

# **Rex Trail – Resource Management Evaluation**

Alaska Department of Natural Resources  
Division of Mining, Land & Water

## **Executive Summary**

### **What is the Rex Trail?**

The subject of this White Paper is the eastern Rex Trail, an important commercial, recreational, and residential access route north of the foothills of the Alaska Range. It runs east from the George Parks Highway for more than 50 miles to the Wood River. North of the Wood River, it enters Fort Wainwright Military Reserve near the Blair Lakes Impact Area. The Rex Trail is a reserved public right of way easement, created and managed for general access purposes to adjacent state lands and past land disposal projects in the area. In the early 1900's, miners created this route for winter access to mineralized areas near Bonnifield and Gold King Creek. Active mines still operate there today, and heavy equipment travel is actively managed through the Annual Placer Mining Application (APMA) permit process. To better protect the public's right of access to planned land sale offerings at Browns Court, Southwind Homestead, Gold King Remote Parcel and Wood River Remote Parcel areas, the state overlaid portions of the original RS 2477 route (RST 119) with Alaska Division of Lands (ADL) public access easements.

Depicted on USGS topographic maps as a "sled road", this essentially unimproved trail crosses multiple terrain types including permafrost-rich wetlands, riparian zones at 3 river crossings, white and black spruce forest. While some summer/fall travel has been possible on this route (requiring careful timing and favorable conditions), the nature of terrain and equipment limitations has historically favored winter travel. The Rex Trail supports mining, hunting, residents, and various forms of public recreation. It is one of the main access routes into Game Management Unit 20A, which has been legislatively designated for Intensive Management (meat production).

### **What Is The Problem?**

Rex Trail use patterns have changed significantly in recent years. Intense seasonal motorized use of standard ATV's and increased numbers of large ORVs such as Nodwells and custom-built "moose buggies" have caused severe trail damage, which in turn has compromised the opportunity for reasonable and safe passage for some traditional trail users – both in the fall and also in winter, when travel has historically been very dependable. While the overall goal has and continues to be the protection of long-term public access opportunities, to date, DNR has passively managed non-commercial travel on the Rex Trail under regulations written to guide generally allowed uses on state lands (11 AAC 96.020). There is every indication that this trail will see increased traffic in the future; it is likely that trail conditions will continue to degrade and more opportunities for accessing state lands will be lost, if an effective management strategy for the Rex Trail is not reviewed and implemented. Public opinions are

extremely varied regarding what constitute reasonable and safe passage, and appropriate trail management. Comments range from requests for DNR to actively restrict vehicles (based on season, weight, ground pressure, or other factors), to requests to upgrade or “fix” the trail to accommodate all-season traffic with all vehicle types; some recommend that no active management is necessary – that any and all travel methods are acceptable regardless of impacts to the land and other trail users.

Although this paper focuses on the Rex Trail, similar problems are developing on state lands in other areas. Any management strategies developed and applied to the Rex Trail situation will have relevance to other similar situations; therefore the statewide impact of the Rex Trail decision must be taken into account.

The Division’s response to the problems identified is seriously constrained by staffing and budgetary limitations, the absence of enforcement authority, and the lack of a regulatory framework which clearly differentiates management goals and objectives for easements versus general state lands. The issue is complicated by the fact that trail degradation is not the result of a single action or user, but a combination of cumulative (but otherwise legal) ATV use, unpermitted large equipment activity which has gone unrestricted for years, and individual cases of reckless motorized use.

## **Discussion**

In managing public uses of and impacts on state land, DNR must recognize and adjust for a wide variety of natural resource conditions and user preferences (means and methods). Because the goal is multiple-use management, the size and scope of this responsibility is vast, and the means for implementation (staffing and operational funds) are limited, the division has developed policies and rules which encourage the widest possible scope of public use of state lands without direct agency oversight (permitting). The Generally Allowed Uses regulations regarding access across state lands (11 AAC 96.020) reflect this. In light of this situation, the Division’s management profile is often reactionary and not pro-active towards on-the-ground management of state lands. Essentially, the Division reacts when resource impacts or user conflict rises to a level where the State’s interest or public safety is being compromised. In such instances, the potential need for trail restrictions or closures, and the authority to accomplish this is found in state statute – AS 38.04.058; regulations 11 AAC 51.100 (a) guide the process.

In the case of easements, the Division’s primary responsibility has been to identify, reserve, and defend the public’s right to use those access easements consistent with the purposes for which they were established. The Division generally does not initiate or manage projects to construct, upgrade, or improve accessibility on public easements. Traditionally in Alaska, it is the public sector (working with the Division, other relevant authorizing agencies, and appropriate funding sources) which makes improvements on established easements. Those improvements – whether privately or publicly funded – are then available for general public use.

## **Options and Goals:**

In its initial evaluation of Rex Trail management issues, the Division of Mining, Land, and Water is reviewing a number of possible options including:

- no change to the current management strategy
- seasonal trail closures to all or to certain motorized vehicles
- trail maintenance or upgrades
- trail realignments
- regulation changes

The evaluation of these options includes identification of the benefits, disadvantages, and limiting factors to implementation. Due to the complexity of the issue, all options are expected to have impacts on some or several user groups.

The final plan for management of the Rex Trail must consider the overall intent to protect long-term public access opportunities. Responsible management will require both short- and long-term goals/actions. Short-term goals must address the immediate need for appropriate public involvement and notice, coordination with ADF&G and the US Military, identification of additional trail assessment needs, and a clear decision regarding Rex Trail management for the upcoming summer season. Long-term goals must address the potential need for regulation or policy changes that may be necessary to clarify the Division's management of unimproved easements. A system which acknowledges the intentional concentration of public use (and inevitable impacts) to easement corridors, while providing workable, fair mechanisms for reasonable resource damage control must be developed. In addition, long-term management of the Rex Trail and other state lands must address the use and potential impacts of large ORVs. Use of these vehicles is increasing, and operators are seeking opportunities to legally operate their vehicles without need for individual permitting. If large ORVs displaced from the Rex Trail by a restriction, they would have few options for summer/fall access to hunting areas east of the Parks Highway, as no hardened trails lead to current motorized hunting areas north of Gold King where large ORVs are currently hunting.

The chosen option for short-term management must, inevitably, be made based on the current information, and with the understanding that future information may lead to a change in management decisions. Additional work and analysis must be done to develop a comprehensive and responsible management strategy for the Rex Trail. This evaluation documents our initial efforts to identify the issues and possible options for future management.