

July 18, 2017

The Honorable Ryan Zinke  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Elaine Chao  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Ave, SE  
Washington, DC 20590

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretaries:

We write to seek your coordinated assistance to resolve one of the longest-running regulatory disputes in Alaska. The dispute centers on the relocation of a 15-mile segment of Alaska Highway 1 (the Sterling Highway, from Milepost 45 to Milepost 60) along the Kenai River near Cooper Landing. We are now in the midst of the third Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for a new road segment in this area, but like most Alaskans, believe the Juneau Creek Alternative is by far the best option to improve safety and protect the local environment.

As you likely know from our previous correspondence, the Sterling Highway connects many of the communities on the Kenai Peninsula to the rest of Alaska. It weaves through the Kenai Mountains, providing access to nationally recognized recreational opportunities in the Chugach National Forest and Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The highway, one of America's most scenic, runs through brown bear and moose habitat, crosses historic sites and archaeological grounds for the Kenaitze Indian Tribe, and tracks long stretches within a few feet of the Kenai River, the birthplace of America's largest king salmon run. Commercial and sport fishing along the river account for 40 percent of the Kenai Peninsula's total economy.

Since the late 1970s, multiple administrations and Congresses have worked to find a more ideal route for the highway in this area. The current road alignment is dangerous, congested, and increasingly heightens the risks of spills that will harm America's premiere king salmon streams, the Kenai and Russian Rivers. The long-standing goal has been to build a bypass away from the Kenai River and around the tourist areas at Cooper Landing to reduce traffic, accidents, and the potential for fuel and chemical spills into salmon streams and wildlife habitat.

Alaskans and many others, representing a diverse array of interests and concerns, agree that the best route for a bypass is the Juneau Creek Alternative. It will run 1.5 miles north of Kenai Lake, so it will not require any construction delays or new bridges crossing the rivers and will protect salmon and other key ecosystem drivers from most sediment and road runoff.

By contrast, the more expensive G-South Alternative undermines the purpose and benefits of realignment, posing significant risks to the environment and area communities and unduly increasing the complexity and overall impact of the project. The discretionary decision matrix the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) used to select preferred route alternatives during the current EIS process, informed by a narrow interpretation of section 4(f) of the Federal Highway Act of 1966, appears to inexplicably undervalue the importance of fish and wildlife habitat, traditional activities, cultural sites and enhanced recreation, prompting the FHWA to identify the G-South Alternative as the “preferred” alternative.

This is uniquely troubling, for this and all other road projects impacting a mosaic of federal public lands and designations. Congress anticipated concerns related to refuge impacts 15 years ago, passing the Russian River Land Act (Public Law 107-362). The Act established a formal process for a land exchange to be initiated by the Department of the Interior to clear a right-of-way so that the preferable Juneau Creek Alternative would no longer cross a 33-acre stretch of the Mystery Creek Wilderness Area in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Unfortunately, concerns related to National Forest System lands appear to have become more of an issue than crossing a wilderness area. The Juneau Creek Alternative additionally crosses the Resurrection Pass National Recreational Trail and passes near the Juneau Falls National Recreation Area. Even though this would provide a meaningful increase in the diversity of recreational opportunities in the region, FHWA has deferred to the U.S. Forest Service’s view that greater public use and access represents a negative impact that cannot be mitigated.

It is critical to the safety and health of both Alaskan motorists and our world-class salmon fisheries that your Departments work together to resolve this complicated issue before the completion of the current environmental review process, tentatively scheduled for early next year. Accordingly, we urge you to actively support the selection of the Juneau Creek Alternative as the final preferred alternative for the bypass and take all other steps needed to allow the bypass to be constructed.

We appreciate your consideration of this request, and stand ready to assist you in any way to ensure the safest outcome on the Cooper Landing Bypass as soon as possible.

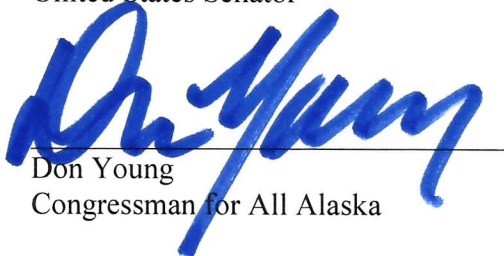
Sincerely,



Lisa Murkowski  
United States Senator



Dan Sullivan  
United States Senator



Don Young  
Congressman for All Alaska



Bill Walker  
Governor, State of Alaska