

WILL THIS BE “A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED”?

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Introduction

A road connecting the capital city of Juneau, Alaska, to the interstate highway system has long been considered, in hopes of achieving the following:

- Increased convenience to traveler
- Reduced state costs
- Lower travelers' expense
- Improved flexibility
- Lower travel time
- Encouraging tourism



Fig. 1. Route of road and ferry with proximal cities



Fig. 2. Sign at current road's end at Echo Cove. Note bumper sticker added by someone with strong feelings.

Materials and methods

Using a base Landsat map overlain on a USGS topographic map, the road was demarcated with the DOT Supplemental Draft EIS as a reference. A file of slide data from the US Forest Service was added as a layer, depicting the areas where mitigation will be necessary.

Results



Fig. 3. Road alignment with USFS slide data

Fig. 4. Avalanche paths as viewed in summer



Fig. 5. Avalanche into Lynn Canal spring 2006



Fig. 6. Use of "avalancher" to release avalanches from distant slopes



Fig. 7. Highway through avalanche-prone Thompson Pass near Valdez.

Graphics Needed

New GIS displays are needed using the most complete up-to-date and thorough avalanche data. As technology has evolved, information from multiple historical sources could be merged into a comprehensive document and made available to the public.

Fig. 8. Example of path maps in SDEIS



Controversy Continues

According to DOT personnel, half of the road's maintenance budget would go to avalanche control. It would require helicopter-dropped bombs, howitzers, and blaster boxes. Some of the howitzer blasts would be launched from nearby islands. Some areas would require as much as 20 blasts per year. Helicopters would be used to monitor the snow pack; noise from helicopter use in the area of Haines has fueled much debate already.



Fig. 9. SEAAC Postcard

Conclusion

The 51.5 mile road proposed to be built between Echo Cove and the Katzehin River is in very treacherous avalanche country. This can endanger maintenance crews as well as the travelling public. As the protracted public process has been carried out in a somewhat illogical way, it cannot be certain that potential drivers are aware of all the dangers. Documenting the frequency of avalanches in known paths, particularly those east of Anyaka Island, over the next ten years before commencing construction is a minimal precaution. Additionally, as the cost of fuel increases, true costs must be recalculated frequently to assess the cost/benefit of this project.

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For further information

Please contact Southeast Alaska Avalanche Center, Southeast Alaska Conservation Council, and Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities personnel.