

Management Unit 15

North Gakona Junction

General Description

Management Unit 15 extends for 18 miles from Milepost 145 (approximately three miles south of Sourdough) to approximately 3/4 mile south of Gakona Junction. It passes through a fairly enclosed corridor of spruce-hardwood forest, paralleling the Gulkana River on its east side. The visual experience of the Gulkana River Lowlands' landscape character is not particularly distinctive. The traveler has the opportunity for several brief lateral views to the Wrangell Mountains and the Gulkana River banks; however, most of the views are filtered by foreground vegetation. The opening created by the road ahead often offers outstanding views south to Mt. Drum and Mt. Sanford, and distant views of the Alaska Range to the north. Other than these opportunities, the view corridor is quite enclosed, resulting in little visual variety for the traveler.



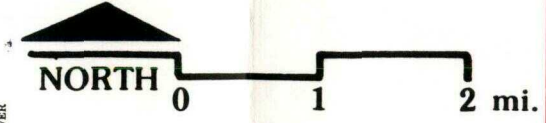
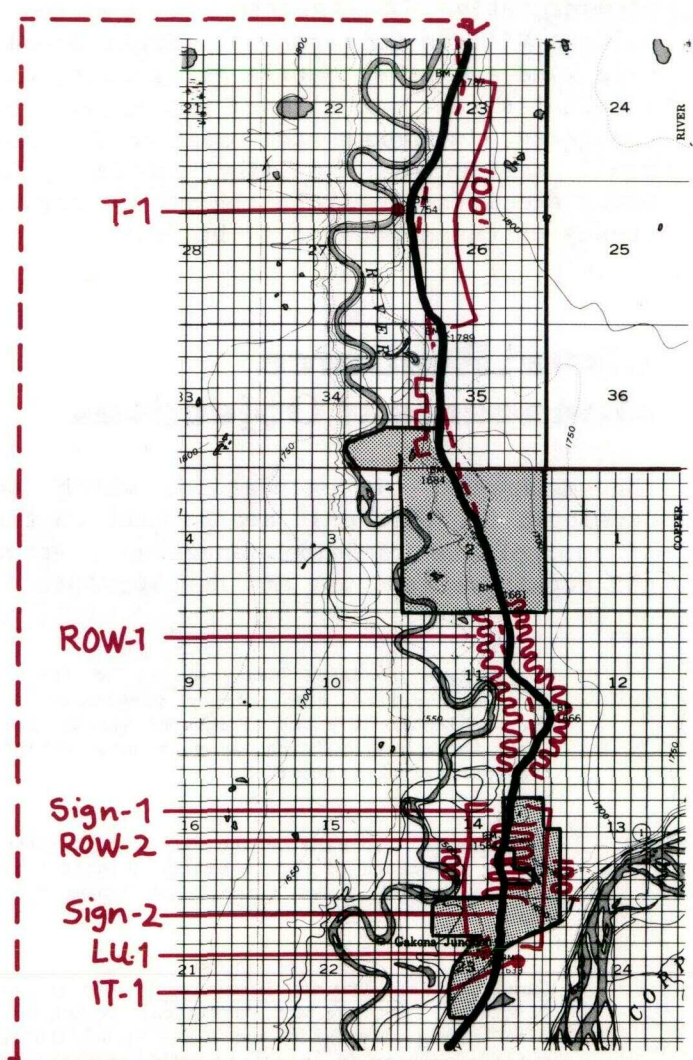
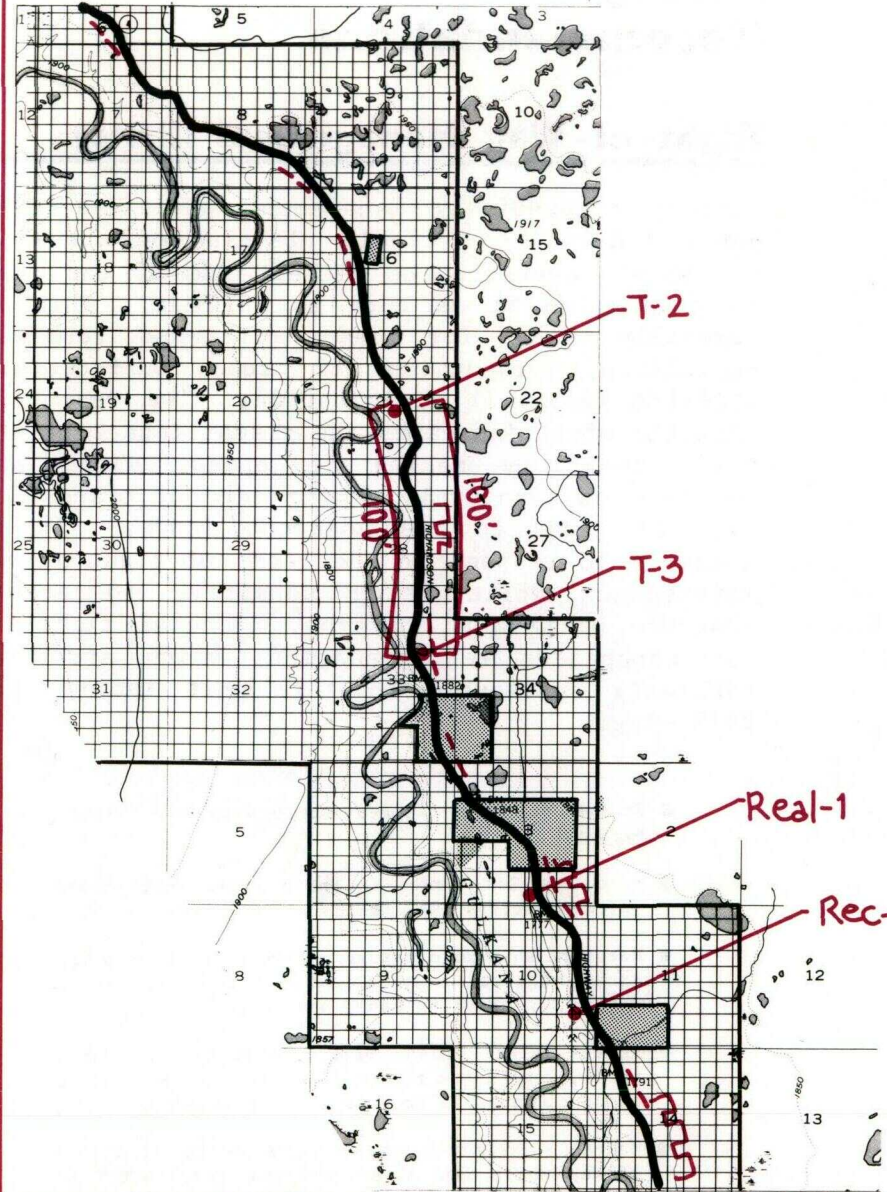
The Gulkana River lowlands are characterized by fairly dense spruce forests. Right-of-way clearing typically creates a broad, monotonous corridor which can be corrected by more sensitive management practices.

Minimal amounts of land development activities occur along this portion of the Richardson. The predominant visible landscape alteration is that associated with right-of-way management practices. The major traveler attraction along this route is focused around the Gulkana River. Several existing and potential trail heads and river access points occur throughout the corridor.

Gakona Junction, the intersection of the Richardson and east Glenn highways, is a particularly important focus for travelers because it is a major entry point into this area from the "Outside".

15 North Gakona Junction

Assessment Units R14-R19



- KEY**
- T- Turnout
 - Real- Proposed Realignment
 - Rec- Recreation
 - ROW- Right-of-Way Mgt.
 - Sign- Roadway Signing
 - IT- Information Turnout
 - 100' - View Management
 - 100' - Greenbelt
 - LU- Land Use
 - [Grid Pattern] Native Corp. Land
 - [Horizontal Lines] Federal Land
 - [Stippled Pattern] Private Land

Land Ownership & Management Responsibility

Land adjacent to the highway within this unit is predominantly in interim conveyance to the Gulkana Village Corporation. Small areas of private land and other Native allotments, as well as material sites, and oil and gas right-of-ways are scattered throughout the corridor. Other than trail easements, the only public lands which occur are located within the 300 foot road right-of-way which is managed by DOTPF.

Visual Resource Management Objectives

The management recommendations which have been developed for this unit are focused on the themes of appropriate roadside management, enhancement, and sensitive land use and development.

Appropriate Roadside Management: To institute more appropriate right-of-way management practices which improve the foreground visual experience while maintaining a safe and efficient transportation corridor.

Enhancement: To enhance the visual experience by taking advantage of opportunities to create additional lateral views through landscape alteration.

Sensitive Land Use and Development: To encourage sensitive land use and development which introduce visual diversity and add visual interest while remaining in character with the surrounding landscape.

Management Recommendations

Right-of-Way Management (ROW)

Current right-of-way management practices commonly consist of periodic clearing of all tree and shrub vegetation on either side of the road to a distance of as much as 35 feet. This is generally done for ease of snow removal, visibility, protection of road surfaces, and wildlife road-kill minimization. The resultant clearing often increases the visual impact of the road itself by making it appear wider and creating an unnatural looking edge or transition from the road to the adjacent lands. It is possible to respond to the needs of right-of-way maintenance while being sensitive to scenic resource management concerns. General right-of-way management recommendations which are particularly applicable to this unit include the following:

- Remove or burn cleared slash from the right-of-way.
- Encourage low shrubs in those areas where moose movement across the road is known to occur.
- Reestablish a more natural, irregular edge to the dense vegetation by allowing trees to intrude within the existing management area.
- Retain larger trees, particularly the deciduous trees, within the right-of-way and allow them to be as close as 15 feet from the road edge.
- Maintain maximum natural vegetation in the right-of-way where new alignments are constructed in order to provide screening of the vacated road-way.

- Where not more intensively managed for viewing opportunities, maintain the natural vegetation of the right-of-way lands as a visual buffer to roadside development and a natural foreground to the surrounding landscape.

In addition to these general recommendations, the following sites have been identified for specific attention:

- ROW-1 Several clearings along both sides of the highway within the area designated on the management unit map have created unnatural openings which do not offer any particular visual interest nor open any views. The introduction of dense plantings of wildflowers such as lupine and vetch and allowing brush and trees to follow, will help create more visual interest and reduce the visual impact of these clearings.
- ROW-2 The road cuts conflict with the landform shapes of the surrounding landscape. The visual impact can be reduced by regrading and softening the sharp edges and planar faces and encouraging revegetation to take place. Seeding with nitrogen-fixing clover, lupine, vetch, and alder would help recondition soils for more rapid revegetation.

View Management (V)

The visual experience throughout this corridor could be readily enhanced with selective and strategic thinning and clearing along the roadside to open up views and add variety. In most cases, thinning of vegetation is preferred to clearing in order to maintain the natural forested character. Several areas have been identified through the field study where selective thinning would open views to either the Wrangell Mountains or the Gulkana River. These locations are indicated on the unit map.

In addition, realignment planning and construction should take advantage of opportunities to open views. With careful pre-planning, the sensitive siting of material sites, construction staging areas, and other clearings can provide openings to distinctive distant views while retaining the necessary vegetation to minimize any negative visual impacts.

Thinning and clearing of vegetation for private roadside development should also take advantage of this opportunity to add needed spatial variety and interest to the overall landscape. Right-of-way management practices should also take advantage of clearings on adjacent lands for more distant views.

Proposed Road Realignments (Real)

DOTPF has recommended realignments for several portions of the road within this management unit. All of the proposed realignments appear to be for the purpose of flattening curves and creating a straighter roadway. The resultant series of long tangents and broad sweeping curves will reduce the interest of the driving experience by eliminating the slightly winding nature of the road which reflects the sinuous nature of the nearby Gulkana River. Additionally, the vacated alignments would create an abundance of visually unattractive clearings.

The proposed realignments should be reevaluated and other alternatives should be considered which would improve road safety and travel efficiency. Upgrading the existing alignment through widening and resurfacing is generally preferred within

this unit from a visual resource management perspective.

Any realignments which are implemented should be accompanied by on-site pre-construction planning to facilitate the retention of sufficient right-of-way vegetation to provide screening of the vacated alignments. Some of the proposed realignments have been identified as opportunities for developing roadside turnouts for scenic viewpoints or trailhead parking. Site specific recommendations for these can be found in the Turnout discussion (T-1, T-2, T-3). Any vacated alignments which are not developed as turnouts should be immediately reclaimed so natural revegetation can begin.

Real-1 This proposed realignment would reduce the visual interest of the driving experience by eliminating the view of an old sod roof house on the west side of the road. This feature of historical and cultural interest provides a significant focus for travelers which should be retained. Existing alignments should be upgraded (widened and resurfaced) in preference to realignment.

Land Use & Development (LU)

Private development visible from the road within this unit could enhance the driving experience by adding visual variety and interest as well as opening up lateral views. Some suggestions for individual landowners and native corporations to consider in planning development include the following:

- Site structures far enough away from the road edge to minimize the impact of highway traffic on development activities.

- Vary building setbacks to maintain visual diversity.
- Utilize the visual absorption capability of dense vegetation to provide a buffer from the highway.
- Concentrate commercial and industrial development near the north Glenn-Richardson junction for greater access and visibility.

LU-1 The DOTPF landscape architect who is developing the right-of-way management plan should work cooperatively with the Glenn-Rich Hotel-Cafe-Gas landowner to determine appropriate right-of-way plantings for the area bordering this commercial establishment. This would serve to both enhance the development and to soften the visual impact of the structures and oversized clearing.

Greenbelts

In keeping with the overall visual resource management objectives for this unit, the greenbelt concept could be an appropriate management tool for both sensitive development and enhancement of the driving experience. A greenbelt could help to insure that roadside land developments are adequately set back and enough of the natural landcover is retained to maintain the scale and character of the surrounding landscape.

Since no implementation mechanism exists for greenbelts in this area (due to private and Native land ownership), it would be largely up to individuals to voluntarily adopt this policy. The greatest potential for implementation lies with the Native corporation which manages large blocks of land within the unit. The corporation could designate greenbelts on their lands adjacent to the road and establish appropriate development guidelines. The following recommen-

dations are made regarding greenbelts in this area:

Width: In areas with high visual absorption capability, a 25 foot greenbelt beyond the right-of-way edge should be adopted.

In areas with moderate or low visual absorption capability, a 100 foot greenbelt is recommended. Only those areas which require a 100 foot greenbelt are indicated on the unit map. A 25 foot greenbelt is sufficient for the remainder of the unit.

- Retain a minimum of 25% of the natural vegetation within the greenbelt management area.
- Encourage the retention of deciduous trees and the clearing of spruce where appropriate to open up filtered views.
- Allow complete clearing of vegetation which would open up distant views of landscape features such as Mt. Drum, Mt. Sanford, or the Gulkana River Valley. Strive to maintain an uneven or natural appearing edge to clearings.
- Encourage greenbelt management which is compatible with right-of-way management objectives.

Information Turnouts (IT)

Since this management unit includes the junction of two major highways the east Glenn Highway, or Tok Cutoff, and the Richardson - it is important that a roadway information turnout be developed here.

IT-1 An analysis of the junction site indicates that the most appropriate location for such a turnout would be on the southeast corner of the intersection within the highway right-of-way. This site would provide the highest visibility

and greatest convenience for travelers coming from either direction. Development at this site, currently a wide gravel clearing, will necessitate some reclamation and site improvements, including:

- Encourage natural vegetation to intrude from the south edge to reduce the visual scale of the clearing.
- Using native vegetation, develop and maintain a landscaped area within the triangle formed by the turnout and the two highways.
- Retain the existing entrances/exits from the Richardson and Glenn Highways.
- Provide an information board or kiosk with information relevant to travel opportunities and road conditions both north and south on the Richardson Highway and east and west on the Glenn Highway.
- Provide signs 1/4 mile from the junction in all three directions to announce the presence of this turnout.

Turnouts (T) & Recreation (Rec)

The traveler's appreciation of this landscape could be enhanced by developing a series of turnouts which provide opportunities for photographing, hiking, picnicking and other recreational activities. Although there are no existing scenic turnouts within this unit, the following turnouts have been recommended:

T - 1 Gulkana River Viewpoint: The proposed realignment would vacate a 1/4 mile loop road with views of the Gulkana River from the top of the hill. View management through selective thinning within the right-of-way would be necessary to maximize the scenic view potential. The vacated alignment should be retained as a paved turnout. Maximum



By using a vacated road alignment as a turnout, an excellent view of Mt. Drum can become the setting for a peaceful roadside picnic area.

vegetation should be retained in the right-of-way between the old and new alignments to provide screening from the highway.

T-2 Trailhead: Flattening the curve here would create a widening in the road which could be maintained and designated as a parking area for the existing trailhead. Notice of the trail location can be improved by placing a graphic trail symbol 1/8 mile on either side of the turnout.

T-3 Lake Viewpoint: The proposed realignment would leave vacant a 1/4 mile loop around the west side of a small lake offering views across the lake to the Wrangells and west to the Gulkana River banks. This site has potential for development as a small picnic area with 2 to 3 tables and

well-screened trash receptacles. Development will require retaining the paving on the vacated alignment and vegetation within the right-of-way between the two alignments. The vegetation will screen from view the new alignment without infringing on views toward the Wrangells.

REC-1 Potential Camping Area and Trailhead: Sourdough Campground, located approximately eleven miles north of this site, is a heavily used small campground (15 camp sites). The development of this apparently vacated material site as an overflow camping area could help to absorb some of the area's heavy demand. The site is completely screened from the highway and would thus require some informational signing at the roadside. There is an existing trail at the site which leads to the Gulkana River along a small creek. Development of this site should include some regrading and planting vegetation within the clearing to relieve its open, expansive character. Toilets and trash receptacles should be provided.

Roadway Signing.

The visibility of highway related information signs is critical, particularly near major road junctions. In order to maintain their visibility and at the same time minimize the cluttered effect of a long series of signs, only those which are essential to the specific junction should be posted near it. Additionally, the size of informational signs should be appropriately scaled to accommodate the road width and traffic speed. Specific recommendations for signage improvement north of Gulkana Junction include the following:

Sign-1 Relocate "Fine for Littering" sign away from the junction and other speed related signs to break up the cluttered effect, both visually and infor-

mationally and to give more prominence to the littering message.

Sign-2 The "Mileage to Destination" sign appears to be excessively large for this two-lane section of the highway where traffic is slowed due to the proximity to the junction. The size of the sign could be reduced and the sign could be relocated with a vegetation backdrop to minimize its unnecessary visual dominance on the landscape.

In addition, many trailheads which are located at the roadside are inadequately signed for easy location or safe entry and exit. The location of all public trails should be designated with signs on the roadside 1/8-1/10 mile on either side of the trailhead.