

EIS Examples: To Build and Not to Build

The Chevron Phosphate Project alluded to in the text, which involved construction of a plant to produce phosphate fertilizer (with phosphate from existing mines), and considerable supporting and transport facilities, raised a number of concerns. Chief among these were air and water quality, resource consumption (water), resource displacement (vegetation), visual impact, possible impacts on both wildlife and grazing, socioeconomic impacts, and possible local slope- stability problems. In response to the draft EIS, 24 "substantive" comment letters (and others expressing opinions) were submitted; the comments came from a great variety of sources, including the U.S. Department of Transportation in Washington, D.C.; the Department of the Army; the Sierra Club; the U.S. Geological Survey; the Office of the Governor and the Division of State History of the State of Utah (through which portions of slurry pipeline would pass); Pacific Power and Light Company; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and several private citizens. Point-by-point responses to concerns were made. Examples: Water use by the plant would decrease the flow of the Green River by about half a percent, and increase salinity of water behind Imperial Dam by about 1 ppm. While the slurry pipeline might cost jobs for 40 truck drivers and about 20 other workers, a net gain of 30 jobs was projected overall. The loss of several thousand acres of deer, elk, and antelope habitat was judged negligible given the total wildlife habitat in the region. There was an unresolved issue about possible adverse impact of wastewater on two endangered fish species, the Colorado squawfish and the



Figure 1 - Preservation of undeveloped land, like this in Denali National Park, Alaska, may protect habitat and scenery, but those benefits may have to be balanced against prospects for discovery of needed resources, economic development, possible pollution, and other potential impacts.

humpback chub. Construction would cause unquantifiable losses of fossils preserved in the rocks, but an on-site paleontologist would be available to judge whether fossils of particular importance were in jeopardy. On balance, the responsible agency-the Bureau of Land Management-supported the project, judging negative impacts to be moderate or manageable.

By contrast, one might expect a proposal to designate a portion (about 11 percent, or 300,000 acres) of an Alaskan national preserve (Bering Land Bridge) as a wilderness area to be relatively noncontroversial. Not so. Alternatives included no wilderness designation, and wilderness designation for most or all of the 2,690,179 acres under consideration. Briefly, wilderness designation would preserve the land's natural condition, banning permanent roads, commercial enterprises, permanent structures, and motor vehicles, among other intrusions (see figure 1). Thus, wilderness areas cannot be extensively developed for tourism, mining, or many other activities, and that factor entered into some of the concerns expressed, being an undeniable economic consequence. Other issues related to village-to- village travel needs of native peoples, recreational uses of the land, impacts on wildlife, subsistence land and resource use by native peoples, and impacts on historic and prehistoric cultural resources. Some 63 comment letters arrived, and again the commenters were a diverse group, including: U.S. Bureau of Mines; Alaska Department of Labor; the National Parks and Conservation Association; the Shishmaref Native Corporation; the Federal Highway Administration; the Reindeer Herders Association; the Alaska Miners Association; Pacific Legal Foundation; and others. The proposed action was believed to be a viable compromise between preservation and development (the commentors having taken the full range of positions from all-wilderness to no-wilderness). With the bulk of the land not designated as wilderness, further development of tourism, mining, etc., would be possible. Current use of the proposed 11 percent was low and known mineral or other exploitable resources minimal, so removing that land from prospective development should not cause

great harm-yet it did still represent a sizeable reserve of wilderness, being, as one letter-writer pointed out, about half the size of Rhode Island!

These are just two of many examples of the complexity of the EIS process.