



SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD
Washington, DC 20423

EO-303

Office of Economics, Environmental Analysis and Administration

April 5, 2006

Judith Bittner
State Historic Preservation Officer
Alaska Office of History and Archaeology
550 West 7th Ave., Suite 1310
Anchorage, AK 99501-3565

Re: STB Finance Docket No. 34658, The Alaska Railroad Corporation – Petition for Exemption to Construct and Operate a Rail Line Between Eielson Air Force Base (North Pole) and Fort Greely (Delta Junction), Alaska

Dear Ms. Bittner:

I am writing to ask for your approval of a site location model and survey strategy described in detail below and enclosed. I have also provided some background information about the proposed project, which I understand you are acquainted with, as well as an explanation of how we anticipate implementing the model and survey, subject to your review and approval.

Background

The Alaska Railroad Corporation intends to file a petition with the Surface Transportation Board (Board), pursuant to 49 U.S.C. 10502, requesting authority to construct and operate a new rail line from North Pole to Delta Junction, Alaska. The Board would be the Federal agency responsible for granting authority for the construction and operation of the proposed new rail line. The Section of Environmental Analysis (SEA) is the office within the Board responsible for preparing the appropriate National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation for railroad construction and operation cases that come before the Board.

As previously communicated to you, SEA is preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to evaluate the potential environmental impacts of the Northern Rail Extension Project, including consideration of cultural resources. ICF Consulting is serving as the independent third-party consultant to assist SEA with the EIS. Northern Land Use Research, Inc. (NLUR) is the cultural resources subcontractor to ICF Consulting.

Description of the Site Location Model and Survey Strategy

Following consultation with your office, NLUR has prepared the enclosed site location model and survey strategy in order to provide the SHPO and other regulatory agencies with the data and information necessary to permit a cultural resource survey of the proposed railroad alignments. The site location model -- developed within a Geographic Information System (GIS) framework -- is used to demarcate high-moderate and low probability areas for the location of cultural materials within the project area. Using the site location model, we believe that we will be able to maximize the discovery of cultural resources and to optimize survey strategies (level of intensity and efficiency of different survey types).

Based on our research, high-moderate probability areas for site location would be ground surveyed (119.7 linear km, 28% of total proposed alignments), and low probability areas would be surveyed through low-altitude, low-speed helicopter overflight and spot ground testing (304.7 km, the remaining 72% of the total proposed alignments). Verification measures for the model have been built in by incorporating these alternative field survey strategies. Since all of the alignments will be surveyed to some level, a more refined model can be constructed on the basis of data gathered during the course of the proposed 2006 fieldwork.

The results of the 2006 field survey will be incorporated into the EIS. The ground survey is defined as the minimum level of effort to meet Level II (Evaluation Phase) survey requirements by the SHPO (i.e., gathering sufficient data for a determination of eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places). Future cultural resource work will depend on the evaluations (and SHPO concurrence) and predicted adverse impacts due to the Northern Rail Extension Project.

We request your approval of this site location model and associated survey strategy for the proposed Northern Rail Extension Project.

If you have any questions about the project please do not hesitate to contact Dave Navecky, SEA Project Manager, at 202-565-1593 or Alan Summerville, ICF Consulting Project Manager, at 703-934-3616.

Sincerely,



Victoria Rutson
Chief
Section of Environmental Analysis

Enclosure