobile Alliance
- Valley Mountain Bikers and Hiker

(Braker 2024)

SECTION 5 | FEASIBILITY, DESIRABILITY, AND EVALUATION OF FINDINGS

5.1. Feasibility

The NTSA defines feasibility in two ways, physical and financial. As described in the NTSA, "the feasibility of designating a trail shall be determined on the basis of an evaluation of *whether or not it is physically possible to develop a trail along a route being studied*, and *whether the development of a trail would be financially feasible*" (NTSA 5[b]).

See Study Objectives 5 and 6 (Sections 5.4.6 and 5.4.7) for an evaluation of the financial feasibility of the study route including the estimated cost of acquiring lands and the cost of development and maintenance of the trail.

Of the study routes, 44.9% exist on the ground today and 48.2% are gaps, either as conceptual routes, road connections, or are currently under development. The remaining fraction of study routes (6.9%) are attributed to social routes, water routes, and other options like riding the train via ARRC. Table 5-1 shows the variety of route statuses along the study route and the associated mileage and percentage of the total route.

Route statuses are defined by the following terms:

Existing trail (candidate) An existing trail that is formally documented on an official trail system. A candidate route is being considered for the proposed trail alignment, but not fully adopted as the official route.

Existing trail (adopted) An existing trail that is formally documented on an official trail system. An adopted route is an "official" Alaska Long Trail (ALT) alignment.

Existing pathway (candidate) An existing pathway (i.e., sidewalk, separated path, bike path, etc.) that is formally documented on an official trail system or is part of pedestrian infrastructure. A candidate route is being considered for the ALT alignment, but it is not fully adopted as the official route.

Existing pathway (adopted) An existing pathway (i.e., sidewalk, separated path, bike path, etc.) that is formally documented on an official trail system or is part of pedestrian

infrastructure. An adopted route is an "official" ALT alignment.

Social route (candidate) An existing/known social route or backcountry route that is not on an official trail system. A candidate route is being considered for the ALT alignment, but it is not fully adopted as the official route.

Social route (adopted) An existing/known social route or backcountry route that is not on an official trail system. An adopted route is an "official" ALT alignment.

Water route (candidate) A route that utilizes a river, stream, or body of water. A candidate route is being considered for the ALT alignment, but it is not fully adopted as the official route.

Water route (adopted) A route that utilizes a river, stream, or body of water. An adopted route is an "official" ALT alignment.

Other - Other modes of transportation such as train, ferry, etc.

Identified gap (work in progress) An identified gap in the ALT where official planning or construction is taking place to create a new segment.

Identified gap (road connection) An interim connection by road until an alternate is found. Most connections are not intended for pedestrian use.

Identified gap (conceptual route) A conceptual route can be one of the following: 1) a concept (i.e., idea, thought, or suggestion) that does not exist in formal plans, 2) a concept needing more refinement to advance to "work in progress" phase, or 3) an existing route that is not fully considered as part of the ALT due to local issues (i.e., private property or unclear local support).

Table 5-1. Total Study Route Status in Miles and Percent

Route Status	Total Miles	Total Percentage*
Existing pathway – candidate	174.2	11.1
Existing trail – candidate	516.3	33.1
Identified gap - conceptual route	325.7	20.9
Identified gap - road connection	266.9	17.1
Identified gap - work in progress	119.0	7.6
Other - train ride	15.4	1.0
Social route	67.4	4.3
Social route – candidate	0.2	< 0.1
Water route – candidate	75.6	4.8
Total	**1,560.7**	**100**

* Discrepancies are due to rounding.

Table 5-2 through Table 5-6 show the status of the study route in each analysis zone.

Table 5-2. Route Status for the Kenai Peninsula Zone

Route Status	Total Miles for Zone	Total Study Route Percentage for Zone*
Existing pathway - candidate	6.1	3.2
Existing trail – candidate	103.2	53.8
Identified gap - conceptual route	24.5	12.8
Identified gap - road connection	19.2	10.0
Identified gap - work in progress	13.0	6.8
Other - train ride	15.4	8.0
Social route	10.5	5.5
Social route – candidate	n/a	n/a
Water route – candidate	n/a	n/a
Total	**191.9**	**100**

* Discrepancies are due to rounding.

Table 5-3. Route Status for the Anchorage Zone

Route Status	Total Miles for Zone	Total Study Route Percentage for Zone*
Existing pathway - candidate	85.2	19.0
Existing trail - candidate	167.1	37.2
Identified gap - conceptual route	51.0	11.4
Identified gap - road connection	46.0	10.3
Identified gap - work in progress	28.9	6.4
Other - train ride	n/a	n/a
Social route	56.2	12.5
Social route – candidate	0.2	< 0.1
Water route – candidate	14.0	3.1
Total	**448.6**	**100**

* Discrepancies are due to rounding.

Table 5-4. Route Status for the Matanuska-Susitna Valley Zone

Route Status	Total Miles for Zone	Total Study Route Percentage for Zone*
Existing pathway - candidate	79.7	15.0
Existing trail – candidate	213.9	40.3
Identified gap - conceptual route	79.0	14.9
Identified gap - road connection	130.8	24.7
Identified gap - work in progress	26.2	4.9
Other - train ride	n/a	n/a
Social route	0.7	0.1
Social route – candidate	n/a	n/a
Water route – candidate	n/a	n/a
Total	**530.3**	**100**

* Discrepancies are due to rounding.

Table 5-5. Route Status for the Denali Zone

Route Status	Total Miles for Zone	Total Study Route Percentage for Zone*
Existing pathway - candidate	3.3	1.2
Existing trail – candidate	12.0	4.2
Identified gap - conceptual route	94.2	33.1
Identified gap - road connection	62.4	22.0
Identified gap - work in progress	50.9	17.9
Other - train ride	n/a	n/a
Social route	n/a	n/a
Social route – candidate	n/a	n/a
Water route – candidate	61.6	21.7
Total	**284.2**	**100**

* Discrepancies are due to rounding.

Table 5-6. Route Status for the Fairbanks/Tanana Zone

Route Status	Total Miles for Zone	Total Study Route Percentage for Zone*
Existing pathway - candidate	20.1	19.0
Existing trail – candidate	n/a	n/a
Identified gap - conceptual route	77.0	72.8
Identified gap - road connection	8.6	8.1
Identified gap - work in progress	n/a	n/a
Other - train ride	n/a	n/a
Social route	n/a	n/a
Social route – candidate	n/a	n/a
Water route – candidate	n/a	n/a
Total	**105.7**	**100**

* Discrepancies are due to rounding.

As described in Section 1.3. OLR, it is foreseeable that many study routes presented in feasibility study maps may be modified as landownership and land use priorities change and evolve over time. This is especially relevant for study routes under private ownership or federal lands eligible for conveyance. Approximately 48.8 miles of the identified gaps exist on private land. The administering agency and/or nongovernmental organization can cooperate with willing private landowners to execute written easements, donations, full-fee acquisition or cooperative agreements for trail purposes, as is common on hundreds of miles of the Pacific Crest and Continental Divide NSTs. Condemnation, which is the legal mechanism used when public interest takes precedence over private ownership, is only available under NTSA for limited exceptions; it was used on only two trails (Pacific Crest Trail and Appalachian Trail) as of 2019 (Tiernan 2013). Public input indicates that condemnation is not supported, therefore the feasibility study does not consider this tool when evaluating the physical feasibility of the Alaska Long Trail.

Tables documenting the results of the evaluation by segment for physical feasibility are documented in Appendix C, Tables C-11 through C-15.

5.2. Desirability

Section 5(b) of the NTSA states that a feasibility study authorized by Congress are "for the purpose of determining the *feasibility* and *desirability* of designating other trails as national scenic or historic trails," however the Act does not define the term "desirability." Drawing from the context of the NTSA, prior feasibility studies, NPS Reference Manual 45 (NPS 2019), and Executive Order No. 13195 Trails for America in the 21st Century, the term desirability is defined here to mean "the quality of being worth having or doing as advantageous and beneficial" to the public. For the purposes of the study, each trail segment's desirability was determined through the following three tests:

Test 1. where public recreational use and **trail corridor protection** for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, and cultural qualities is reasonably compatible with other major known ongoing or reasonably foreseeable, long-term land uses;
Test 2. located as to provide for **maximum outdoor recreation potential**; and
Test 3. that is **broadly supported** or at least not generally opposed by affected landowners and public land users, tribes, agencies, and public and private organizations, as well as by the public at large.

Tables documenting the results of the evaluation by segment are documented in Appendix C, Tables C-11 through C-15 for these three desirability tests: trail corridor protection, maximum recreation potential, and public and agency support. The following factors were considered during the analysis of the three characteristics:

1. Trail Corridor Protection – The existence of a current or proposed managed route recognized in a trail plan.

2. Maximum Recreation Potential – Routes that are not on a road, that best minimize user conflict, and that facilitate an outdoor recreation experience.

3. Agency Support – Routes that stakeholders have identified as being in alignment with existing trail management goals.

5.2.1 Public Reflections on Desirability

The feasibility study public involvement process revealed important information related to issue themes, desirability and potential opportunities. Some comments were in favor of the designation while some conveyed opposition for the designation. The following community input represents the key components of desirability related to the study routes. This information may inform future management decisions that are presently outside the scope of a feasibility study.

Community input is categorized into themes and followed by possible strategies or opportunities to address the specific topic. Experience over the past five decades on the NTS, which is longer than the federal highway system, has helped institutionalize best practices to resolve user

conflicts, conserve resources, protect landowner rights, meet trail stewardship goals, promote community connections, and fund administration and management.

5.2.1.1 Public Recreation Use

Existing Motorized and Non-Motorized Routes

The study routes currently include trails and roads designated for a variety of different transportation vehicles. Some of these routes are designated as motorized and are utilized for a wide range of purposes: off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation (such as snow machines and four-wheelers), hunting and trapping access, fishing access, mining access, backcountry rescue access, and backcountry access for trail users with mobility impairments. Many current motorized routes provide vital access for subsistence uses. Since Alaska has so few roads, many remote areas are only accessible by trails used by snowmachines, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), utility terrain vehicles, and other OHVs. In addition, motorized recreation is a significant contributor to the local economies through tourism and local businesses.

Public and agency input received included whether motorized trails would maintain their designations if an NST were designated, whether a potential NST designation would require a non-motorized trail experience; whether potential multi-use trails would lead to user conflict and safety issues; restrictions for using the trail to access communities, hunting, fishing, trapping and subsistence areas via motorized access; and whether motorized activity is allowable with an NST designation. Specifically, the State of Alaska objects to the limitation, diminution, restriction, or elimination of any existing contemporary, historical, customary use, mode of transport, or right of access regardless of their compatibility with an NST designation (ADNR 2025b).

More than 260 miles of the study route exist along roadways, particularly along the Parks Highway between Anchorage and Nenana. For several years, Alaska's legislature, boroughs, and local governments have funded the design and construction of multi-use trails that allow ATVs and snow machines on one or both sides of the Parks Highway to improve regional multi-modal access. Following the Parks Highway corridor offers many benefits, such as convenient motorized access, wayfinding, access for maintenance operations and search and rescue, and consolidation of disturbance within an existing transportation and utility corridor.

Winter Versus Summer Use and Seasonality

The study route is currently utilized in a variety of different ways during different seasons. Many study routes are viable winter trails for dog teams, snow machines, fat tire bikers, and cross-country skiers, but would be unsuitable during the summer months due to large unfordable river crossings, long sections of bogs, and unfavorable conditions. Well-engineered winter trails are often located in the lowlands where users can travel across frozen waterbodies while limiting potential avalanche exposure. In contrast, summer trails are often built on dry crests and hillsides with minimal creek crossings. Due to the nature of the region, there are few study routes that can sustainably support both winter and summer use opportunities. Considering the differences

between the physical locations of seasonal trails, some public input relates to the potential difficulty of creating a single trail that provides accessibility during various seasons.

Water Routes

There are multiple sections of the study route where users could potentially utilize river systems to travel the study route via water passage. The NTSA has established notable water trails, such as the Lewis and Clark NHT and the Potomac Heritage NST, which both offer a mixture of hiking and paddling routes. Some public and agency input relates to general safety of these potential water routes and the potential increase in associated backcountry rescue for this type of use. There are also considerations related to the logistics and costs involved with water travel for prospective Alaska Long Trail users, such as the travel and the gear requirements required for both land and water-based through experiences. Related to this, there are considerations about kayak/canoe rental services availability to provide the gear necessary for Alaska Long Trail users to utilize the water routes. Additionally, some water routes and crossings may be subject to the authority of the State of Alaska, and thus future water route development would require involvement of State of Alaska land managers and proper permitting for such use.

Hunting and Trapping

Hunting and trapping are major recreational and subsistence activities for many local Alaskans and visitors to the region. Dependance on fish and wildlife resources for both recreational and subsistence lifestyles was a common topic contributed by the public and land management agencies during the public input phase. Some of the study routes exist on lands that are popular for hunting and trapping and lands that provide access to hunting and trapping opportunities. Many individuals and groups have offered input regarding hunting and trapping access becoming potentially limited by landowners or land managers along a potential NST, including restrictions on the use of motorized vehicles to access hunting grounds and to pack out harvests.

Subsistence Use

Considering Alaska's tradition of subsistence living, the ability for Alaskans and visitors to access the land for fishing, hunting, and trapping, etc. represents a vital characteristic of the culture that should not be negatively affected by the study route. Much of the subsistence activity that occurs in this region depends on backcountry access along routes designated for motorized use. Limiting access to motorized vehicles could decrease the ability for Alaskans and visitors to participate in the subsistence use activities that have historically occurred in this region. On federal lands, impacts to traditional activities and subsistence access and mitigation measures would be analyzed upon potential designation and through the comprehensive management plan process.

The Alaska Board of Game and the Federal Subsistence Board would handle conflicts between State and Federal hunters as appropriate.

Conservation System Unit

Section 102 of the ANILCA defines CSU. Should future Congressional legislation occur designating an NST, the proposed trail would meet the definition as a CSU defined under ANILCA, unless specifically exempted by Congress. Section 811 and 1110 of ANILCA direct the Secretary to allow motorized and non-motorized access, subject to reasonable regulations to protect the natural and other values of the CSU. Access to lands for subsistence purposes, traditional and ongoing recreational uses, and ongoing valid existing rights is a topic voiced by many individuals and groups along a potential NST. These topic areas included access to inholdings, property areas, connecting roads to cabins, property, and mining claims.

Multi-Use Areas

The study route currently includes existing routes and areas that are utilized by a variety of different user activities and types. The public has expressed various options for connecting an ideal trail system from Seward to Fairbanks while maximizing NST qualities and minimizing negative impacts. There is public input related to what types of uses (e.g. motorized use and non-motorized use) would be allowed access along the study route, and potential conflicts between the different trail user groups. There is also interest in continuing existing or establishing future designated or dispersed campgrounds, campsites, tent platforms, shelters, and cabins and associated infrastructure (vehicle access, water, trash, restrooms, etc.) to support trail users. Any future infrastructure and development require authorization from the applicable landowner or land manager.

Trail Access Points

Public consideration was received regarding inadequate trail access points to sustain the study route. The location of strategic access points is important to ensure that potential trail users, maintenance staff, and law enforcement have sufficient opportunities to enter and exit the trail. Further, sustainable access points must be compatible with land management goals and scenic, natural, and cultural resources. The clearing of snow at future access points, the potential for garbage and human waste accumulation, and crowding were all received for consideration during public input.

Access for Trail-to-trail Towns and Resources

The study routes not only provide access for recreation users but provide exclusive access to towns and resources. For example, there are areas where the only way to access groceries, fuel, supplies, laundry services, etc. involves using an OHV or snowmachine on a designated motorized trail. If the study route were to alter trail designations on these routes, the people who depend on these routes for access to towns and resources could be left with no feasible alternative for accessing their basic needs.

Strategies or Opportunities to Address Trail Use Issues

Promoting vehicle use that matches route designation:

a) Post signs noting allowed and/or restricted uses at trailheads.
b) Create physical barriers (e.g., gates, boulders, etc.) to vehicles that are unauthorized on a given segment.
c) Request help from state and regional enforcement in severe enforcement problem areas.
d) Request help from user groups to help police themselves.

Provide trail maps and information: Provide more detailed maps of the trail, posted at trailheads, with printed copies available for distribution.

Trail markings: Make sure trail blaze indicators and other markers are kept up-to-date and clearly delineate the route.

Landowner – trail steward agreements: Written agreements could specify the terms of use for the trail on private lands, including the types of trail users that landowners want or do not want.

Safe hiking education: Educate hikers and trail users on hunting season dates and the use of blaze orange clothing during hunting season.

Continued Tribal consultation: Continue to engage Tribes in trail maintenance and management conversations to ensure that local and traditional knowledge continues to inform management decisions.

Subsistence access: Retain access to existing routes used for priority resource access.

Motorized and non-motorized routes to the same destination: To resolve competition and conflict of multiple users, multiple different route options to the same destinations would allow for both motorized and non-motorized uses while limiting user conflict.

Grants for building trail and trail-related infrastructure: Trail stewards could work with communities to apply for Recreational Trails Act grants, self-help grants, and other funds to help build a better community linked trail system.

5.2.1.2 Trail Corridor Protection

Cultural/Historic Features

Some public considerations are related to highlighting or avoiding potential cultural or historic features along the trail corridor. All study routes would traverse the traditional homelands of many Alaska Native groups. These values would need to be factored into trail siting, trail management, and potential interpretation resources.

Both users and cultural or historic features would benefit from an NST that accesses appropriate sites, improves stewardship, and facilitates appropriate education and interpretive opportunities

for trail users. Other cultural or historic features, however, are sensitive to and would benefit from minimizing potential trail access through the OLR process.

Some cultural or historic features (e.g., backcountry historic mining areas) are accessed nearly exclusively by motorized access. There is public input that these areas may be inaccessible if an NST designation does not allow motorized access to certain areas.

Natural Communities

The study route passes through a diverse array of ecosystems that support a wide network of flora and fauna. Some of the wildlife living along the study route are resident while others are migratory in nature. There are public and agency considerations that the study route would disturb these ecosystems and the wildlife or the manageability of protected conservation areas due to an increase in recreational disturbance. Some of these potential impacts include increased amounts of human waste, improper disposal of trash, and soil erosion from increased tread. The impacts from more trail use and the development of new trail-related infrastructure (trailheads, parking lots, etc.) could result in impacts on natural communities, such as increased introduction of invasive plant species.

Additionally, the natural setting in some areas may make it difficult to develop a year-round trail due to a lack of waterways that can be used for winter trails or a lack of drier uplands for summer routes. This is most seen in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley Zone, where marshes, bogs, and swamps make trail construction difficult to establish and maintain. The study included a variety of study routes, increasing the potential for trail feasibility through such areas by looking at different route opportunities that may shift with changing conditions. Should it be designated, an OLR could determine a route through the area in coordination with landowners, land managers, and all relevant entities.

Scenic Views

Some segments of the study route (e.g., those passing through urban areas, or paralleling the Parks Highway from Gateway to Denali Viewpoint South or from Clear to Nenana) are considered to have less than average scenic values compared to other segments. Other commenters were concerned that designation or future management planning could place restrictions on development that impacts viewsheds or restrictions that could limit use of or access to adjacent lands.

Maximum Recreation Potential

Public input was received that the study route is focused too heavily on linking together existing routes rather than planning a route focused on maximizing the highest recreational potential.

Possible Strategies or Opportunities to Address Trail Protection Include:

Federal funds for land protection: Federal funds provided to local land trusts, trail stewards, or local land trust funds, could provide another option for landowners wishing to sell land for purposes other than development. Federal funding is not guaranteed as a result of any future congressional action potentially designating an NST.

Site trails with cultural, natural, and scenic resources, qualities, values, and associated settings in mind: A central purpose of the NTSA is to conserve "the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass (Section 3)." The OLR routing process prioritizes these qualities through avoidance and minimization while maximizing enjoyment and appreciation.

Address viewshed considerations in the comprehensive management plan: Federal policies relating to trail viewsheds and a National Trail Management Corridor only apply to federal land, and would not affect private, State, or tribal lands.

5.2.1.3 Landowner Issues/Interests

Landownership/Management Coordination

The study route passes through a mix of state, private, ANC lands, and federal/state mining claims, as well as many railroad easements and rights of way. Landownership is a key topic of interest as well as long-term management and ownership of the trail, particularly in relation to landownership, access, and potential impacts. Further, many of the study routes have Revised Statute (R.S.) 2477 protections. R.S. 2477 is found in Section 8 of the Mining Law of 1866. It granted states and territories rights-of-way over federal lands that had no existing reservations or private entries. There are concerns regarding limitations on access to established R.S. 2477 routes.

Extractable minerals are present near or under the trail, raising potential conflicts. Many study routes for the trail serve industrial uses or lead to active mining and exploration areas, contributing to potential use conflicts. Active mining is taking place along the trail corridor on federal and state claims, which could lead to conflicts with trail users.

Landowners are concerned that their access and use types would change. Landowners requesting access across the trail to their private property would not be inhibited. Further, adjacent private landowners are concerned about user impacts to their property, privacy, and maintaining remoteness, with no desire for increased management restrictions or limitations on access. There are concerns about liability should injury occur on private property.

There is public interest for the trail to be located within existing national parks, wildlife refuges, or wilderness areas and desire for trailheads to be placed in locations that could be managed by

local entities and not impact private landowners. That said, some public land managers prefer the trail to route around national parks and other protected areas.

Some federal lands are selected for transfer or top-filings along study routes, and the State of Alaska objects to any involuntary rejection or restriction of selected or top-filed federal lands (ADNR 2025b). Such considerations, along with existing authorization requirements, land uses, and land management objectives would be evaluated and addressed under a comprehensive management plan if the trail is designated. This includes consideration of how trail easements and rights-of-way are determined, with consideration of Section Line easements and public access where they currently exist or are proposed for the trail and trail access points.

Possible Strategies or Opportunities to Address Landowner Issues/Interests

Signage for private lands: Trail stewards could increase public awareness of private lands, by posting signs at private property boundaries noting that trail users are entering private property and asking that they stay on the trail and respect private property rights and the authorization of landowners.

Trail relocations: Trail stewards could work with local officials to relocate the trail to areas that are preferred by landowners. In many cases it is possible to relocate the trail to publicly owned lands.

Local zoning: Trail stewards could work with communities to ensure that zoning restrictions do not adversely affect landowners.

5.2.1.4 Maintenance and Trail Management

Partnerships

The sustainability of National Trails is upheld through partnerships that support maintenance and trail management. There are public and agency topics of interest about land management and the differences between administration and management functions should future designation occur.

Long Term Maintenance Considerations

The implementation and long-term stewardship of the trail would require coordination with current land managers and partners. There is wide interest in what federally designating the trail would potentially change on nonfederal lands. This interest primarily relates to access and recreational use. Key challenges include securing adequate capacity and funding for ongoing maintenance, such as cleaning up debris, managing vegetation, grooming snow, and maintaining bridges and road crossings. Additionally, there is a need for coordination on whether the trail should be designated for winter use only or for multiple seasons, along with considerations about determining a capacity limit along study routes, similar to other NSTs. The study does not propose any limits on capacity or use on the trail. Such considerations would be evaluated as part of a comprehensive management plan should the trail be designated.

Safety

The study route would pass through remote areas with harsh weather, dangerous wildlife, river crossings and travel, and avalanche potential, increasing the need for emergency services, such as search and rescue, especially as tourism grows and attracts people unfamiliar with the area and unprepared for the unique hazards in Alaska. Emergency services along the study route are currently provided by boroughs and member organizations of the Alaska Search and Rescue. There are concerns about the capacity of local emergency services and who would complete and pay for these services.

5.2.1.5 Community Connections

Economic Benefits/Impacts

The study route presents opportunities to influence the local economy. There are opportunities to expand the outdoor recreation economy through the establishment of the Alaska Long Trail. The proposed NST would become a travel destination for national and international travelers (2023-2027 Alaska Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan [SCORP]). Research has demonstrated that trail use can build local economies along the trail. The study route has the opportunity to preserve special places and achieve sustainable economic benefit from conservation. Public input was also received that the current economic benefits from motorized trail access and associated activities (e.g., hunting, trapping, etc.) would be lost if the trail excludes motorized use. ADNR is specifically concerned about potential impacts if motorized uses are prohibited and advocates that existing uses and trails that currently allow should be preserved.

Social Benefits/Impacts

The study route has the potential to influence social value in a positive and negative way. The study route presents the opportunity to showcase more of Alaska to visitors, to further develop recreation opportunities for Alaskan locals, and to continue to build on Alaska's socioeconomic niche as an outdoor recreation destination. However, Alaskans have developed their own social value in the ways they have historically interacted with the land. The longstanding use of lands related to motorized access, dog mushing, subsistence living, hunting, trapping, etc. is a topic of concern contributed by the public when considering NST designation.

Possible Strategies or Opportunities to Address Community Connections Strategies

Grants for trail building: Trail stewards could work with communities to apply for Recreational Trails Act grants, self-help grants, and other funds to help build a better community linked trail system.

Federal funds for trail building: If designation occurs, a portion of potential federal funding could be allocated to local community trail-related needs.

5.2.1.6 Administration

Administering Agency

Considerable public input was received related to the difference between administration and management of the study route. There are concerns regarding the extent of administrative influence, and whether designation would result in greater bureaucratic control and restrictions via administrative (staff) decision-making rather than through legislation (elected officials).

Comprehensive Plan Process Considerations

Should Congress pass subsequent legislation establishing the Alaska Long Trail as an NST, the public and agencies have highlighted some considerations for a potential comprehensive management plan that would follow such a decision. In addition to the topics of interest above, considerations related to the future potential implementation of the trail include trail maintenance workload and a lack of trail-related infrastructure (e.g., overnight camping opportunities).

Possible Strategies or Opportunities to Address Administration Strategies

Alaska Long Trail website: Create a permanent website for the route that lists contact information for local trail stewards, as well as trail maps, trail rules, and other trail information. Post the website address on trail brochures and guides. Examples of meaningful user- and stewardship-focused websites include the Pacific Crest Trail Association (https://www.pcta.org), NPS Ice Age NST (https://www.nps.gov/iatr/index.htm), and USFS Continental Divide NST (https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/trails/cdt).

Trail signage and brochures: Create and install informational kiosks at trailheads to inform hikers of trail rules, private lands, Leave No Trace, etc. Create and make available trail system brochures that include a map and trail rules.

Trail Stewardship Council: Create a locally based stewardship council for the study route, comprised of trail stewards, landowners, representatives from land trusts, communities, and trail user groups. This group could assist with trail system management, administration, and conflict resolution.

5.3. Feasibility and Desirability Summary

All the individual study routes were evaluated and are documented in Tables C-11 through C-15 in Appendix C. Each potential segment is analyzed through the lens of feasibility and desirability to conclude whether or not it is suitable for the study route.

5.4. Evaluation of Findings

Section 5(b) of the NTSA lists nine study objectives to be addressed in feasibility studies "for the purpose of determining the feasibility and desirability of designating other trails as national scenic trails." This chapter summarizes whether each Section 5(b) study objective is or is not met through landscape scale desktop analysis. NTSA states: "Such studies, when submitted, shall be printed as a House or Senate document, and shall include, but not be limited to" the objectives listed in the subsections below.

Segments that pass the feasibility and desirability tests are suitable for designation as an NST. The ultimate suitability finding can be found in Objective 4 found in Section 5.4.4, and Appendix C, Tables C-11 through C-15.

5.4.1 Objective 1

Proposed route of the trail: Objective 1 addresses the Section 5(b) criteria that "The feasibility of designating a trail shall be determined on the basis of an evaluation of *whether or not it is physically possible to develop a trail* along a route being studied" (NTSA).

The physical feasibility of individual segments is documented in Map B-1 through Map B-5 in Appendix B and Tables C-11 through C-15 in Appendix C. The network of physically feasible study routes is summarized by zone as follows:

1. **Kenai Peninsula**: At least one end-to-end route following the winter-based Iditarod NHT from Seward to the Turnagain Arm is physically feasible.
2. **Anchorage**: One end-to-end route from the Turnagain Arm to Knik Arm is physically feasible through minor OLR adjustments. One such example where an optimal route is necessary, is one 1.25-mile segment where the Birchwood Airport, Birchwood Recreation and Shooting Park, and heavy railroad corridor make safe and legal passage infeasible based on the study routes provided. The Areawide Trails Plan anticipates a route through these constraints has yet to be sited (Municipality of Anchorage 1997). It is anticipated that further field investigations and landowner engagement through the Alaska Long Trail Anchorage to Mat-Su Reconnaissance Study would result in physically feasible minor segment adjustments (Alaska Trails 2023).
3. **Matanuska-Susitna Valley**: At least one end-to-end route across Matanuska-Susitna Borough (between Knik Arm to Cantwell) is physically feasible through OLR adjustments along major roadways and the Parks Highway.
4. **Denali**: At least one end-to-end route between Cantwell to Nenana is physically feasible through OLR adjustments to the length of Parks Highway or alternatively the Nenana River (water route).
5. **Fairbanks/Tanana**: At least one end-to-end route from Nenana to Fairbanks is physically feasible.

On the basis of the above, Objective 1 is met.

5.4.2 Objective 2

The areas adjacent to the trail to be utilized for scenic, historic, natural, cultural, or developmental purposes: Based on Desirability Test #1 found in Section 5.2 Desirability, new NSTs must be "so located as to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass."

At numerous points along the proposed trail route, the trail intersects or travels near a number of urban and natural points of national or state scenic, environmental, historic, or cultural interest. The extensive unfragmented forests, large river valleys, and dramatic mountain peaks, as well as pathways through important Native American and early expedition and gold rush landmarks associated with these points of interest showcase some of the best examples of classic Alaska towns and landscapes not found in the Lower 48 states. The proposed design of the trail is tailored to highlight regional landscape features and to provide views of significant scenic, natural, and geologic resources. Assessments of these resources are found in Section Route Description. Below are features that are within a mile of the trail. These intersecting or adjacent features are feasible areas to visit while traveling on the proposed trail.

5.4.2.1 Zone 1: Kenai Peninsula

Scenic/Natural

- Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge
- National Public Lands – Kenai Wildlife Refuge
- Bear Lake Glacier
- Spencer Glacier
- Barlett Glacier
- Harding Ice Field and Skilak Glacier

Historic/Cultural

- Nine NRHP sites and 46 state or locally recognized historic sites along the Seward Historical Walking Tour
- Iditarod NHT
- Government Cable Office (1905)
- Van Gilder Hotel (1916)
- Swetman House (1916)
- Brown & Hawkins Store (1904)

5.4.2.2 Zone 2: Anchorage

Scenic/Natural

- Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge
- Chugach State Park
- Eagle Glacier
- Twentymile Glacier
- Blockade Glacier
- Capps Glacier
- Triumvirate Glacier
- Eklutna Glacier
- Knik Glacier

Historic/Cultural

- In Anchorage, Alaska, 15 NRHP are adjacent to the study route
- Original AEC townsites within Anchorage
- Iconic Art Deco, Moderne, and Craftsman historic buildings
- Eklutna Village and Historical Park – Mike Alex Cabin, Old Saint Peters, and Spirit Village
- Spring Creek Lodge – Chugiak, Alaska

5.4.2.3 Zone 3: Matanuska-Susitna Valley

Scenic/Natural

- Palmer Hay Flats
- Matanuska Valley Moose Range
- Willow Mountains Critical Habitat
- Trimble Glacier
- Kahiltna Glacier
- Ruth Glacier
- Eldridge Glacier

Historic/Cultural

- Palmer, Alaska and the Palmer Depot (built in 1935)
- Wasilla, Alaska and the Old Wasilla Townsite, including the town museum and four NRHP-designated sites (founded in 1917)
- Independence Mine State Historical Park (established in the early 1900s)
- Talkeetna National Historic District

5.4.2.4 Zone 4: Denali

Scenic/Natural

- Mount McKinley and the Alaska Range
- Nenana River

Geology and Glacial Geomorphology

- Yarnest Glacier
- Denali National Park
- Denali State Park

Historic/Cultural

- K'esugi Ridge
- Mount McKinley Natural and cultural landmarks important to many native people

5.4.2.5 Zone 5: Fairbanks/Tanana

Scenic/Natural

- Minto Flats State Game Refuge
- Creamer's Field State Migratory Waterfowl Refuge

Historic/Cultural

- Nenana, Alaska
- Nenana Depot (built in 1922)
- Alfred Starr Nenana Cultural Center
- Nenana Ice Classic
- Fairbanks, Alaska including one site, Rainey's Cabin, listed on the NRHP

On the basis of the above, Objective 2 is met.

5.4.3 Objective 3

The characteristics which, in the judgement of the appropriate Secretary, make the proposed trail worthy of designation as a national scenic trail: Desirability Test #2 found in Section 5.2 Desirability is that public recreational use and a protected trail corridor for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, and cultural qualities is reasonably compatible with other major known ongoing or reasonably foreseeable, long-term land uses. Study Objective 3 suggests the experience of traveling the Alaska Long Trail should be comparable in quality and enjoyment to other NSTs in similar environments (i.e., the Pacific Crest, Pacific Northwest, Continental Divide, North Country, and Ice Age NSTs). The following main characteristics make the proposed trail worthy of designation as an NST:

5.4.3.1 Recreational Experiences

The proposed trail would offer a unique scenic and recreation experience with convenient access for current and future recreation users, and improved connectivity to recreation infrastructure. Specific highlights of the trail experience include:

- Scenic experiences: The proposed trail passes through four different Alaskan mountain ranges—Kenai Mountains, Chugach Mountains, Talkeetna Mountains, Alaska Range, and the Yukon-Tanana Uplands—from coastal temperate rainforests to high elevation tundra, and many other scenic points of interested as described under Objective 2.

- Access to historic and cultural landscapes: The trail traverses important Native American and colonial landmarks. Over 100 miles across the Kenai Peninsula would create a summer trail following the winter Iditarod NHT—providing potential trail users with the opportunity to experience a new season of use along the rich cultural history of the Iditarod NHT. In addition, the proposed trail provides the potential to connect hikers to village centers and historic districts adjacent to the trail described under Objective 2.

- Local and regional trails in many communities connect neighborhoods to the trail, providing access to recreational opportunities for both casual and more serious athletes alike. If designated, side and connecting trails will be identified during the subsequent comprehensive plan.

- Multi-use recreation opportunities: The design of the route would be compatible with bicycling, cross-country skiing, day hiking, equestrian activities, jogging or similar fitness activities, mountain biking, overnight and long-distance backpacking, snowmobiling, hunting, subsistence uses, surface water activities, and other compatible non-motorized uses.

5.4.3.2 Natural History

Alaska boasts a remarkable natural history shaped by tectonic forces, glaciation, and diverse ecosystems. Its landscapes are a mosaic of rugged mountain ranges, expansive tundra, lush forests, and dynamic coastal environments—a collection of natural features unlike anywhere else in the U.S. The proposed trail provides an opportunity to experience this unique assemblage of diverse landscapes within a single trail system. Information on the natural resources along the study route can be found Section Route Description.

5.4.3.3 Tourism Experiences and Urban Proximity

The NTSA places high priority on locating designated trails “primarily near the urban areas of the Nation,” and being located “so as to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential.” The study route intentionally is located through the most populated areas of the state to offer a world-class outdoor recreational opportunity for a significant number of people. The study route avoids, wherever possible, highways and other roads, mining areas, electrical transmission lines,

commercial and industrial developments, private operations, and other activities that might detract from the trail's recreational purposes while still connecting over 20 urban areas that house two-thirds of the state's population.

The study route transects some of the most highly visited areas in Alaska. Visitors are captivated by its vast landscapes, from the peaks of the Alaska Range to the glaciers and marine environments of Resurrection Bay, the waters of the Kenai River to the mountain passes of the Chugach Range, the most highly visited and sought after adventures within Alaska occur along, or within close reach, of the study route. These include visiting historic towns, dog sledding, fishing, hunting, glacier hiking, etc.

The State of Alaska's SCORP 2023-2027 found that long trails are soaring in global popularity. The SCORP public survey shows that long, interconnected trails were in the top group of desired trail improvements in Alaska. This matches the national and international enthusiasm for long trails. From the Pacific Crest and Appalachian Trails in the Lower 48 states, to trails in Europe and South America, long trails are drawing visitors from around the globe, showing an ability to attract use and spending. Much of the use is for portions of these long trails rather than full-length trips. These findings led to SCORP Strategy 6.3: "Develop Alaska versions of long trails." In summary, there is an anticipated need for the trail, and it would be capable of attracting visitors from across the nation to its scenic and natural outdoor recreational experiences.

On the basis of the above, Objective 3 is met.

5.4.4 Objective 4

The current status of landownership and current and potential use along the designated route: Desirability Test #3 found in Section 5.2 Desirability is that study routes be broadly supported or at least not generally opposed by affected landowners and public land users, tribes, agencies, and public and private organizations, as well as by the public at large. The study route is opposed by the two organizations listed below.

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough, whose jurisdiction would be crossed by at least 100 miles of study routes, has issued several resolutions related to the study route: some supporting the route, and others opposing it. The first two resolutions, 21-045 (adopted May 18, 2021) and 23-104 (adopted November 21, 2023) expressed general support for the study route, passing unanimously and being added to the Borough's Action Priorities list. The third and fourth resolutions 24-056 (signed May 21, 2024) and 24-099 (signed October 1, 2024) expressed opposition towards the study route. Resolution 24-056 stated that the Assembly "is opposed to relinquishing authority over Borough-owned and/or operated trails and lands and opposed to over-reaching restrictions on the Alaska Long Trail within the boundaries of the Borough." Resolution 24-099 refined the previous resolution further by stating that the Assembly "specifically opposes the designation of the Alaska Long Trail as an NST on Borough-owned land because of the use restrictions and loss of local control over the trail."

Matanuska-Susitna Borough has been informed that a potential NST designation does not change the ownership of the land the trail crosses, that all trails would continue to be owned and/or managed by the respective landowner or agency after designation, and that a subsequent comprehensive management plan would be designed to develop cooperative relationships with corresponding easements necessary for long-term management. As described in Section 1.3 Study Approach cessation of state or local government authority is not an option in establishing or protecting the proposed trail system. Yet while the establishment of an NST designation under the NTSA neither extends federal authority over private, local, state, or tribal lands, nor imposes use restrictions, nor restricts existing rights or authorities, except through voluntary cooperative agreements, Matanuska-Susitna Borough specifically opposes designation of an NST through their jurisdiction.

Ahtna, Incorporated, a for-profit Alaska Native corporation that stewards over 1.5 million acres of land in the Ahtna region, has expressed their opposition to the study route where it crosses Ahtna lands. Through their letter dated May 15, 2024 they state the Alaska Long Trail project will exacerbate trespass on Ahtna lands due to opening up these lands to additional public use.

On the basis of the above, Objective 4 is not met.

5.4.5 Summary of Objectives 1-4, Suitable End-to-End Routes

Taken as a whole, the results of the physical feasibility and the three desirability tests lead to an overall determination of suitable or unsuitable end-to-end routes in each zone (Table 5-7 and Figure 5-1). Among the network of study routes, a suitable end-to-end route has not been identified between Seward to Fairbanks due to opposition from Ahtna Incorporated (in the Denali Zone). That said, two suitable end-to-end route networks greater than 100 miles in length (consistent with NTSA Section 3(b)'s definition of an extended trail) exist as follows:

1. From Seward to Ahtna lands near Summit Lake for a length of 435.3 miles.
2. From Ahtna lands near Denali Park to Fairbanks, for a length of 204.8 miles.

Table 5-7. Suitable End-to-End Routes by Zone

Zone	Physically Feasible	Desirability: maximum outdoor recreation potential	Desirability: trail corridor protection	Desirability: agency and public support	Suitable
Kenai Peninsula	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	**Yes**
Anchorage	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	**Yes**
Matanuska-Susitna Valley	Yes	Yes	Yes	No[1]	**Yes**
Denali	Yes	Yes	Yes	No[2]	**No**
Fairbanks/Tanana	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	**Yes**

[1] Matanuska-Susitna Borough's resolution conditionally opposes the NST designation (see Section 5.4.4 Objective 4).

[2] Atna Incorporated opposes NST designation (see Section 5.4.4 Objective 4).

See Map B-1 through Map B-5 in Appendix B and Tables C-11 through C-15 in Appendix C for the segment-by-segment findings.

Of the two suitable end-to-end routes, 39.4% exist on the ground today and 48.9% are gaps, either as conceptual routes, road connections, or those currently under development. The remaining fraction of study routes (11.7%) are attributed to water routes or social routes. shows the variety of route statuses along the study route and the associated mileage and percentage of the total route.

Table 5-8. Total Suitable Summer and Winter Segment Status in Miles and Percent

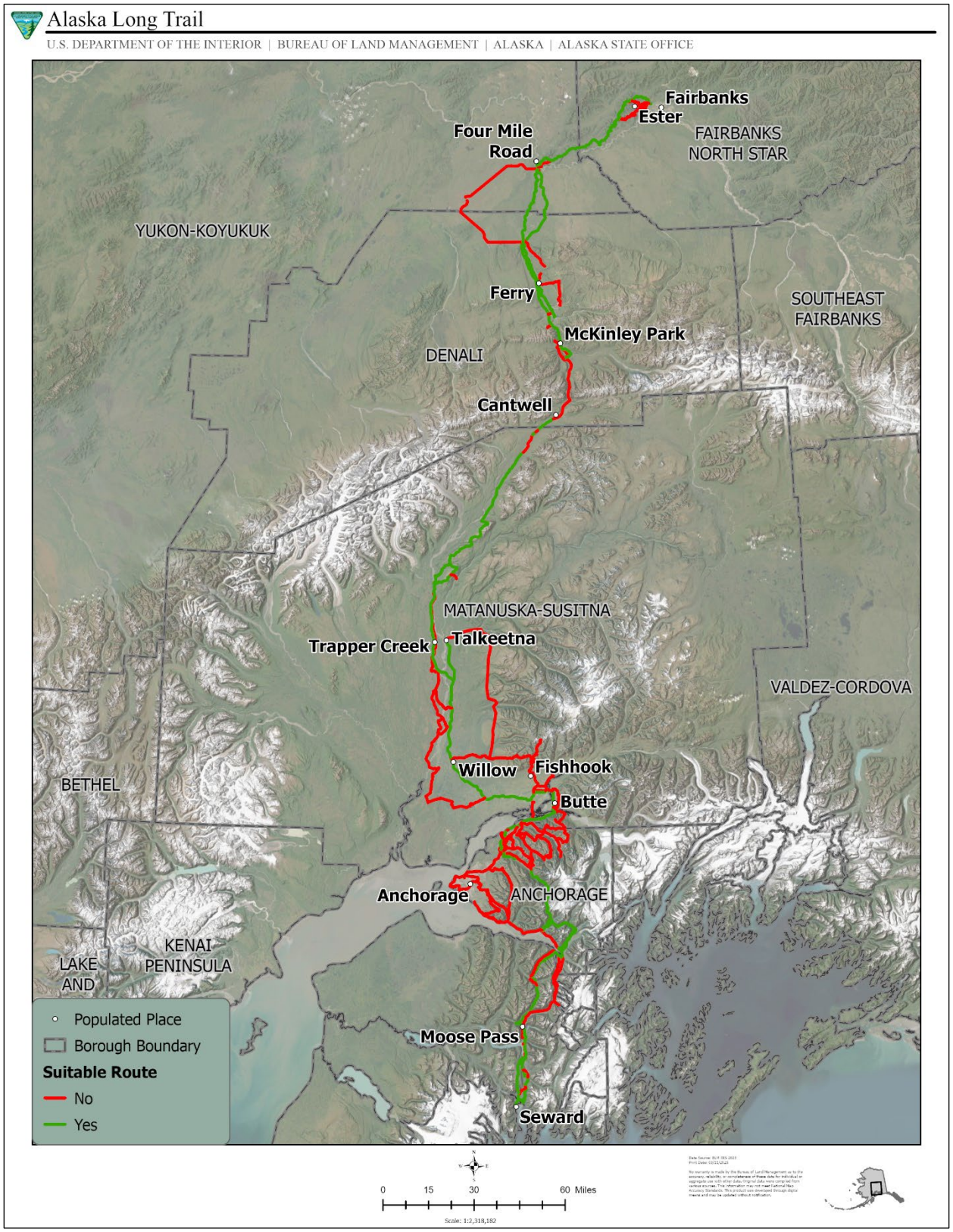
Suitable Route Status	Total Miles	Total Percentage*
Existing pathway – candidate	82.2	12.7
Existing trail – candidate	173.6	26.8
Identified gap - conceptual route	69.2	10.7
Identified gap - road connection	171.8	26.5
Identified gap - work in progress	75.9	11.7
Other - train ride	0	0
Social route	0	0
Social route – candidate	0.3	<0.1
Water route – candidate	75.6	11.7
Total	**648.6[1]**	**100**

[1] The two suitable end-to-end routes (Seward to Summit Lake and Denali Park to Fairbanks) total 640.1 miles.

*Discrepancies are due to rounding.

Source: Alaska Trails 2024, BLM 2024, USFS 2024

Figure 5-1. Map of Suitable and Unsuitable Routes



Landownership patterns along suitable routes vary, though are largely dominated by state ownership at approximately 64.7% (). The next largest landowner along suitable routes is the federal government at an approximate 16.2% (totaling all federal departments). Suitable routes across private ownership, on which voluntary agreements with willing landowners would be predicated, is approximately 2.3%.

Table 5-9. Mileage of Suitable Segments and Ownership across All Zones

Landowner	Total Miles	Total Percent*
Alaska Native	**13.4**	**2.1**
Alaska Native Allotment	0.3	< 0.1
Alaska Native Lands Patented or Interim Conveyed	13.1	2.0
Federal	**105.2**	**16.2**
USDA: USFS	87.7	13.5
DoD: Air Force	0.1	< 0.1
DOI: BLM, NPS	16.8	2.6
Department of Transportation: FAA	0.1	< 0.1
Other Federal	0.5	< 0.1
Local Government	**22.8**	**3.5**
Private	**15.1**	**2.3**
State	**419.7**	**64.7**
ADFG	0.3	< 0.1
ADOT	244.5	37.7
ADNR-Division of Forestry	0.1	< 0.1
ADNR-Mental Health Trust	5.1	0.8
Alaska Railroad	5.1	0.8
Alaska-DNR	93.0	14.3
Chugach State Park	15.7	2.4
Denali State Park	52.6	8.1
University of Alaska	3.3	0.5
Water	**72.4**	**11.2**
Total	**648.6**[1]	**100**

[1] The two suitable end-to-end routes (Seward to Summit Lake and Denali Park to Fairbanks) total 640.1 miles.
*Discrepancies are due to rounding.
Acronyms: ADFG – Alaska Department of Fish and Game, ADNR – Alaska Department of Natural Resources, ADOT – Alaska Department of Transportation, BLM – Bureau of Land Management, DoD – U.S. Department of Defense, DOI – U.S. Department of the Interior, FAA – Federal Aviation Administration, USDA – U.S. Department of Agriculture, USFS – U.S. Forest Service.
Source: Alaska Trails 2024, BLM 2024, USFS 2024

Table 5-10 summarizes whether non-motorized and motorized travel modes are allowed as of 2025 on suitable routes. See Section 3.3.2.6 Trail Uses and Section 5.2.1.1 Public Recreation Use for a discussion on the use of motor vehicles. Existing agency policies regarding motorized/non-motorized use for any given trail segment would not change as a result of this feasibility study. For example, the use of motorized off-road vehicles with a curb weight of up to 1,500 pounds and highway vehicles with a curb weight of up to 10,000 pounds is authorized on or off an existing trail on general domain State lands (i.e., DMLW lands) without an authorization (see the Generally Allowed Uses Fact Sheet by visiting

https://dnr.alaska.gov/mlw/cdn/pdf/factsheets/generally-allowed-uses.pdf). Exceptions or restrictions to the State's allowed use occur within some legislatively designated areas and other special management categories like State Parks, as provided for in State statutes or regulation[4]. If designated as an NST, allowed travel modes on specific trail segments would be determined by the realities of terrain and the management policies of individual landowners and agencies.

Table 5-10. 2025 Allowed Modes on Suitable Segments

Allowed Modes[1]	Miles of Trail	Percent*
Summer		
Hike Only	157.8	24.3
Multi-use	210.5	32.5
N/A (Winter only)	204.7	31.6
Watercraft	75.6	11.7
Summer Total	**648.6[2]**	**100**
Winter		
Hike Only	9.9	1.5
Multi-use	297.9	46.0
N/A (Summer only)	340.8	52.6
Watercraft	0	0
Winter Total	**648.6[2]**	**100**

Acronyms: N/A – Not applicable.

[1] Allowed modes is defined in the metadata as the use type of the existing or planned route. This may not reflect existing rules or regulations enacted by land managers, nor suggest a change to current management designations.

[2] The two suitable end-to-end routes (Seward to Summit Lake and Denali Park to Fairbanks) total 640.1 miles.

*Discrepancies are due to rounding.

Source: Alaska Trails 2024, BLM 2024, USFS 2024

5.4.6 Objective 5

The estimated cost of acquisition of lands or interest in lands, if any: Objectives 5 and 6 address the Section 5(b) criteria that "the feasibility of designating a trail shall be determined on the basis of …whether the development of a trail would be financially feasible" (NTSA). Section 7(d) of the Act provides the basic methods that may be used to acquire lands for trail protection:

> *Within the exterior boundaries of areas under their administration that are included in the right-of-way selected for a national scenic trail … the heads of Federal agencies may use lands for trail purposes and may acquire lands or interests in lands by written cooperative agreement, donation, purchase with donated or appropriated funds or exchange* (NTSA 1968).

The federal acquisition of land or interest in land is not a pre-requisite for completion of unbuilt conceptual routes if designated as an NST. Where on private land, willing owner access

[4] Alaska Statutes Titles 16, 38, and 41 and Generally Allowed Uses under 11 AAC 96.020 and Conditions for Generally Allowed Uses under 11 AAC 96.025.

agreements could be led by a nonprofit organization, the state, or local jurisdiction with authority. Public access to and permanent protection of the entire study route is a long-term goal; one that would require some level of funding for acquisition of lands and easements by entities such as land trusts, nonprofit trail associations, communities, state agencies, and others, working with willing and interested landowners as opportunities arise.

It is assumed that condemnation would neither be authorized by Congress nor necessary for the suitable routes to be completed. Rather, the study process anticipates that suitable portions of the proposed trail system would continue to be hosted by private individuals, corporations, and others through cooperative agreements for the foreseeable future as is common on the Pacific Crest and Continental Divide NSTs. Approximately 2% of the existing trail route is already hosted in this manner today.

In 2022, 2023, and 2024 the Alaska Legislature approved funding for new trail construction, improvements, maintenance, and reroutes on key segments of the Alaska Long Trail. Monetary support from municipal and borough governments and tourism organizations has consistently been dedicated to trail development and stewardship to create more reasons for visitors to spend time and money in Alaska. These funds might be provided through established granting mechanisms, directly through the NST enabling legislation, the administering agency's annual appropriation, or through other means.

While the potential costs of such acquisitions are difficult to ascertain given changing national and local economies and real estate markets, a general estimate is as follows:

- Routes are suitable between Seward to Ahtna lands near Summit Lake and again from Ahtna lands near Denali Park to Fairbanks (see Objective 4 in Section 5.4.4);
- Suitable routes cross 3.9[5] miles of private land;
- A 30-foot easement for 3.9 miles, or 14.2 acres, would need to acquired; therefore
- At an assumed cost of $15,000 per acre for 14.2 acres, the estimated cost of acquisition of private lands or interest for public trail access between Seward and Fairbanks would amount to approximately $212,940 in 2025 dollars.

On the basis of the above, Objective 5 is met.

[5] Includes identified gaps for road connections and conceptual routes as of data provided by Alaska Trails in September 2023 and April 2024.

5.4.7 Objective 6

The plans for developing and maintaining the trail and the cost thereof: Much of the planning for trails in the U.S. occurs at the state and local level. Section 8(a) of the NTSA encourages states to carry out such plans, and NTSA section 8(b) encourages the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to include recreation trails in the planning for urban and metropolitan areas. The genesis for the Alaska Long Trail occurred in this way through Alaska Trails' 2020 Statewide Investment Strategy and is reflected in the 2023 – 2027 SCORP. Alaska Trails, in partnership with state and local governments, corporations, and non-profit organizations, has developed a strategy for the Alaska Long Trail's development and maintenance. Without federal prompting, partners have worked together to construct a variety of suitable routes through 2025. Appendix E, Models and Recommendations coalesces the recommendations and strategies that have arisen through public and agency consultation to address long-term trail viability.

If designated by Congress, a comprehensive plan for administration and management and associated NEPA analysis would be prepared for the NST. Table 5-11 below provides cost estimates for the federal portion of anticipated trail planning, administrative, development, and maintenance activities. Using the ongoing Iditarod NHT Comprehensive Plan Revision and NEPA analysis as a comparable estimate, the preparation of such a plan would cost between $400,000 and $600,000. Plans of this nature typically direct administration of the trail over a 15- to 20-year period. A yearly budget would be required for a federal agency to administer the trail, within a range of $500,000 and $1,500,000 annually, again drawing from the Iditarod NHT's annual trail-wide administration costs. Costs borne by other State and local governments, tribal agencies, and non-governmental volunteer organizations such as search and rescue operations are not included in the table.

Trail construction for new trail segments, trailheads, information kiosk construction, and signage are examples of other types of expenses that could be incurred if the proposed trail is designated. Previous Alaska Long Trail development costs have ranged widely, from approximately $70,000 to $150,000 in 2025 dollars depending on their difficulty (Alaska Trails 2021, Alaska Trails 2023, Chugach Mountain Bike Riders 2023). Construction techniques would be designed to be sustainable and would minimize natural, historic, cultural, and aesthetic resource impacts (BLM 2010). These kinds of expenses would be single events for the initial design and development but would require periodic maintenance and upkeep by the landowner or public land manager where the trail, kiosk, wayside, or sign would be placed. These particular expenses would require the active voluntary participation of trail partners and a long-term commitment to provide maintenance of the structure or trail.

While the potential costs of new trail developments are difficult to ascertain given the wide variability of terrain and development potential associated with different segments of the trail, a general estimate of one-time federal costs are as follows:

- Suitable routes between Seward to Ahtna lands near Summit Lake and again from Ahtna lands near Denali Park to Fairbanks would require construction of 233.1[6] miles of identified gaps on summer and winter routes.
- Trail development is estimated at approximately $70,000 per mile at the low end, $150,000 per mile at the high end. Assuming up to 10 miles would be developed per year as an example ($70,000 x 10 miles =) $700,000 per year as a low estimate and ($150,000 x 10 miles =) $1,500,000 per year as a high estimate.
- Therefore, the total estimated cost of developing the trail would be $16,317,000 (low) to $34,965,000 (high) for the 233.1 miles of suitable identified gaps (non-constructed) routes between Seward and Fairbanks.

These cost estimates are not binding on Congress should it choose to designate the proposed trail as an NST. Designation of an NST does not guarantee any federal funding or staffing for the administration of the trail nor obligate state or local agencies to commit funding. Funding decisions are determined by Congress, the administering agency, and land management agencies as part of their annual planning and budgeting strategy and are dependent on agency priorities and future funding availability.

No federal or state agency has yet allocated funding to plan, design, construct, administer, and maintain 500+ miles of new trail. Furthermore, these agencies report that they lack the funding to maintain the existing 200+ miles of suitable segments on state and federal lands. As an example, in 2024, the State's Recreational Trails Program allocated up to $700,000 between motorized, non-motorized, and diversified allocations to non-DPOR projects, leaving only $200,000 per year for non- motorized trail projects statewide (ADNR 2025b).

[6] Includes identified gaps for road connections and conceptual routes as of data provided by Alaska Trails in September 2023 and April 2024.

Table 5-11. Federal Cost Estimates for Trail Planning, Design, Construction, Administration, and Maintenance for Suitable Routes between Seward and Fairbanks

Federal Tasks	Low-Cost Estimate	High-Cost Estimate
Comprehensive Management Plan (includes public and agency consultation, environmental assessment, document design, technical editing, printing, binding, and shipping)*	$400,000	$600,000
Approximate Acquisition Costs for 3.9 miles of Suitable Identified Gaps on Private Land	$212,940	$212,940
Approximate Trail Development Costs for 233.1 miles of Suitable Identified Gaps on Federal Land (over a multi-year development plan)[1]	$16,317,000	$34,965,000
Total One-Time Planning, Design and Construction Costs[2]	**$16,929,940**	**$35,777,940**
Annual Operating Costs[3]	$440,000	$660,000
Annual Trail Resource Inventory*	$62,000	$250,000
Annual Maintenance*	$550,000	$3,500,000
Total Annual Costs	**$ 1,052,000**	**$4,410,000**

*Costs are estimated from similar NSTs utilizing current inflation rates for 2024

[1] Trail development is estimated at approximately $70,000 (low) and $150,000 (high) per mile

[2] One time estimate total includes 20% design contingency costs

[3] First year annual operating budget of the New England NST was estimated at $425,000 and Butterfield Overland NHT was estimated from $440,000 to $625,000 (in 2024 dollars)

Source: BLM 2024; ALT 2024; ALT 2023; Oregon Parks and Recreation 2018; NPS 2022 [1]; Congressional Research Service 2023; NPS 2022 [2]; Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources 2024; Pacific Crest Trail Association 2022; ADNR 2025

On the basis of the above, Objective 6 is met.

5.4.8 Objective 7

The proposed federal administering agency: Since 1968, 47 long-distance trails have been studied for inclusion in the NTS and 32 have been designated. The NPS administers 21 trails, the BLM administers one, the USFS administers six, and the NPS and BLM jointly administer two.

The NTSA provides for a federal agency to administer an NST and NHT in perpetuity, in cooperation with a variety of partners that includes other federal agencies, state and local agencies, Tribes, local communities, and private landowners. Trail administration encompasses a variety of activities, mostly accomplished with the collaboration of partners. Trail administration does not include "management" activities, which are the purview of the land agencies and landowners that manage the lands upon which the trail resources occur (see comparative lists below). Comprehensive management plans align management activities on federal lands and determine partnership opportunities on non-federal lands.

Non-federal segments may be managed by voluntary means such as cooperative and certification agreements, easements, and actions by a range of entities, including nonprofit organizations. All trail management activity on non-federal land is strictly voluntary.

Trail authorities are carried out at two levels:

- Administration by the administering agency – trail-wide coordination and planning, interagency coordination, oversight of trail site and segment development, development of trail maintenance and marking standards, resource protection, trail-wide resource inventories and mapping, interpretation, cooperative and interagency agreements, and financial assistance to other cooperating government agencies, landowners, interest groups, and individuals; and

- Management by the government entities, private groups, and individuals who own and/or manage lands – on-the-ground resource inventory and mapping, planning and development of trail segments and sites along the trails, authorizing trail uses and vehicles allowed, compliance, mitigation of resource damage, provision of appropriate public access, interpretation, trail and vegetation maintenance, trail marking, resource and viewshed protection, and management of visitor use.

The USFS is recommended to serve as the lead federal administering agency for the trail if designated as an NST. USFS manages the majority of the study routes located on federal lands (87.7%). Per Section 5(b)(7) of the NTSA, "in the case of an NST wholly or substantially within a national forest, the administering agency shall be the USDA."

The BLM could also serve as the administering agency, as the suitable routes through the Kenai Peninsula, Anchorage, and Matanuska-Susitna Valley zones (until crossing the Yentna and Susitna rivers) are similar to the Iditarod NHT, and BLM has been serving in that capacity as the Iditarod NHT administrator since 1978.

It is anticipated that the partner organizations and nonprofits would continue to play leadership roles in trail management, with support from the additional partner organizations comprising the Trail Stewardship Council, including the USFS, BLM, state agencies, communities, landowners, land trusts, and trail user groups.

On the basis of the above, Objective 7 is met.

5.4.9 Objective 8

The extent to which a state or its political subdivisions and public and private organizations might reasonably be expected to participate in acquiring the necessary lands and in the administration thereof: As described in Objective 6, the NST designation model anticipated in the draft Feasibility Study is based upon a high level of commitment and involvement from landowners, communities, land trusts, state agencies, and other entities in the Kenai Peninsula and Anchorage zones. While Matanuska-Susitna Borough and Ahtna Incorporated are two organizations that oppose the study route (see Objective 4 in Section 5.4.4), many other nonprofit organizations and state and local agencies have demonstrated commitment to existing trail systems and would continue to fulfill a leadership role in the development and maintenance of the suitable routes should they be designated. The following organizations, agencies, and local governments have sent letters of support, passed resolutions, and provided direct testimony at legislative meetings (Alaska Trails 2025):

- Alaska Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
- Alaska Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects
- Alaska Huts Association
- DPOR
- Alaska Trails
- Alaska Travel Industry Association
- Anchorage Assembly
- Anchorage Park Foundation
- Anchorage Ski Club
- Anchorage Trails
- Chugach State Park Citizens Advisory Board
- City of Palmer
- City of Seward
- Denali Borough Assembly
- Eagle River Valley Community Council
- Eklutna Valley Community Council
- Explore Fairbanks
- Fairbanks Cycle Club
- Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly
- Friends of State Parks - Mat-Su
- Girdwood Board of Supervisors
- Greater Palmer Chamber of Commerce
- Greater Wasilla Chamber of Commerce
- Interior Trails Preservation Coalition
- Kenai Back Country Horsemen
- Kenai Mountains – Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area
- Latitude 61 Girdwood
- Mat-Su Health Foundation
- Mat-Su Ski Club
- Mountaineering Club of Alaska
- NPS
- Nordic Ski Club Fairbanks
- Roadmap to a Vital and Safe Anchorage
- Single Track Advocates, Anchorage
- Skeetawk, Hatcher Alpine Xperience
- Valley Mountain Bikers and Hikers

Further, ADNR outlines goals that acknowledge a high level of commitment and involvement from these groups. In the 2023-2027 SCORP, ADNR outlined seven statewide outdoor recreation goals that support the Alaska Long Trail initiative:

1. Support the Alaska Outdoor Recreation Way of Life
2. Make Outdoor Recreation a Cornerstone of Alaska's Economic Future
3. Grow the Outdoor Recreation Workforce; Use Outdoor Recreation to Attract and Retain Residents and Businesses
4. Empower and Enable Alaskans to Lead Active Healthy Lives
5. Balancing Outdoor Recreation Growth and Stewardship
6. Grow Stable and Sustainable Outdoor Recreation Funding
7. Strengthen Partnerships to Improve Outdoor Recreation Management

On the basis of the above, Objective 8 is met with the exception of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough and Ahtna, Incorporated.

5.4.10 Objective 9

The relative uses of the lands involved, including: the number of anticipated visitor-days for the entire length of, as well as segments of, the trail; the number of months which the trail, or segments thereof, will be open for recreational purposes; the economic and social benefits which might accrue from alternate land uses; and the estimated man-years of civilian employment and expenditures expected for the purposes of maintenance, supervision, and regulation of the trail:

5.4.10.1 Visitor Days

Visitor days on the trail would vary by season considering the climate implications of the proposed trail. According to the State of Alaska's 2023-2027 SCORP, "National and Alaska data tell the same story: the demand for outdoor recreation experiences and infrastructure continues to increase, driven by both higher participation rates and growing populations (in the lower 48 states and in parts of Alaska)" (SCORP 2023).

The Alaska Visitor Statistics Program's most recent report on visitor statistics was published in 2016 (Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, & Economic Development 2016). Most recent reports, like the SCORP, have relied on data anonymously collected from mobile devices (cell phones and tablets) to estimate the number of people participating in outdoor recreational activities in Alaska. This methodology is not able to provide a precise visitor count, but rather, track "Device Days," which are defined as the product of the number of unique devices and the number of days those devices were observed. As measured by device days, the overall relative recreational use increased substantially between 2019 and 2021. Normalized sample size counts increased from approximately 1 million device days in 2019 to 1.5 million in 2021. This is not a measure of total use, but rather the number of unique devices measured and the number of days those devices were observed (SCORP 2023). The study does not propose any limits on capacity or use on the trail.

5.4.10.2 Months the Trail Could Be Open

The summer season (late June – early September) is anticipated to attract the highest level of use with users traveling in either direction. Many trail segments would be open year-round given the allowed use of snowmachines and other winter activities like snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

5.4.10.3 Economic and Social Benefits from Alternate Land Uses

According to the State of Alaska's 2023 SCORP, Alaska's outdoor recreation and tourism is a bright spot in a struggling state economy. The same 2023 report notes that Alaska's outdoor recreation sector was one of the few sectors of Alaska's economy that grew between 2013 and 2019 (SCORP 2023).

Given that the vast majority of the suitable routes already exist on public land, are in use as trails, and are recognized in agency trail plans, the suitable routes do not compete with alternate land uses. Land uses patterns in the immediate vicinity of the proposed trail are not expected to be altered by future management activities. All landowner-permitted existing uses would continue.

5.4.10.4 Estimated Man-Years of Civilian Employment and Expenditures

Outdoor tourism is a significant part of Alaska's economy. A 2023 report for the BEA found that outdoor recreation provides a total of 21,242 jobs in the state. The total annual compensation for these jobs is estimated at $1.5 billion.

On the basis of the above, Objective 9 is met.

5.5. Alternative Approaches

The study route process included considerable input from the public, as well as input and consultation from land management agencies and landowners on the proposed trail. BLM examined alternatives to the study route original starting proposal that were derived from public input. These included route options that are shorter than 500 miles, seasonal route variations, and alternative names other than "Alaska Long Trail." Land management alternatives were not explored and would only be addressed if congressional designation occurred in the subsequent phase of a comprehensive management plan.

5.5.1 Route Proposal Change or Alteration

As denoted in Section 502 of P.L. 117-328, "the Alaska Long Trail, extend[s] approximately 500 miles from Seward, Alaska, to Fairbanks, Alaska." While the amendment to the NTSA calls for the feasibility of the Alaska Long Trail from Seward to Fairbanks, input on the feasibility study included alternative route proposals outside of these original end points. NTSA Section 3(b) allows consideration of alternative proposals: "While it is desirable that extended trails be continuous, studies of such trails may conclude that it is feasible to propose one or more trail segments which, in the aggregate, constitute at least one hundred miles in length."

5.5.1.1 Seward to Talkeetna

This route alternative begins in Seward and ends in Talkeetna. This route is shorter than the original proposed route by approximately 240 miles. This new route would cut the proposed trail mileage by approximately half of the original length. The idea for this alternative route was generated through public engagement due to both feasibility and desirability considerations.

This alternative is physically feasible because most of the existing trails are located between Seward and Talkeetna. The area north of Talkeetna offers fewer options of existing trail, and much of the land is difficult to build new trail on due to thawing permafrost and bogs. The

financial feasibility of creating new trails between Talkeetna and Fairbanks would result in a far more expensive trail, unless a water route were utilized floating the Nenana River.

This alternative also meets Desirability Tests #1 and #2 found in Objectives 2 and 3 because it represents the portion of trail that offers a high degree of recreational value and enjoyment of significant scenic, historic, natural, and cultural qualities. However, the Seward to Talkeetna alternative does not meet Desirability Test #3 found in Objective 4, due to conditional opposition from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

5.5.1.2 Seward to Denali State Park

This route is shorter than the original proposed route by approximately 200 miles. This route is similar to the Seward to Talkeetna route but extends the northern end point to Denali View North (milepost 162.7) within Denali State Park. This end point maximizes scenic opportunities by including closer views of Mount McKinley and the opportunity to hike in the Alaska Range. The view of Mount McKinley at the northern end acts as a bookend for the trail. The existing trail network in Denali State Park would lessen building expenses for conceptual routes.

Like the Seward to Talkeetna alternative, the Seward to Denali State Park alternative meets the physical feasibility and Desirability Tests #1 and #2. However, it does not meet Desirability Test #3 due to conditional opposition from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

5.5.1.3 Seward to Healy

This alternative is shorter than the original proposed route by approximately 110 miles. Similar to the Seward to Denali State Park alternative, this alternative would focus on Mount McKinley as the northern end point on the trail by extending the trail to end at Healy near popular tourism destinations. This alternative allows trail users to experience much of the Denali Zone of the trail including Denali State Park, K'esugi Ridge Trail, and views of Mount McKinley from many different angles, while eliminating the Fairbanks/Tanana Zone. Public input showed more interest in the segments surrounding Denali National Park compared to the Fairbanks/Tanana zone.

Like the prior alternatives, the Seward to Healy alternative meets the physical feasibility and Desirability Tests #1 and #2. However, it does not meet Desirability Test #3 due to conditional opposition from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough and specific opposition from Ahtna, Incorporated.

5.5.1.4 Caines Head to Fairbanks

This alternative is longer than the original proposed route by approximately 8 miles, and could be additive to any of the alternatives above. This new route would extend the end of the potential study route from Seward south along the Resurrection Bay Coastline. This 8 mile alternative route would provide visitors with more of the coastal marine environment in the greater Seward area, and it could offer another opportunity to integrate a water route segment considering its popularity amongst kayakers.

Like the original proposed route, a Caines Head to Fairbanks alternative likely meets the physical feasibility and Desirability Tests #1 and #2. However it does not meet Desirability Test #3 due to conditional opposition from the Matanuska-Susitna Borough and specific opposition from Ahtna, Incorporated.

5.5.2 Alternative Names

Throughout the course of the study, alternative names have been contemplated for the Alaska Long Trail for three primary reasons:

1. In the context of the NTSA, all NSTs are long trails, in that they are more than 100 continuous miles in length. The terms “long trail” and “long-distance trail” are often used interchangeably.

2. Two prior trails studied by Congress and not yet designated included similar names: the Long Trail (272 miles from Williamstown, Massachusetts to North Troy, Vermont) and The Long Walk (350 miles from northeastern Arizona to the Bosque Redondo reservation in eastern New Mexico). It may lead to confusion if Congress were to designate the proposed study routes as the Alaska Long Trail, given the other two study routes not yet designated with similar names.

3. Many are of the opinion that Long Trail only refers to its length and is a poor descriptor of its uniquely Alaskan qualities.

Other trails have reconsidered their original name during or after the feasibility study process, prior to the designation of the trail. For example, the New England NST was previously named the Metacomet Monadnock Mattabesett Trail during the feasibility study process. The Gold Rush Trail proposal was designated by Congress as the Iditarod NHT.

In August 2023, the Alaska Long Trail Coalition recommended changing the name of the Alaska Long Trail project to the Alaska Traverse for the feasibility study. However, at the onset of the feasibility study process, BLM was required to keep the original name of Alaska Long Trail, as was listed in the Congressional assignment and amendment to the NTSA.

As the feasibility study approaches completion and should Congress so determine, a name change could be beneficial. It is recommended that the NST designation be pursued under a new name which could lessen public confusion.