

The big picture regarding resources, Manh Choh and the future of Alaska

Sen. Lisa Murkowski
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As I've returned home to Fairbanks over the past year, one of the hot topics raised with me is Kinross' Manh Choh project, which recently commenced mining operations nearly 250 miles away.

Almost everyone I have spoken with is supportive of this gold mine, which is located on lands owned by the Native Village of Tetlin. It is an example of tribal self-determination — already bringing high-paying jobs and critical infrastructure to Tetlin, where unemployment is severe and honey buckets remain a fact of life. The Manh Choh mine is also bringing economic opportunity to Tok and other neighboring communities, quadrupling the household income of some families in the region.

At the same time, many I have spoken with are concerned by or opposed to Kinross' plan to transport rock from the mine to Fort Knox's existing mill north of Fairbanks, a distance of 247 miles. To do that, a fleet of double-trailer trucks will make 60 roundtrips on public highways each day for the next four to five years — raising apprehension about safety, traffic, and road wear.

Responsibility for Manh Choh's trucking plan resides at the state level, where the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities has commissioned the Alaska, Richardson, Steese Highway Corridor Action Plan (CAP) to make recommendations for potential safety improvements on the roads

between Tetlin and Fairbanks.

While I know there are concerns that Kinross is already running trucks prior to the completion of the CAP, residents with concerns are best advised to weigh in through that process.

A draft CAP is expected in December and will then be discussed at open houses in communities along the transportation corridor. You can submit your comments now or after its release.

It will be important for the CAP's recommendations to be taken seriously and implemented fully. Alaskans are counting on that. I certainly am.

But from a broader perspective, I can't help but think about how this situation came to be. This is not just related to one particular project. Access is an issue that has plagued us since statehood.

It pains me to see one of our most pro-mining communities divided over a project that will provide hundreds of millions of dollars in economic benefits to communities that need them. In my mind, this ultimately boils down to a lack of vision — a failure to think big, and long-term, about transportation and resource development in Alaska.

Alaskans cannot focus solely on taking resources out of the ground; we also need to think holistically about how we transport those resources once they are out of the ground.

While there may be no immediate viable alternative to trucking for Manh Choh, there are additional mineral prospects in the region that could be developed in the future. They, too, will meet with community resistance if we haven't prepared for the future. And that requires more than just clearing brush from roadsides and adding passing lanes.

As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Alaska Railroad, we urgently need a vision for its second century. In my view, we should start with a link that extends the railroad past its current terminus in North Pole to run through Delta Junction and then further southeast.

This link — part of which is called the "Northern Rail Extension" — would benefit the region in numerous ways, certainly by providing a better transportation option for future resource development. It could also provide the military with greater ability to supply Fort Greely, help the military reach local training grounds, facilitate the movement of commercial goods, and enable further opportunities for tourism.

The groundwork has already been laid. Years ago, I worked with the late Senator Ted Stevens and Representative Don Young to secure federal funding to help build a bridge over the Tanana to access military training grounds. It was completed nearly a decade ago, in 2014, but progress ground to a halt soon after.

It's time to return to that project, complete the remaining phases of the Northern Rail Extension, and keep the tracks going across the Interior. This won't be easy — and it will be costly — but the Alaska Railroad, the military, resource developers, commercial operators, the Governor, the State Legislature, and the congressional delegation can all play substantial roles in figuring it out.

Manh Choh translates to “Big Lake” in Athabascan, and it should also prompt us to think big about transportation in a coordinated, strategic fashion. In the Interior, the future of resource development, and all the benefits that brings, demand it.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski is a Republican representing Alaska. One of her committee assignments is on the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.