

Allow access: Dalton Highway corridor closure should be loosened

Legislators in Juneau have before them a simple bill to end a longstanding, unreasonable limitation on Alaskans' right to travel across public land north of the Yukon River.

Reps. Mike Kelly of Fairbanks and Mark Neuman of Wasilla have proposed allowing snowmachine travel on the Dalton Highway corridor during winter months. Rep. Tammie Wilson of North Pole has signed on as a co-sponsor.

For many years, state law has prohibited virtually all off-road vehicle use within five miles of the highway. Miners and oil workers are allowed on business. And some local snowmachine use is allowed — crossings of the 10-mile wide corridor are permitted if the rider starts from outside the corridor and is on his way to somewhere on the other side. Starting or stopping a snowmachine trip within the corridor is not allowed.

This, of course, eliminates the use of the Dalton Highway as a take-off point for most travel via snowmachine.

The rule is something Alaskans might expect from Washington, D.C., not Juneau. But it has a long history of political compromises that have sustained it in state law.

Some argue that the state must prohibit snowmachines in the corridor to protect wildlife from renegade hunters. If this is a reasonable argument, shouldn't the state apply the same five-mile buffer to the rest of its remote road system? Most of our highways traverse lightly populated areas where law enforcement is spotty.

The Dalton Highway is more remote, yes, but that actually argues against more stringent regulation. Its remoteness, lack of services and unpaved surface discourage most Alaskans from venturing up it — fewer people, fewer enforcement problems.

The ban on off-road vehicles in the corridor was passed in part to discourage urban hunters from using the road and competing with villagers. If that's such an issue, the state could limit access in areas that might be considered too near to the few villages along the route. The blanket prohibition north of the Yukon River is overkill.

The legislation in Juneau would allow snowmachines on the highway corridor from Oct. 1 to April 30. That roughly matches the season of frozen soil and snow cover, so the resulting travelers would have minimal impact on tender surface vegetation.

Even if the legislation passes, the prohibition on all other off-road vehicles would continue. So, too, would state regulations that prohibit hunting, except with bow and arrow, and the transport of hunters using motorized vehicles in the corridor.

The proposal would simply offer Alaskans access during the winter months to public lands from a public highway, with far more limits than they face on any other remote Alaska road.

Rebecca Rooney

From: Dreamworks Cabinetry LLC [dreamworks@alaska.net]
Sent: Monday, March 08, 2010 6:09 PM
To: Rep. Peggy Wilson
Subject: HB 267

I am writing to you today to urge you to vote NO on HB 267 in the House Transportation Committee, the proposal to open the Dalton Hwy corridor to snowmachines. The 5 mile corridor protection was put in place in 1980 not only to protect the caribou herds from hunting pressure, but also to protect this extremely fragile ecosystem from motorized vehicle damage. Snow cover is highly variable in interior and northern Alaska and frequently is insufficient to protect the tundra for large portions of the scheduled opening of Oct 1st through April 30th. Modern snowmachines have so much power that even 2 feet or more feet of snow can be eaten through in only one passing and there is frequently far less than that. Even when there has been adequate snowfall the winds along much of the corridor redistribute it and leave large portions of the tundra with minimal coverage. The fact that the ground is frozen does not prevent damage to the vegetative mat. Since most of this corridor is underlain with permafrost, damage to the vegetative cover can lead to catastrophic changes as the insulation is degraded and the permafrost melts. Do you remember how much damage was done by the two trucks that decided to off-road off the Dalton just a year or two ago? It will take decades for the scars in the tundra to heal from that incident, if it ever does. I urge to to keep the current protections of Alaska's arctic wilderness in place. There is plenty of Alaska available to snowmachiners. On nice Winter and Spring days it's hard enough already to find places away from the incessant whine of joyriding snowgos. Let's keep the peace and leave the snowmachines off the tundra. Those with a legitimate need to be riding snowmachines within the corridor already have the right to do so under the existing wording of Section 1. AS 19.40.210.

Thank you for your consideration.

--

Christopher Larrick

Managing Member

Dreamworks Cabinetry LLC

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(907) 459-0311

(907) 459-0312 fax

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Rebecca Rooney

From: John Strassenburgh [jsandrw@matnet.com]
Sent: Monday, March 08, 2010 10:34 PM
To: Rep. Craig Johnson; Rep. Peggy Wilson; Representative_Pete_Peterson@legis.state.ak.us;
Rep. Max Gruenberg; Rep. Tammie Wilson; Rep. Cathy Munoz; Rep. Kyle Johansen
Subject: HB 267 public comment

Dear House Transportation Committee members:

I am writing to express my opposition to HB 267, which would open the Dalton Highway corridor to virtually unregulated snowmachine use. In so doing, the bill would also provide unfettered snowmachine access to lands outside of the corridor.

This bill would create an access that no agency has the capacity to manage. Over time, snowmachine use would proliferate, and the impacts to wildlife and to the land would increase accordingly.

As it stands now, snowmachines may cross the corridor, but the trip may neither begin nor end within the corridor. This is reasonable regulation, which prevents the corridor from being a barrier to cross country travel and has the effect of keeping the numbers down and filtering out the inexperienced/unprepared riders and the hot-rodders.

This bill would remove all but seasonal regulation. This would attract all sorts of riders, and there would, looking into the future, be a lot of them. The result will be resource damage, wildlife impacts, emergency rescues, and people parking wherever they wished. And given that there is no capacity to manage the use, the problems will continue to get worse and worse and worse. It is opening a Pandora's box.

Please reject HB 267.

Sincerely,

John Strassenburgh
PO Box 766
Talkeetna, AK 99676
jsandrw@matnet.com

Rebecca Rooney

From: Thor Stacey [thorstacey@gmail.com]
Sent: Monday, March 08, 2010 3:26 PM
To: Rep. Peggy Wilson
Subject: HB267

Dear Representative Wilson,

I'm interested in testifying on HB267 this thursday. I have extensive knowledge regarding transportation issues off of the Dalton Highway and feel my input will be valuable to your committee's recommendations regarding this bill. I'm a registered hunting guide, currently holding an exclusive use permit in ANWR, and my family has large mineral holdings just north of Wiseman. I have lived in the region year round and travelled the highway hundreds of times.

I'm currently in Juneau and plan to testify in person. Please sign me up and let me know what time the hearing will be held and in what room.

If you, or your staff, need to talk to me my phone number is listed below.

Thank you,

Thor Stacey

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Thor Stacey
907 687 5238

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Please reject HB 267.

Sincerely,

John Strassenburgh
PO Box 766
Talkeetna, AK 99676
jsandrw@matnet.com

Rebecca Rooney

From: Susan Olsen [soeh@alaska.net]
Sent: Tuesday, March 09, 2010 9:10 AM
To: Rep. Kyle Johansen; Rep. Cathy Munoz; Rep. Tammie Wilson; Rep. Max Gruenberg; Representative_Pete_Peterson@legis.state.ak.us; Rep. Peggy Wilson; Rep. Craig Johnson
Cc: Susan Olsen
Subject: HB 267

Dear members of the House Transportation Committee:

It is absolute folly to suppose that this law would create a corridor which snowmachiners would respect and honor. The sheer distance and difficulty of access precludes any enforcement. Passage of this law would mean that you have opened up the entire 5 miles on either side of the Dalton Highway to snowmachines. It is hypocritical to pretend otherwise. Vote NO.

Thank you for reading my comment.
Susan Olsen

March 9, 2010

Attention: Derek Miller, Legislative Aide

Why I'm opposed to HB 267

While I'm opposed to HB 267, I'm not against snowmachines and I'm not against hunting. I have and will continue to participate in both activities. It is also important to note that access to this public land is not currently prohibited. For years, centuries, and perhaps millennia, humans have traveled this landscape, hunting, foraging, hiking, and recreating. The driving of motorized vehicles on this land is currently prohibited. I have spent extensive time north of the Yukon River along the Dalton Highway corridor, hiking and photographing its beautiful landscape and wildlife. It is big country, with vast open regions and epic vistas. This is one of the few places that remains relatively unmarked (save for the Trans Alaska Pipeline--the reason for the roads existence) and unpopulated by the masses. There is no doubt that this in part, is what makes the place unique and special--to me and many others.

My opposition to HB 267 is not rooted in a legal framework, but rather from a contextual perspective of having traveled not only widely across the state of Alaska, but many parts of the world as well. From my travels around the globe I have seen man's unfortunate impact and damage to many landscapes. It is unfortunately clear that we have proved ourselves effective at leaving unnecessary marks upon the earth, and that is being kind. In many cases, instead of being good stewards, we have disrespectfully trashed the land.

I see a huge value in having some parts of the landscape free from the motorized buzz of our transportation-frenzied society and its side effects. With motorized access comes increased impact: damage during low snow due to winds or minimal precipitation, seasonal transitions, increased violations, increased trash, etc., with the closest law enforcement officer dispatching from Fairbanks. Furthermore, the region in consideration is remote, with the most rudimentary services consisting of a few rest stops with trash bins. The road itself is used primarily by trucks that service the Prudhoe Bay Oil fields.

A few years ago in early October, I stopped at a rest stop along the Dalton Highway, and took the photos below. It baffles me that in remote Alaska's arctic, people would drop a bag of waste next to a trash bin (a grizzly bear proof one at that) to be ripped open by ravens and blown across the tundra. It is not that increased traffic is intrinsically a bad thing, but when it results in activity like this, It is obviously a detriment, not a contribution. We have rights to access but not to destroy.



Oddly, people can't make the necessary judgment when considering minimal services in Alaska's arctic.



Patrick J. Endres / AlaskaPhotoGraphics.com

Bear proof, but not people proof trash containers at one of the few rest stops on the arctic north slope, Alaska.

Some years ago Ralph Seekins sponsored a bill that was passed into law, lifting the restriction for bow hunting within 1/4 mile of the Dalton Hwy. I personally don't think that was a good idea either. In September of 2006, while watching a herd of bull caribou approach and cross the road, I captured this photo of a bow hunter laying in wait along the ditch in the road. I was not overly paranoid about getting shot with an arrow, but it was not beyond the realm of possibility, and well, it just does not really fit the picture of hunting to me.



Bow hunter lays in wait along the shoulder of the James Dalton Highway (Haul Road).



Bow hunter shoots a bull caribou crossing the Dalton highway in Alaska's arctic.

Wildlife viewing, sightseeing, and photography are also considerable venues of merit to Alaska, and they don't really mix that well. Incidentally, the bow hunter gut shot this caribou and it ran off with its entrails hanging out. Whether the hunter eventually got the animal, I don't know. I think restricting hunting at least some distance from the road is a good idea for hunters and other users of the corridor, although it may not need to be 1/4 mile off the highway.

I say lets continue to enjoy, hunt, explore, hike snowshoe, ski, etc., along the Dalton Highway corridor, but lets be responsible stewards of a great landscape, one of the few not already trashed on this planet. And in this case, I believe its fine to leave the snowmachines at home.

Sincerely,

Patrick J. Endres
PO Box 81312
Fairbanks, Alaska 99708