

Road to Umiat

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Ground Truth Trekking

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Summary

The Road to Umiat (officially known as the Foothills West Transportation Access Project) is a proposed 100-mile road from the Dalton Highway to the outpost of Umiat in the North Slope Borough. The goal of the $400 million project is to improve access to oil, gas (/Issues/AlaskaOilandGas.html), and coal (/Issues/AlaskaCoal.html) resources in the area. Proponents argue that the road would stimulate resource development and that the resulting economic activity and employment would provide benefits both regionally and statewide. Opponents are concerned about the impact of the road on native communities, on the wilderness character of the area, as well as the potential environmental impacts of expanded resource development.

Background

The project study area itself is very large, ranging from a northern limit along the Dalton Highway at Milepost 376, south to Milepost 278, and from those points west about 100 miles to

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Umiat. There are currently no permanent roads or developed airfields in the project study area. The oil fields of interest are the Gubik Oil/Gas fields and the Umiat oil field. The Nanushuk coal field (/Issues/AlaskaCoal/Nanushuk-Coal-Prospect.html) is also located in the southern part of this area. In addition to direct access to these resources, the road to Umiat would end on the doorstep of the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska (NPRA) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Petroleum_Reserve%E2%80%93Alaska).

The project is being proposed as two phases. The first phase would construct about 85 miles of road to the Gubik fields, with the remaining 15 miles to Umiat and the NPRA built later (including a bridge across the Colville River). Five different routes are being considered based on their ease of construction, environmental/cultural impacts, cost, and access to various resources. The project is at present entirely funded by the state, with $8 million expended in FY2012 and a further $10 million expected in FY2013. From the Office of the Governor (http://www.sitnews.us/1211News/120711/120711_budget.html):

> This funding provides for continued EIS work; continued evaluation of routes from Umiat to existing industry roads on the North Slope, and definition of a preferred alternative; and securing environmental permits and right-of-way for the Umiat project. The project has $25 million in previous funding.

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It is also possible that development of offshore oil/gas resources in the Chukchi Sea (/Issues/AlaskaOilandGas/ChukchiSeaOilandGasDevelopment.html) would necessitate building a pipeline through Umiat running to TAPS. This pipeline would have an associated road and would presumably negate the need for the proposal discussed here.

Opposition

Some of the opposition to the Road to Umiat project stems from concerns about state subsidy of private resource extraction, although this is fairly common in both Alaska and the rest of the world. Another concern is the lack of detailed knowledge about the size of the oil and gas reserves in the area. If much less oil or gas is discovered than is currently anticipated, the return on investment for the road could be lower than expected.

However, most of the concerns about the proposed road revolve around the impacts on wetlands, wildlife habitat, fish, cultural resources, and subsistence resources. Of particular concern is the potential impact on the caribou herds, which are important both culturally and as a subsistence food source for many of the people residing in the area. The physical presence of the road and its associated traffic could affect caribou migration patterns and force some people to travel much further for food, or even to relocate (http://www.adn.com/2011/05/13/1861899/road-to-umiat-would-destroy-rural.html). If the road were open to the public, it would bring many more people into the area. This

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would be a boon for activities such as tourism, guiding, and outfitting, though such an influx of people to the area could also lead to overhunting and overfishing of subsistence resources.

Native communities in the area have generally been opposed to the road. The North Slope Borough Fish and Game Management Committee, the Naqsragmiut Tribal Council, City of Anaktuvuk Pass, Native Village of Nuiqsut, Native Village of Point Lay and the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope have all passed resolutions opposing the road (http://www.akbizmag.com/Alaska-Business-Monthly/February-2012/Arctic-Native-leaders-in-Juneau-to-tell-lawmakers-they-oppose-Umiat-Road/). A few environmental groups have voiced opposition (http://www.alaskadispatch.com/article/parnells-road-resources-plan-slammed-environmental-groups) to the entire “Roads to Resources” program, including the road to Umiat.

Current Status

Even though a route for the road has not yet been chosen and there has been no official decision to move forward, discussion of the road has already encouraged private investment and exploration in the area (http://newsminer.com/view/full_story/14557036/article-Road-to-Umiat-hits-early-review--draws-support--concerns?instance=home_news_window_left_top_1). The state spent $8 million during 2011 on an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project (http://www.foothillswesteis.com/) and plans to continue evaluation and route selection in 2012. Residents of Arctic communities,

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including Anaktuvuk Pass, were actively lobbying against the road (http://www.alaskapublic.org/2012/02/16/anaktuvuk-pass-residents-lobby-against-road-to-umiat/) in Juneau in early 2012.

Further Reading

> Foothills West Transportation Access EIS (http://www.foothillswesteis.com/)

> Foothills West Transportation Project (AK Department of Transportation) (http://foothillsroad.alaska.gov/)

> "The Road to Umiat" presentation (AK Department of Transportation) (http://www.dot.state.ak.us/stwdplng/cip/stip/projects/Assets/Foothills_COC.pdf)

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