

ALASKA HIGHWAY INTERNATIONAL FORUM
“Preserving a Lasting Legacy and Planning for Tomorrow”

- Background Discussion Paper -

September 2004

The historic Alaska Highway, formerly known as the Alcan Highway, was constructed from Dawson Creek, British Columbia to Big Delta (Delta Junction), Alaska between 1942 in only eight months.

This amazing highway construction project was made possible through the hard work and dedication of local native guides, Canadian and American civilians and over 10,000 American servicemen. At a time of global conflict and in the face of a serious threat of a Japanese invasion U.S. army engineers completed one of the most incredible construction feats of the twentieth century. The Alcan Military Highway cutting a swath through 2,450 km (1,523 miles) of wilderness and climbing over several separate mountain ranges opened up remote regions of northeastern British Columbia, Yukon and Alaska.

Groups of United States Army engineers were dispatched to several different locations along the proposed highway route and quickly began construction of the all-weather, gravel-surfaced road. Located in Canada and the United States, the original route was 2,450 km (1,523 miles). Building the road at a rate of up to 13 km per day the work crews pushed on to complete the harrowing effort. The roadway required a total of 133 bridges over 6 meters in length and several thousand culverts. Maintenance of the highway was a constant battle with nature. Landslides and floods in the springtime and extreme cold winter temperatures of -40°C presented a formidable challenge for the highway workers.

The Alcan Military Highway was officially opened at Soldier’s Summit on November 20, 1942. At a cost of 147.8 million U.S. dollars this vast region was supplied with airfields, flight strips, buildings, telephone systems and a road infrastructure which has stood the test of time. In 1947 the highway was opened to unrestricted travel and since then has been undergoing a significant construction upgrade.

The development of the Northwest Staging Route and construction of the Alaska Highway is of international significance. In 1954 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recognized the Alaska Highway as an *Event of National Historic Significance*. Events of national historic significance are designated if they represent a defining action, episode, movement or experience in Canadian history. Since 1919, the Government of Canada has designated 300 events as being of national historic importance. Historic plaques were installed at Contact Creek and Soldier's Summit on the Alaska Highway.

In 1996 the Alaska Highway was recognized as an *International Historic Civil Engineering Landmark*. The designation was presented by the American Society of Civil Engineers and Canadian Society for Civil Engineering. The inscription on the plaque reads: "*Constructed in just 8 months in 1942, this 2,450 kilometer highway provided an essential transportation link to the northwest during the Second World War, and has since remained a major transportation artery.*"

The 50th Anniversary of the Alaska Highway was recognized by governments and communities in 1992. An international joint committee was established to oversee the development of a range of project initiatives in celebration of this unique historical event. Local committees were formed and thousands of volunteer hours were put into the coordination of community events. Highway pull-offs were upgraded and additional interpretive signage was added at key locations along the highway corridor. In early 1992, historic mileposts were installed along the highway. Time capsules were placed at strategic locations and are to be opened in 2042.

Today, the Alaska Highway extends 2,238 km (1,390 miles) and is the major transportation artery linking northeastern British Columbia, Yukon and Alaska. The longest section is located in British Columbia and covers a distance of 987 km (613 miles) while the Yukon portion is 929 km (577 miles) and the Alaskan section to Delta Junction is 322 km (200 miles). The remaining distance to Fairbanks, Alaska along the

Richardson Highway is 158 km (98 miles). It also serves as an important collector of other transportation routes for the traveling public and industry which benefit communities on and off the highway throughout each of these jurisdictions. Over the past decade the Alaska Highway has undergone a major transformation as many of the original dangerous curves have been straightened; the road surface has been upgraded from gravel to pavement; and several new pullouts have been added. The “highway experience” continues to change as a result of these capital improvements.

A significant feature of the Alaska Highway is the recognition of the cultural elements along the route, as well as the natural and built landscapes through which the road travels. Cultural resources along the corridor can include distinctive communities of aboriginal and non-aboriginal groups or concentrations of craftspeople and events, traditions, food or music.

Between Dawson Creek, British Columbia and Delta Junction, Alaska there are fifteen different communities who share the Alaska Highway representing a population of over 63,000 people. If North Pole and Fairbanks (who are not officially located on the Alaska Highway under their current highway classification) are included, the overall population is in excess of 95,000 people. The highway crosses international, provincial, territorial, state, and municipal boundaries and it crosses nine different cultural boundaries of northern indigenous people. This includes the Dunne-za, Dene-thah, Kaska, Inland Tlingit, Tagish, Tutchone, Upper Tanana, Tanana and Tanacross Indian people.

The Alaska Highway is a “working highway” used year round by the trucking industry and local area residents. Companies involved in oil and gas exploration and forestry utilize the highway as a major access point to this resource rich region. During the summer months the highway is especially important for the tourism industry as thousands of visitors make their way up the Alaska Highway to visit northern British Columbia, Yukon and Alaska. As reaffirmed by the Northern Rockies Alaska Highway 2003 Visitor Survey which was facilitated by Tourism British Columbia, the majority of these visitors are retired couples from the United States and Canada traveling by recreational vehicle.

In recent times, the Alaska Highway has been largely ignored by the northerners who benefit from it the most. We often take it for granted. This is primarily due to the fact that no one government or designated body takes responsibility over how it is used, maintained, upgraded, marketed or promoted. How should this great highway be classified? The Alaska Highway travels through several different jurisdictions and has been consequently segmented into three distinctly different highway routes thereby detracting from its recognition as a single highway. In B.C. it is recognized as Highway 97, in the Yukon as Highway 1 and in Alaska as Highway 2. How do we determine which sections of the highway should be preserved, restored or rehabilitated? How do we balance the historic, wilderness, cultural and industrial values of this important transportation corridor? How should the highway be branded? How do we work cooperatively to tell the remarkable story of the Alaska Highway to visitors, northern residents and future generations?

These are the challenging questions the Alaska Highway International Forum conference sets out to answer. The success of this conference will be measured in whether delegates are able to put aside regional differences and focus on the common good of working together to promote one of the most important international highways and fantastic driving experiences offered anywhere in the world today.

This great highway crosses no less than twenty-eight major rivers and countless creeks and smaller tributaries. The road climbs over several major mountain ranges and crosses over the continental divide separating the Yukon and Mackenzie watersheds. It provides access to some of the most important wilderness lands in North America including the Northern Rockies, Kluane National Park and Reserve which is home to Canada's highest mountain peak, and the Wrangell-St. Elias Mountains which form part of the largest ice fields outside of the polar region. Kluane National Park and Reserve, together with Alaska's Wrangell St. Elias and Glacier Bay National Park and British Columbia's Tatshenshini Alsek Park, form the largest protected area on the planet. This entire area has been recognized and protected under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention as an *outstanding wilderness of global significance*.

The Alaska Highway either travels through or by some of the best wilderness recreation areas in North America. In northeastern British Columbia the highway cuts a swath through the Northern Rockies and provides access to a combination of ten provincial parks and campgrounds including Stone Mountain, Muncho Lake and Liard River Hotsprings. In addition the highway corridor passes by the Wokkpash Protected Area and travels through the Muskwa-Kechika Management Area. In Yukon, the highway provides access to eight campgrounds and two recreational areas as well as providing stunning views of Kluane National Park and Reserve as visitors drive along the park perimeter. In Alaska, visitors can access a combination of eight State Recreation Sites and Campgrounds as well as the Tetlin National Wildlife Refuge and access to the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park which is the largest National Park & Reserve in the United States.

The Alaska Highway, in some way, is comparable to a watershed and requires a similar approach to “watershed management”. Imagine the highway as the major economic transportation artery flowing through northeastern British Columbia, Yukon and Alaska. Think of the highway as an important collector of upstream economic activity from other communities such as Anchorage, Skagway, Dawson City, Mayo, Ross River, Carmacks, Atlin, Hudson’s Hope and Chetwynd. Now think of the downstream impacts of poor highway planning on other communities dependent on the highway corridor. Everyone who shares this great highway has an interest in its future through proper long-term land-use planning.

What efforts can be made to try and establish inter-jurisdictional approaches for future land-use along the highway that will protect its historic, wilderness and cultural attributes? At the same time what efforts must be made to ensure that long-term economic opportunities such as the establishment of a natural gas pipeline or a railway along the Alaska Highway corridor are encouraged to proceed?

Land-use planning is usually done on a regional basis and is very myopic when addressing the needs of an entire transportation corridor such as the Alaska Highway. Again, the questions remain: How should the Alaska Highway be classified? The highway currently travels through several different jurisdictions and has been

consequently segmented into three distinctly different highway routes. How do we determine which sections of the highway should be preserved, restored or rehabilitated? How should we brand the highway? How do we balance the historic, wilderness, cultural, and industrial values of this important transportation corridor? How do we work cooperatively to tell the remarkable story of the Alaska Highway to visitors, northern residents and the traveling public?

The Alaska Highway is a *Living Museum* providing travelers with a glimpse of our past, present and future. The cultural diversity, historical significance, wilderness characteristics and economic dependency, provide unique challenges for politicians at all levels of government to find ways to work cooperatively to ensure the sustainable future of this great road. In preparation for the upcoming Alaska Highway International Forum, highway communities throughout northeastern B.C., Yukon and Alaska, and other stakeholders were surveyed about the most important ways they could cooperate to preserve the history of the highway and develop it as an international tourism icon. In addition, stakeholders were asked to identify the key priorities for future collaboration to be outlined in the proposed Memorandum of Understanding to be signed by local municipal governments located along the Alaska Highway corridor.

Surveys were mailed out to each Alaska Highway community as well as other interested stakeholders. A total of forty-seven survey responses were received which represents 14% of those surveyed. A total of seventeen surveys were received from American respondents and thirty were received from Canadian respondents. A total of 59.5% of those surveyed were elected officials. Survey responses to the question: “What are the most important ways that we could cooperate to preserve the history and to develop the Alaska Highway as an international tourism icon?” are outlined in Table One.

Survey responses to the question: “If a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Alaska Highway Municipal Governments what should be the priorities?” are outlined in Table Two.

Table One: What are the most important ways that we could cooperate to preserve the history and to develop the Alaska Highway as an international tourism icon?

Yes	No	N/A	Question
41	0	6	<i>Better tourism-related information</i>
40	3	4	<i>Improved joint marketing & promotion program</i>
35	3	9	<i>Improved signage</i>
34	1	9	<i>Improved rest stops</i>
33	2	12	<i>Better joint marketing and promotion</i>
33	4	10	<i>More RV friendly signage</i>
32	1	11	<i>More restrooms and garbage containers</i>
30	3	12	<i>Improved highway maintenance</i>
30	6	11	<i>Should the highway be promoted and preserved for its wildlife and wilderness value?</i>
28	4	15	<i>Improved international signage</i>
28	7	12	<i>Should an International Alaska Highway Joint Commission be established to ensure the legacy of The corridor is preserved?</i>
23	13	11	<i>Better interpretive information</i>
16	22	9	<i>Should the official name of the highway be changed to Alcan?</i>

Table Two: If a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Alaska Highway Municipal Governments what should be the priorities?

High	Medium	Low	N/A	Questions
27	11	3	6	<i>Improved rest stops</i>
26	16	1	4	<i>Improved joint marketing & promotion program</i>
25	14	1	7	<i>Better tourism-related information</i>
25	13	2	7	<i>More restrooms and garbage containers</i>
23	13	4	7	<i>Improved highway maintenance</i>
23	6	11	7	<i>Should the highway be promoted for its wildlife and wilderness value?</i>
21	15	2	9	<i>Better joint marketing and promotion</i>
20	16	6	5	<i>Improved signage</i>
18	14	8	7	<i>Should an International Alaska Highway Joint Commission be established to ensure the legacy of the corridor is preserved?</i>
18	18	5	6	<i>Better interpretive information</i>
11	19	11	6	<i>Improved international signage</i>
15	17	8	7	<i>More RV friendly signage</i>
7	4	28	8	<i>Should the official name of the highway be changed to Alcan?</i>

During the Alaska Highway Legacy Tour local municipal government representatives will be asked to provide advice on the wording of a proposed Memorandum of Understanding (please see Appendix A) which is planned to be signed at the Alaska Highway International Forum in Dawson Creek, British Columbia on September 29, 2004. Results of the survey questions will help to guide discussions about the important ways communities can cooperate to ensure that the historic, wilderness, and cultural characteristics of the Alaska Highway are preserved for future generations.

The proposed Memorandum of Understanding is not a legally binding agreement. Instead it is intended as a starting point for improving cooperation and partnerships between the communities who share this important highway corridor.