



Ambler Road Environmental Impact Statement

Frequently Asked Questions—Alaska

1. Why do we need a road to the Ambler Mining District? Aren't there access roads there already?

There is currently no road access to the Ambler Mining District. The Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority's (AIDEA's) Ambler Mining District Industrial Access Project is intended to provide for surface transportation from the Dalton Highway to the Ambler Mining District (District). AIDEA's proposed access corridor, which would cross the Western (Kobuk River) Unit of the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (GAAR), would allow for the exploration and development of mineral deposits in the District. According to AIDEA, the access corridor is needed to increase job opportunities and encourage the economic growth of the State. Without access, AIDEA has concluded that the mineral assets associated with the District would remain unused, and AIDEA would not be able to support economic development and increase job opportunities within a region known for high unemployment rates.

2. What alternatives are under consideration in the environmental impact statement?

AIDEA proposed a route from Milepost (MP) 161 of the Dalton Highway, almost directly west to the District. This route would cross GAAR, as allowed by the law that created the Preserve. AIDEA also presented an alternative that follows the same alignment except it would pass through the Preserve several miles south, in an area where the Preserve is narrower. These alternatives would pass several miles north of Bettles and Evansville and north of Kobuk. In the environmental impact statement (EIS), these are called Alternative A and Alternative B, respectively. The EIS also considers Alternative C, which would run from Dalton Highway near MP 59.5 generally northwest to the District, passing a few miles north of Hughes and approximately one mile west of Kobuk. Ambler and Shungnak also would be near any of these alternatives. Finally, the EIS considers the No Action Alternative. If the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) selects the No Action Alternative, no road would be authorized or built. The No Action Alternative provides a benchmark to evaluate other alternatives against.

3. Who would pay for this project? Can we afford this?

Costs for construction of the full build-out of the two-lane access road would be \$519 to \$992 million, depending on the alternative. Operations and maintenance costs are expected to be \$9 to \$14 million per year, again depending upon the alternative. AIDEA, as an independent public corporation of the State of Alaska and development finance authority, has proposed to develop the access route as a public-private partnership in which AIDEA would raise funds from investors by selling bonds, and the bonds would be paid off over time by charging annual fees to mining companies using the Ambler Road. The bonds are intended to be secured by the project's revenue stream and not by the general obligation of the State of Alaska. The money for constructing and operating the road would not be part of the State capital or operating budgets.

4. Who would be responsible for maintenance of the Ambler Road?

AIDEA would be responsible for operations and maintenance of the Ambler Road and would likely procure those services through another party. Some of the areas built as material sites would be developed into maintenance stations to house staff and equipment to operate and maintain the road.

5. What are the different roles of AIDEA, the federal agencies, and the State of Alaska?

- AIDEA is proposing the Ambler Mining District Industrial Access Project, and would be responsible for securing its funding, construction, operation, and maintenance.
- The BLM is the lead federal agency for preparing the EIS under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The BLM will use the final EIS to determine whether to grant a right-of-way for the Ambler Road across BLM-managed lands. The BLM also has evaluated potential impacts to subsistence uses in accordance with Section 810 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), and to cultural and historic resources in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act.
- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) provides permitting under Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act and Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, and would use the EIS as the basis for its decisions.
- The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) provides permitting for constructing bridges over navigable waters and also would use the EIS as a basis for its decisions.
- The Alaska Department of Natural Resources makes land management decisions for right-of-way access across State-managed lands.
- Other agencies also have permitting authority. The full list of anticipated permits and approvals is available in Appendix B, Table 1, of the EIS.

6. Who would be able to use the Ambler Road? Why would access be limited?

During scoping, many commenters stated concern about increased use of the project area by the general public and competition for subsistence resources. The general public would not be permitted to use the road. AIDEA proposed a controlled access road to support mineral exploration; mine development, construction, and operations; and ore transportation. Because the road is proposed and designed for industrial traffic only, it would not be safe for general public use. Bridges would be one lane wide, and radio communication would be required between drivers and dispatchers. Drivers would be required to be commercially licensed, have special training, and check in and out at a staffed gatehouse. For these reasons, the BLM is not considering a public access option.

7. How much traffic would there be on the Ambler Road?

The mining scenario presented in Appendix H of the EIS anticipates that there would be four mines. The mines would generate traffic on the road—approximately 16 to 46 double-trailer truck trips per day—hauling ore concentrate or empty containers back to be refilled, depending on the size of the mine. Because double trailers are expected to be broken down to single trailers for trips on the Dalton Highway to the Alaska Railroad yard at Fairbanks, trips associated with the Ambler Road would be higher on the Dalton Highway. Total traffic, including fuel and other supplies, is anticipated to be up to 168 trips per day on the Ambler Road and up to 238 trips per day on the Dalton Highway during mine production. Trucks on the Ambler Road would haul more than is allowed on public roads.

8. Will communities be allowed to ship commercial goods on the road?

While the proposed Ambler Road would have controlled access, local communities would be permitted to hire commercial transportation providers to deliver fuel or freight, or residents could form their own businesses to provide these services. Under all build alternatives, existing and projected future mining roads likely would connect the Ambler Road physically to Kobuk (a gatehouse is expected to prevent general public access). Kobuk would have a direct connection to Ambler Road and could receive direct deliveries if the community chose to. Other communities may desire to connect directly to Ambler Road by building their own side trail or road. These potential side connections are not proposed as part of AIDEA's project. Alternatively, communities may be able to receive goods at staging areas, probably in the winter, for transport to its final destination. Any staging area also would need to be pursued separately.

9. Why is an EIS being prepared? Who is paying for that?

An EIS is a document required under NEPA for actions that may significantly affect the quality of the human environment. NEPA requires federal agencies to consider the environmental impacts of their decisions and all reasonable alternatives. The BLM is the lead federal agency for this project and is responsible for preparation of the EIS. AIDEA is funding the EIS.

10. Do I have to read the entire EIS to understand project impacts?

It is not necessary to read the entire EIS. The Executive Summary and Appendix C, Tables 1 and 2, present impacts of the alternatives side by side in a much briefer format. However, Chapter 3 and some appendices provide the greatest detail regarding anticipated impacts. Chapter 3 is separated into many resource categories (such as Geology and Soils, Mammals, and Subsistence), so it is possible to choose which topics you are interested in and read those. Appendix N includes measures proposed by AIDEA and the BLM to minimize impacts.

11. What is the preferred alternative?

The BLM's preferred alternative is the Alternative A and B alignment.

While Alternatives A and B are separate alternatives, they share an alignment except in their approach to and crossing of GAAR. The BLM does not have authority to select the route through GAAR. The decision making process for crossing GAAR is set out in ANILCA, and the decision to allow a road across the Preserve was made by Congress in ANILCA Section 201(4)(b). ANILCA establishes that the decision regarding the best route across the Preserve is left to the Secretary of the Interior and Secretary of Transportation based on an Environmental and Economic Analysis prepared by the National Park Service. ANILCA exempted that decision from NEPA.