

WHISTLE STOP PROJECT

Proposed Action

Introduction

The overriding goal of this project is to increase recreational opportunities for visitors to a vastly unroaded section of the Chugach National Forest through a business partnership with Alaska Railroad providing transportation passes to proposed recreational trails and dispersed remote facilities. This area of the National Forest encompassed by the Whistle Stop Project is relatively remote and inaccessible to the vast majority of National Forest visitors, and providing new recreational opportunities will help meet local Forest direction. The proposed action, utilizing approximately 25 miles of Alaska Railroad track, currently closed to access for safety reasons, aims to provide various facilities capable of meeting the diverse needs of visitors hoping to engage in either a day use or multi-day adventure into the heart of the Chugach National Forest. These recreation facilities include, but are not limited to, an interconnected trail system, wildlife/scenic viewing platforms, and a variety of overnight accommodations.

Project Area Description

The project area extends from Portage in the north (at the junction of the Seward Highway and Portage Valley Road) to Trail Creek in the south, approximately 4 miles from Moose Pass. This section of track leading down to Seward heads south up the Placer River Valley passing Luebner Lake, the centerpiece of a large, wide open, wildlife filled wetland area fed by the nearby glaciers and creeks. The valley quickly narrows and the railroad route heads towards Spencer. The Spencer area is distinctive as the Railroad goes by Spencer Glacier and the glacially filled Spencer Lake, one of the largest lakes along this portion of the route. After leaving the Spencer area, the Railroad track begins to climb higher into the mountains, passing Bartlett Glacier and reaching a pass in the Kenai Mountains named Grandview where sweeping vistas provide views of numerous glaciers, lakes and forested valleys. After leaving Grandview, the railroad route descends through the Kenai Mountains following Trail Creek past the proposed stops at Hunter and Trail Creek, just above the entrance to Trail Lake. Along this route, visitors have the opportunity to view a wide variety of wildlife, much of which can only be found in large numbers in Alaska; numerous glaciers, including Skookum, Spencer, Bartlett, and Trail Glaciers; lakes; and the Placer River.

Existing Conditions

At this time, there is no infrastructure present to facilitate recreation use throughout the project area. Therefore, summer independent recreation use is limited to sporadic boat activity along both the Placer River and Upper Trail Lake/Trail Creek systems, and rare cross-country hiking adventures; the winter brings skiers, both self-powered and heli-assisted and snowmachine users into numerous areas included in this project.

Current outfitter/guide use is very limited. Three companies currently have special use permits for summer use in the area, two of which operated in 2004. The summer recreation opportunities currently offered by outfitters/guides are rafting, fishing, camping, picnicking, canoeing and hiking. Winter-based recreation opportunities are offered through five companies with special use permits, only one of which operated in this area for 2004. The activities offered include skiing, snowmachining, helicopter assisted skiing and avalanche courses. For existing Alaska Railroad passenger train service, please see “Proposed Action” section.

Purpose and Need for action

The Forest Service seeks to meet the growing demand for recreation opportunities and growing demands of recreation-based tourism by developing a rail way infrastructure, along with a series of interconnected recreation sites that will provide the public with a unique recreation and travel experience not found anywhere else in the United States. Utilizing the existing infrastructure of the Alaska Railroad, the Forest Service proposes to create a wide variety of world-class recreation and transportation opportunities for users of the Chugach National Forest. Access would be gained to spectacular ice-capped mountains, glacial lakes, wild rivers and dispersed backcountry campsites, huts and trails, with transportation provided through Alaska Railroad passenger rail cars.

Completion of this project will strengthen the ability for Chugach National Forest visitors to get out and experience National Forest lands instead of experiencing them through the “glass window” that currently exists for the majority of Alaska Railroad passengers traveling through this scenic corridor. The purpose and need for this project is to:

- **Provide additional backcountry access and increase recreation opportunities available to Chugach National Forest visitors while maintaining an Alaskan backcountry experience and maintaining the area’s natural quality.** With a large land base in the eastern Kenai Peninsula and few existing backcountry recreation facilities, the proposed mix of trails, overnight facilities, viewing platforms and information and education sites will meet the needs of Chugach National Forest visitors. Use would be better spread throughout the Kenai Peninsula thereby providing users with a more remote, Alaskan backcountry experience. The additional backcountry access that is required due to growing demand will be provided utilizing the existing Alaska Railroad infrastructure and will not necessitate development of new roads.

- **Provide opportunities for visitor information and education regarding various forest resources including wildlife and fisheries.** The Chugach National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan emphasizes the need to provide Forest visitors with information and education regarding Forest resources. From the glacial movement evident at Spencer Lake, to the dynamic hydrological activity, to the historical remnants scattered along the Alaska Railroad, the Forest Service can provide a diverse view of the natural and human history of the area. Additionally, both Alaska residents and visitors alike are drawn to the annual spawning of various fish species and the incredible diversity of wildlife found in Alaska including brown and black bears, moose, wolves, Dall sheep and mountain goats. Located at each Whistle Stop station and throughout the inter-connected trail system, kiosks will interpret the important aspects of each geographical area.
- **Provide a unique transportation and recreation experience found nowhere else in the United States, while encouraging transportation dispersal and public safety.** Alaska is famous for and attracts a tremendous number of tourists because of its immense glaciers and ice-capped mountains. The Railroad is unquestionably the best land-based transportation route to view and access glaciers. Furthermore, development of this transportation route would diminish somewhat the congestion on the Seward Highway, thereby providing safety on the road and diverse recreation opportunities for the public.

Implementation of the Whistle Stop project will help meet the purpose and need outlined above and follow direction outlined in the Chugach National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (CRLRMP). Forestwide direction outlined in the CRLRMP identifies Recreational Opportunities, Access and Facilities as a major area of emphasis to be accomplished through Forest Plan implementation (CRLRMP, 3-1, 3-7-3-9). Three goals identified in this section of the CRLRMP will be met with implementation of the Whistle Stop project including: Maintaining quality settings for nonmotorized recreation opportunities; provide[ing] recreation opportunities for interpretation and education as related to all Forest resources; and expand[ing] recreational capacity by developing new recreational facilities and trails in response to user demands and where appropriate to management area objectives (CRLRMP, 3-8, 3-9). Forest Plan direction for the Kenai Peninsula Geographic Area, where the Whistle Stop project is located, dictates that ‘during the summer season nonmotorized use will predominate across the area. These opportunities will include hiking, camping, mountain biking, fishing, hunting and mountaineering with opportunities for canoeing, rafting and other forms of boating on lakes and rivers...Campgrounds or similar developments (i.e., “Whistle Stop”) along the Alaska Railroad between Moose Pass and Portage may also be available (CRLRMP, 3-15).’

Proposed Action

Recreation Facilities

The project proposal calls for a variety of recreation facility developments that are summarized below:

- **Whistle Stop stations.** Six backcountry Whistle Stop stations are proposed for development along approximately 25 miles of Alaska Railroad track between Luebner Lake and Trail Creek. The six proposed stops, from north to south include: Luebner Lake, Spencer Lake, Bartlett Glacier, Grandview, Hunter and Trail Creek. Each Whistle Stop station will be American With Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant, have the same general appearance and include the following components:
 - A safe loading/unloading platform
 - Hard surface (gravel, boardwalk, etc.) connecting loading/unloading platform to the general use area
 - General use area that will consist of:
 - Shelter with seating for visitors and area housing a wheelchair lift
 - Restroom facilities
 - Bear proof trash receptacles
 - Sign boards with train schedule and information
 - Kiosks providing information and education to recreationists
 - Additional signage stating various Forest Service and Alaska Railroad regulations

- **Public use cabins.** Six public-use cabins are proposed for development along various sections of the trail system.

- **Group campsite.** One group campsite, capable of accommodating at least 150 people is proposed for development in the Spencer Lake area.

- **Backcountry dispersed hardened overnight sites.** A total of 34 sites are proposed throughout the project area (please see detail listed in the appendix for individual Whistle Stop Station areas). The criteria to establish their location include: developing sites that are out of sight and sound of each other; located at least 100' from water and trails; location is close to potable water and is near views and attractions. Types of amenities that may be included at these backcountry sites include: cleared, level ground; a bathroom facility; fire ring; and bear-proof food locker.

- **Trail system.**
 - A system consisting of approximately 44 miles of new trails are proposed for the project area. The backbone of this trail system is the proposed Placer Valley Trail which will connect the Whistle Stops of Luebner Lake, Spencer Lake, Bartlett Glacier and Grandview. Spur trails off of the Placer Valley Trail will be located in the Spencer Lake, Bartlett Glacier and Grandview areas.
 - The majority of the trail system is planned for development that will create trails with an obvious and continuous, clearly defined trail tread that will generally be clear of major obstacles. The remaining portion of the trail system will be more highly developed with a smoother, wider tread that will generally involve more gradual increases or decreases in grade.
 - The majority of the trail system would be designed and actively managed for hiker/pedestrian and bicycle use.
 - At least 12 bridges will be constructed along the trail system, the majority of which will be simple drainage crossings. There will be the need to construct at least 1 larger bridge in the project area.
 - Easements will be established where necessary to survey, construct and manage certain trail segments that cross lands not administered by the Forest Service. As identified in this proposed action, proposed trail segments totaling approximately 3 miles cross land owned by the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources.

- **Rafting take out locations.** The rafting take-out locations at Luebner Lake and Trail Creek will include a platform that will allow for safe transfer of gear from the platform to the rail car. Additionally, at both sites a temporary storage facility (approximately 250 square feet) for rafting gear will be constructed and located at these locations from May-September. Use of these facilities will be for the main purpose of storing equipment used by outfitters and guides who conduct raft trips in the Spencer/Placer and Trail Creek areas. At these two Whistle Stop locations, a pedestrian crossing will be established allowing visitors to safely move to the designated waiting area of the Whistle Stop station.

- **Wildlife and Scenic viewing platforms.**
 - Two wildlife viewing platforms, approximately 40' x 60' each, including interpretive kiosks and viewfinders would be located along the boardwalk trail at the Luebner Lake Whistle Stop.
 - A wildlife and scenic viewing platform, approximately 40' x 60', including interpretive kiosks and viewfinders would be located along the boardwalk trail at the Grandview Whistle Stop.

Train schedule

The Whistle Stop train service plans to be facilitated with use of a self-propelled rail car that is both quieter and more fuel efficient than the current Railroad trains that traverse the project area. Capacity of these self-propelled rail cars are approximately 80-85 people per unit, with this proposal calling for two attached rail cars to transport visitors to each Whistle Stop station.

Currently the Alaska Railroad conducts daily business, carrying both freight and passengers, throughout the project area multiple times per day. In terms of passenger business, up to three trains per day visit the project area: The Coastal Classic and Glacier Discovery both operate daily from mid-May to mid-September and a train chartered by Cruise Ship companies periodically traverses the project area. The following table exhibits both the currently existing passenger train service in the project area, as well as the proposed future Whistle Stop train service.

Existing and proposed Alaska Railroad Passenger service in the project area

Service	Name of trip	Train Route	Capacity	Round trips /day
Existing	Coastal Classic	Anchorage-Portage-Seward	300	1
Existing	Glacier Discovery	Portage-Spencer-Grandview	300	1
Existing	Grandview (Chartered cruise ship trips)	Varies	300	1 or less
Proposed	Whistle Stop service	Portage-Grandview-Trail Creek	170	4

The Whistle Stop service, as proposed, will make four round trips per day from Portage to Trail Creek, potentially stopping at a different combination of Whistle Stops each trip. One round trip, stopping at each Whistle Stop station, would take approximately 4 hours to complete.

Details of Proposed Activities

In order to help understand the project proposal, attachments to this document have been divided into “Whistle Stop areas.” Each “Whistle Stop area” is broken down in detail on

the individual sheets in the Appendix section. These maps and information tables provide background on items such as trail length and development scale; managed and prohibited uses of trails; and additional recreation facility developments by geographical location.

Decision to be made

The Forest Service will evaluate the proposed action and alternatives. From your comments, and the work of resource specialists, the Forest Supervisor will reach a decision that is in accordance with the purpose and need for this project.

The decision will include, but not be limited to:

- What Whistle Stop stations will be developed in the project area
- The type and dimensions of facilities that will be developed at each Whistle Stop station
- The type and dimensions of facilities that will be developed throughout the Whistle Stop project area
- The level of development for all newly developed trails
- The designed, managed and prohibited uses for all trail segments

How you can help

Please review this information and take the time to give us feedback on our proposal. You may use the enclosed form, call, or send us an email. We will be considering your comments to develop alternatives, design resource protection measures, and analyze the potential effects of these actions in a draft environmental analysis.

All comments received will be considered. Please submit your comments to the address listed below:

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