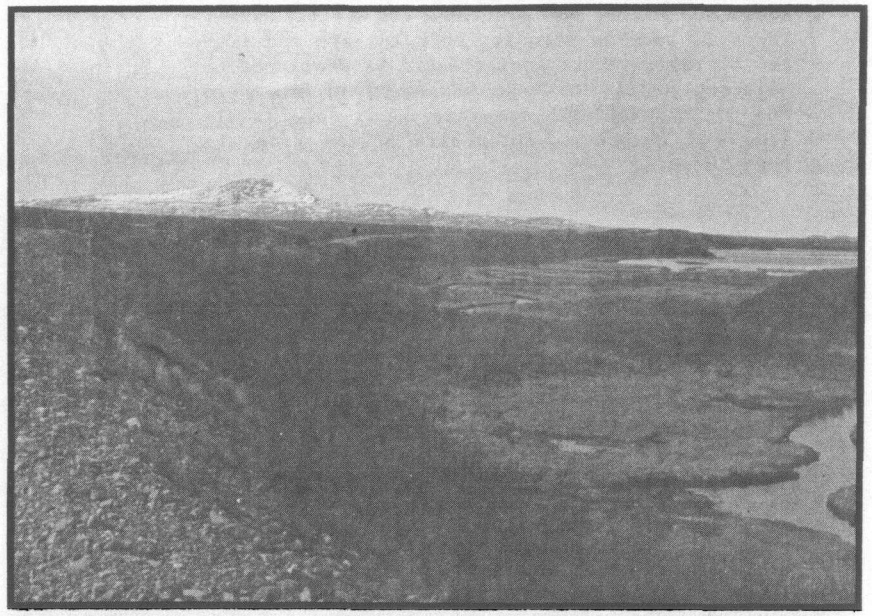
Clearwater & Osar Creeks



The sinuous form of the esker bordered by Osar Creek gives this unit its unique character. Roadside interpretive information is necessary to explain the geological feature to an untrained eye.

General Description

In 13.8 mile long Management Unit 6, the Denali Road crosses a broad glaciated valley, bordered by the Clearwater Mountains on the west and Crazy Notch on the east. On either side of the road the terrain is flat to gently rolling and covered by high brush vegetation. To the north and west, the views are enclosed by the peaks of the Clearwater Mountains and the Alaska Range. The steep mountain ranges are in stark contrast to the flat foreground, and thus are dominant visual elements throughout this unit. To the south, the flat plain extends for miles to distant foothills. Because of the general lack of visual interest in this direction, most of the viewer's orientation focuses on the northern, mountain-enclosed scenery. In addition to the mountains, interesting waterforms highlight this unit. Clearwater and Osar Creeks, as well as small glacially formed lakes, are scattered along portions of the road. Their meandering paths and sinuous shapes add visual interest to the foreground views. The lakes are also good sites for fishing, bird watching and beaver observation.

The road in this unit is built on the top of two long eskers, one of the several unique glacial landforms characteristic of the valley. From the vantage point of the esker above the valley floor, there are interesting views of the distinctive, glacially-shaped terrain.

6 Clearwater & Osar Creeks

Assessment Units D35 – D40

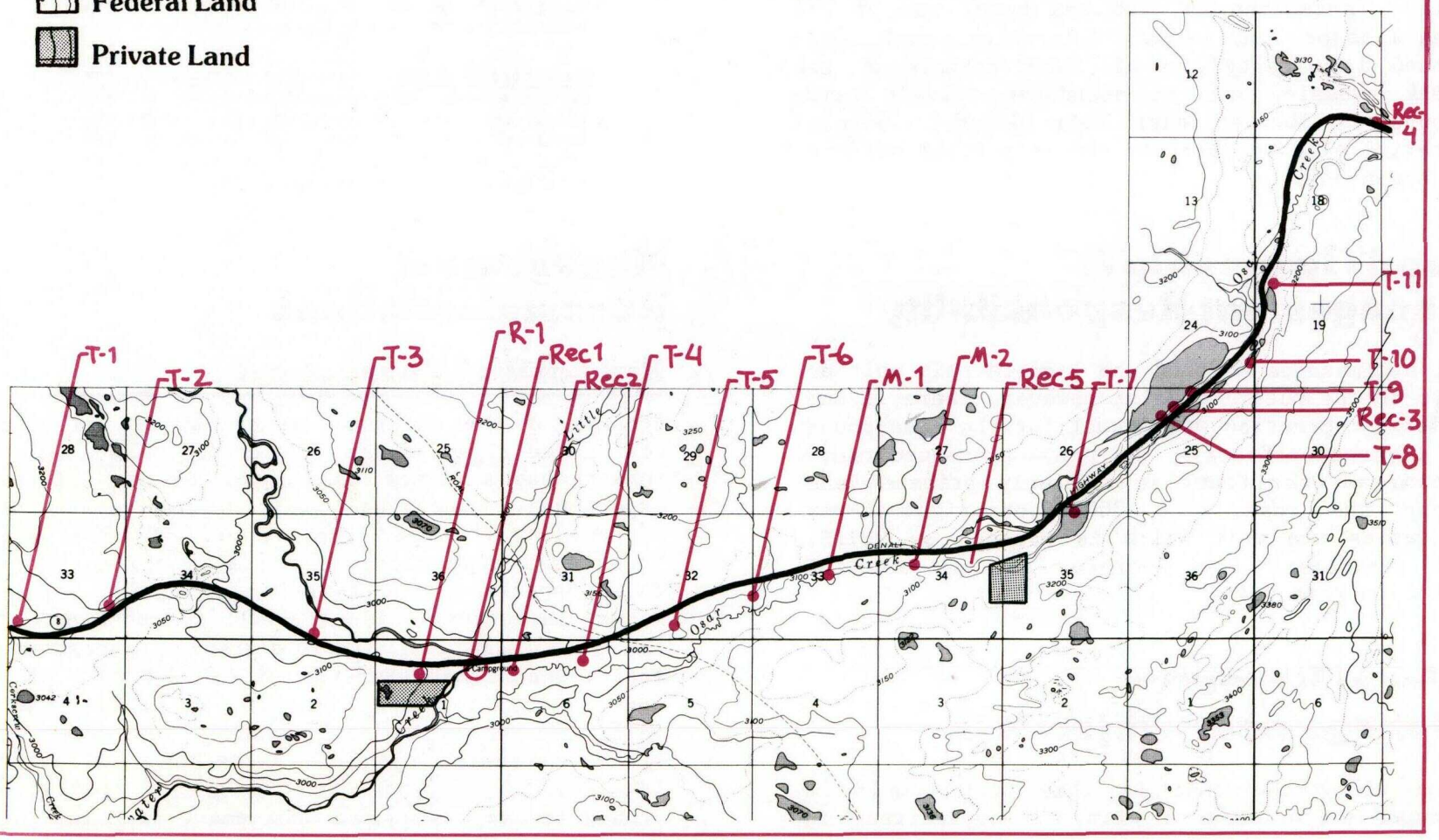
KEY

T- Turnout
R- Reclamation
Rec- Recreation
M- Impact Mitigation

Federal Land

Private Land

NORTH 0 1 2 mi.



The scenery in this unit is much less dramatic than other areas along the Denali and the landform characteristics are much more subtle. The visual absorption capability is low because of the absence of vegetation screening potential and the openness of the terrain. The land is also marshy in many areas which places a constraint on the area's development potential.

At present, there is little development in this unit. Recreation is, and has been, one of the area's major land uses. Clearwater Creek campground is situated on all four corners of the creek crossing and an abandoned private campground is located near Osar Creek. Several material sites constitute the only other evidence of human use.

Land Ownership & Management Responsibility

The BLM manages most of the land in this unit as part of the public domain; however, there is one federal recreation withdrawal for the campground at Clearwater Creek. The privately-owned campground at Osar Creek is the only private land along the road. A 300 foot right-of-way traverses the unit which is managed by DOTPF. The department also oversees several material sites in this unit.

Visual Resource Management Objectives

Land along the road in this unit should be managed in accordance with the objectives of: retention, appropriate roadside management, and sensitive land use.

Retention: To retain the visual quality of the area which, though the landforms are subtle rather than dramatic, is important to the overall wild and scenic quality of the Denali Road.

Appropriate Roadside Management: To manage both the right-of-way and the adjacent viewshed in a manner that is sensitive to the fragile scenic quality of the open landscape and attempts to maintain its natural, undisturbed quality.

Sensitive Land Use: To foster recreational use of the area by improving and enhancing existing facilities and encouraging the sensitive development of new ones; and to ensure that other development in the unit respects the sensitivity of its scenic resources.

Management Recommendations

Right-of-Way Management

Because of the complete visibility of all land within the right-of-way, its condition and maintenance has a significant impact on the driving experience. Throughout Unit 6 the vegetation surrounding the road consists of high and low brush that grow close to the edge of the road. There appears to be little or no active right-of-way management. Plant growth is contained at the road edge and its low-growing characteristics means that there is no interference with road visibility. As a result, the road blends well with the natural surroundings and there is little intrusion upon the landscape. Allowing low brush to encroach upon the graded road edge should become a standard management practice for

DOTPF's road maintenance crews along this portion of the Denali.

Greenbelts

The openness of the landscape means that the critical scenic management area is much wider than the right-of-way. Because most of the land in the unit is publicly owned, a greenbelt can be established and managed in conjunction with the right-of-way to provide the needed scenic resource protection. A 1-mile wide greenbelt is recommended for the full length of the unit because of the area's low visual absorption capability.

The greenbelt designation should not imply a total prohibition on use or development; instead, the following guidelines would apply to all proposed uses:

- Minimize vegetation clearing or disruption (the right-of-way should be retained in natural vegetation to the extent possible and all disturbance minimized. In general, any new material sites should be located outside this area.)
- Encourage recreational uses that do not require facilities development outside development nodes. Concentrate development at Clearwater Creek, on the eskers, and near the glacial lakes where the landforms and soils are conducive to use.
- Discourage settlement, mining and, mineral leasing within the greenbelt.
- Minimize the number of access roads through the greenbelt and align them so they are sensitive to topography and landform.
- Locate material sites in the greenbelt only if well-screened or otherwise hidden from view.
- Prepare a visual impact assessment for any major development proposed to be located within the greenbelt.

Land Use & Development

Although this unit has lower intrinsic visual quality than most areas along the Denali Road, it is nevertheless an important unit in terms of the transitional role it plays between riverine and montane areas. Moreover, its openness and the visibility of the entire valley make it sensitive to visible development. Therefore, any new land use or development should be guided by standards designed to protect scenic quality.

Settlement is generally discouraged in this area due to its low visual absorption capability. In particular, it is recommended that BLM not open this area to settlement through one of its disposal programs. However, as the scenic resource values are lower here than other portions of the Denali, opening this area is preferable to others with higher scenic values. In any case, development should follow guidelines designed to protect visual quality, at the very least using distance and topography to screen development from view.

While allowed, mining leasing outside the greenbelt should also be subject to the following scenic management guidelines:

- Minimize land clearing
- Locate access roads to conform to local landforms and topography
- Site all structures so as to minimize their visibility from the road

Recreation (Rec)

With its many lakes and creeks and opportunities for fishing, camping or hiking, this unit is a suitable area for recreation use. These uses should be located where the combination of terrain and natural features provide screening as well as a desirable recreation experience. Dispersed use is appropriate throughout the unit, but facilities development should be concentrated in selected locations. Those areas identified for additional use include Clearwater Creek, several locations on the eskers near the small lakes, and the lakes to the west of Crazy Notch. (For a general discussion of recreation development guidelines, see the Findings and Recommendations for the Denali Wild and Scenic Road.)

The following are recommendations for specific sites in this unit:

Rec.1 The Clearwater Creek Campground straddles the four corners of the creek crossing. Screened from the surrounding area by the hilly topography, it is an excellent site for active recreational use. Currently popular as a pull-off and rest area, the site has good fishing and hiking opportunities. The campground design, however, is in need of improvement. Each of the four corners is an open gravel parking lot immediately next to the road with no screening or privacy. Neither are the campsites defined. The one vault toilet serving the facility is placed next to the creek. All in all, the campground presents an unattractive appearance.

The development on all four corners of the creek inhibits an orientation to the water since there is always a campsite for a view backdrop. Therefore, two corners should be retained for use, probably the two to the west, and the other two should be reclaimed and revegetated. The overnight use area should be pulled back from the river—either by expanding and redesigning the site or locating it up the hill at Rec. 2. The toilet should be relocated at the base of the hill where it can be better screened from view. The creek side sites are preferable for day use because the area is open and privacy limited. The entrances to the rest area and bridge ends should be planted with low plants or brush to better define the entrance and soften the present harsh appearance. The bridge would blend more harmoniously with the surrounding landscape if it were painted in brown, dark green or rust.

Rec. 2 Up the hill to the east of Clearwater Creek is an old material site which could be developed as the overnight camping area or as an overflow area for Clearwater Creek. It is set off the road in a screened location and has excellent views from its elevated vantage point. Access is convenient and safe. The gravel pad provides a good foundation for site development; but it requires some leveling, site design and landscaping. Although 1/10 mile from the creek, a trail could be easily provided that would link the two. The DOTPF also recommends developing this site as a turnout.

Rec.3 This existing boating/fishing access site on a small lake below an esker could be developed for regular use. The short road to the lake is steep and narrow, and if use continues, the road should be graded, the entrance enlarged, and signs placed to note the entry as it is around a corner that lacks clear visibility.

Rec.4 This old material site outside the entrance to Crazy Notch is recommended for development as a rest area or small, undeveloped camping area (2-3 sites). Distant views of the Talkeetnas and the foothills of the Clearwater Mountains and several kettle lakes are the sites amenities. Several short trails could be developed across some of the morainal landforms. Site development would require reclamation and contouring of the gravel pit and some site expansion to the north. (This may be a site recommended by DOTPF).

Rec.5 The one private landholding in this unit is located in an area highly sensitive to development. The Jim Moore Campground is an open gravel rectangle the size of a football field, lacking landscaping or screening. Its location on an open slope makes it visible along the road for several miles in either direction. Boarded-up buildings and general site disarray indicate the facility is abandoned. The owner is encouraged to remove the old buildings and clutter. It would be desirable to reclaim the site; but if use is to continue, the campground would benefit from site design and landscaping to soften the existing hard edges and give some privacy to the campground.

This is a poor site for development because of the open terrain and absence of vegetation. Future development should attempt to avoid such locations.

Road grading across turnout entrances creates a ridge of loose rock that makes access difficult, evident at this pull off which is recommended to contain an interpretive display about the esker. The litter barrel placed in the center of the view is also distracting.

Turnouts (T)

There are numerous roadside turnouts in this unit, many of them created as a result of materials extraction within the right-of-way. Once an area is cleared and the material source exhausted, sites have generally been left to function as turnouts. While turnouts are necessary to meet travelers' needs, this practice has raised several concerns in this unit relating to: (1) The number of turnouts and (2) turnout access.

(1) Retention or reclamation of turnouts. In Unit 6 there are gravel widenings as frequently as every 1/4 mile, and generally occur at 1/2-3/4 mile intervals. Most of these sites are old road maintenance sites where the remaining pads form the foundation for the turnout. The retention of all these areas is not necessary, and, in fact, their sheer number tends to increase the road's visual impact. Those sites that are most suitable as turnouts—because of their adequate size, view potential, location with respect to adjacent turnouts, safe entry/exit, and ease of maintenance—should be identified by the DOTPF as part of their road management operations. Other

sites should be graded so their contours conform to their natural surroundings, or have access closed and then be allowed to revegetate naturally or through replanting. These gravel sites are too numerous to identify individually, although many are noted on the assessment unit sheets on file at DNR. As part of defining an overall maintenance program for the road, the DOTPF should identify sites appropriate for retention and sites for reclamation and then manage them accordingly.

(2) Safe and easy access to roadside turnouts is extremely important for driving comfort and public safety. Present grading practices on the Denali Road create rough or impassable entrances to numerous turnouts that do exist. Graders run their blades along the edge of the road creating a furrow and ridge of gravel across the entire turnout entrance. The gravel is soft and loose and the ridges are sometimes 12 inches high, prohibiting use. It is impossible to leave the road smoothly and, in some particularly bad areas, there is the danger of getting mired in the gravel. Thus cars stop completely outside the turnouts, creating hazardous driving conditions. This problem can be corrected by more sensitive and careful road grading. Graders should contour and smooth the entry/exit and surface of the turnouts identified for retention. This should become a standard management practice for turnouts along the road.

T-1 This site is an existing gravel widening that should be retained because of its interesting views of the esker. Very little site improvement is needed except for contouring and grading the entrance.

T-2 This segment of the road is aligned along the top of an esker for approximately 1.6 miles and its elevated position in the landscape provides good views of the Clearwater Mountains and the nearby glacial terrain. Because it is a good vantage point for viewing the esker, this is a good site for an interpretive sign describing the esker and the processes which formed it. BLM recommended this as one of its 18 interpretive sites in the 1976 Denali Highway Information Plan. DOTPF included this as one of its recommended turnouts. The site is an existing turnout, with a bright orange litter barrel located in the center. The size is ample to accomodate 6-10 cars. No major site improvements are needed. The litter barrel is unsightly and out of scale with the open landscape and should be replaced by a buried trash receptacle or several shorter barrels located at the edge, not the center, of the turnout.

The road enters and exits the esker through steep gravel cuts which enclose the road and create a pleasant sense of arrival or departure to this unique area.

T-3 This existing widening should be retained as a turnout. It has views of the Clearwater Mountains and a vista of Carob Chip Mountain. Only minimal grading is needed to improve the site.

T-4 This turnout is recommended to take advantage of the panoramic views to the south of the rolling glacial terrain and distant mountains. Very few improvements are required except clearing some low brush and site grading.

T-5 This DOTPF recommended turnout is located on a small knoll and has good views. While it is a good site for a turnout, others nearby should take higher priority.

T-6 Views of distant mountains and shallow valleys as well as safe and convenient road access make this a desirable site for turnout development. Some clearing and grading are required.

T-7 This recommended turnout has pleasant distant views and is near several lakes which offer the potential for some recreational use. Minimal

site development or maintenance is required to make the turnout usable.

T-8-10 These three existing turnouts on the esker only require grading. They each are expressive of their esker location and also offer views of lakes and distant mountains. T-9 is a particularly large site with open and expressive views. This is a second priority site for a sign interpreting the esker.

T-11 Currently, there are two existing turnouts, at this location, one on either side of the road, providing access to lakes adjacent to the esker.

The small site on the north side should be closed and allowed to revegetate, while the larger site near the lake should be developed for use. Filling a small ravine near the road, vegetative screening, and relocating the unsightly litter barrel would make this an attractive turnout. It appears that the DOTPF also recommends this turnout.

Material Sites & Reclamation (R)

Materials sites are located at regular intervals throughout this unit. They are often located immediately off the road because of easy access with little regard for their visual impact from the road. Active sites should be managed to mitigate their negative impacts while greater care should be taken in selecting future sites.

- All new sites should be located outside the right-of-way and screened by topography, berms or vegetation. Where possible, they should also be located outside the greenbelt. When glacial landforms are used as a source--such as small morainal features--the material should be taken from the side away from the view. In open landscapes, new sites should be located on the side of the road away from the major views. Sensitive material extraction also requires careful location and alignment of access roads to conform with surrounding landforms.
- When no longer in use, the sites should be assessed for their value as turnouts or rest areas. If they are suitable and the need exists for the turnout, they should be developed for that use. Otherwise, they should be recontoured and/or have access closed and allowed to revegetate naturally.
- Whenever possible, active sites visible from the road should be screened with vegetation or a berm. Although others are noted on the assessment unit maps, one site in particular requires immediate reclamation:

R-1 When no longer in use, this site should have high priority for reclamation and revegetation.

Impact Mitigation (M)

Because it is an area crossed with numerous glacial streams, culverts are often required for water drainage. Some of these are in need of maintenance.

M-1 This eroding culvert serves a small tributary of Osar Creek and is causing road settling and erosion problems. To eliminate the problem, the culvert should be adequately sized and redesigned and the road repaired.

M-2 This visually obtrusive culvert should be screened with vegetation and/or painted an earthen tone to minimize the color contrast with the landscape.

Roadway Signing

The road signs and mileposts in this unit are in varying states of disrepair and the mileposts are incorrectly placed. The mileposts should be correctly calibrated and other roadway signs replaced.