

# DENALI BOROUGH

## BUILDING FOUR SEASON FRONTCOUNTRY RECREATION



Front Country pleasures: skiing the Nenana River (*photo by Dave Talerico*); autumn color along the Triple Lakes Trail (*photo by DowntheTrail.com*); and adventure along the Park Road (*photo by Chris Beck*)

**Denali Borough** is home to Alaska's world-renowned wilderness gem: Denali National Park and Preserve. Each year hundreds of thousands of visitors travel to this area from Alaska and around the world. Summer visitation dominates, but winter visitation is accelerating.

While the wildlife and spectacular landscapes of the Park's interior are the main attraction, there is a real opportunity to expand "frontcountry" and non-summer travel. This responds to the interest by the many National Park visitors who spend much of their visit enjoying park-edge "gateway communities" and adjoining outdoor recreation activities. An additional motivation is the need to accommodate continued growth while dealing with the realities that Denali Park Road has finite capacity and serious maintenance challenges.

Much more could be done to take full advantage of the scenic frontcountry corridor along the Parks Highway, at the Park's eastern boundary. This includes creating new and improving existing trails, trailheads, and signage to respond to visitor and resident interests in accessible active outdoor recreation and provide an appealing counterpoint to the less accessible, wilder Park interior. These same trails can help expand fall, winter and spring opportunities. Making these investments will benefit residents and visitors, increase visitor length of stay and spending in the borough, and support growth in jobs, business opportunities and bed tax. Finally, creating year-round, attractive, concentrated walkable visitor/resident villages, for example in Healy, will promote more visits and longer stays, and provide an attractive place to live or stay for seasonal employees, visitors and residents.

**Total Park Visits**  
nearly doubled to  
600,000 in last 10 years

23% Out-Of-State AK  
visitors travel to Denali  
**430,000 people**

Visitors generated  
**\$4.05 M in Bed Tax**  
95% of all Borough tax  
revenues

**Fall/Winter/Spring**  
**Visitation** - small but  
growing faster than  
summer- from 6000 to  
20,000 people in last  
10 years

Data from: Alaska Visitor Statistics Program 7  
– Summer 2016 ; Alaska Taxable 2018; NPS  
Visitor Use Statistics - IRMA

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED INVESTMENTS

The table below summarizes projects selected for inclusion in this document based on their potential for creating attractive, four season, Denali frontcountry outdoor recreation options. These options aim to diversify recreation opportunities for residents and visitors, expand the local economy, and ease the burden on the Denali Park Road by offering visitors more choices.

The projects are presented in more detail on pages that follow. The scope of work proposed here ranges from improving an existing trailhead and trail, increasing road safety and walkability of a hub community, and expansion of snowmachine and other winter activities.



Mt. Healy Overlook Trail (photo by National Park Service)

<b>Denali Borough Projects Summary</b>			
<b>Project</b>	<b>Lead and Support</b>	<b>Estimated Cost</b>	<b>Priority &amp; Status</b>
1. Bison Gulch Trails	Denali Borough, NPS, AK DOT	\$450,000-\$500,000	<b>Near Term</b> – Planning in Progress
2. McKinley Village Bridge/Trail Head & Trails	Denali Borough, AK DOT	\$48M	<b>Near Term (Shovel Ready)</b>
3. Nenana River Bluff Trail	NPS, Denali Borough	\$400,000-\$600,000	Mid Term – Planning in Progress
4. Winter Recreation: Cantwell/Denali Highway	Denali Borough, AK DOT	\$25,000-\$50,000	<b>Near Term (Shovel Ready)</b>
5. Nenana River boat/raft launch	Denali Borough, AK DOT	Cost Estimate being developed	Mid Term – Planning in Progress

## PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS<sup>1</sup>

Partners and supporters that provided feedback on these recommendations include Denali Borough, Denali National Park, NPS Rivers Trails Conservation Assistance program, and the AK Department of Transportation. The Denali Borough Land Use and Economic Development Strategic Plan, approved by the Borough Assembly in 2018, was another important reference.

It is important to note there are a number of detailed, thoughtful National Park Service plans affecting future trail development, fall/winter/spring improvements, etc. The recommendations presented here by necessity cannot capture the depth and breadth of those plans, but instead aim to focus on a representative subset of identified, high value projects.

<sup>1</sup> See *Introduction* for full discussion on partners and supporters.

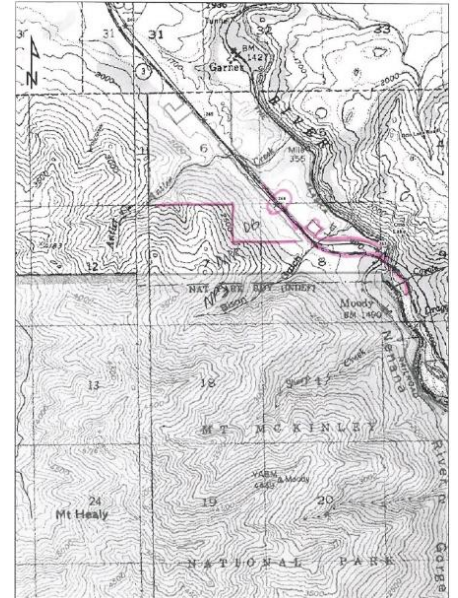
# RECOMMENDED INVESTMENT PROJECTS: DENALI

## 1. BISON GULCH PARKING AREA & TRAILS ENHANCEMENT

Bison Gulch offers what is too often typical of Alaskan trails – a popular but informal social trail and roadside parking area, neither of which is sized, designed or located to be safe and sustainable. Denali Borough and the National Park Service are working towards two improvements: first, to relocate the current informal roadside parking area across the Parks Highway to create a new trail head on the west side of the road, and second, to create a new, well designed trail system, including inviting 2-3 mile loops, for both easy and more adventuresome hiking or cross-country skiing.

Working with the State Department of Transportation, the NPS Rivers Trails Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program, and this Trails Initiative, last year the Denali Borough applied for and received a \$500,000 Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) grant, supported by \$10,000 of Borough funding. These funds are being used to shift the parking lot across the Parks Highway, eliminating the danger to pedestrians crossing the highway to get to the trail. Planning and NEPA work for the parking lot is scheduled for summer 2020, with construction in summer 2021. The design for the new trail head will include plans for a restroom, with work in progress to determine funding for construction and ongoing operations. The Borough, RTCA and Denali National Park are now working on plans for relocated and refurbished short trails extending from this trail head, aiming to make Bison Gulch a year-round, user-friendly recreation area, for all levels of outdoor enthusiasts. The eventual goal is a to extend a sustainably built trail up to the ridge line, with a destination inside National Park boundaries, offering spectacular 360- degree views.

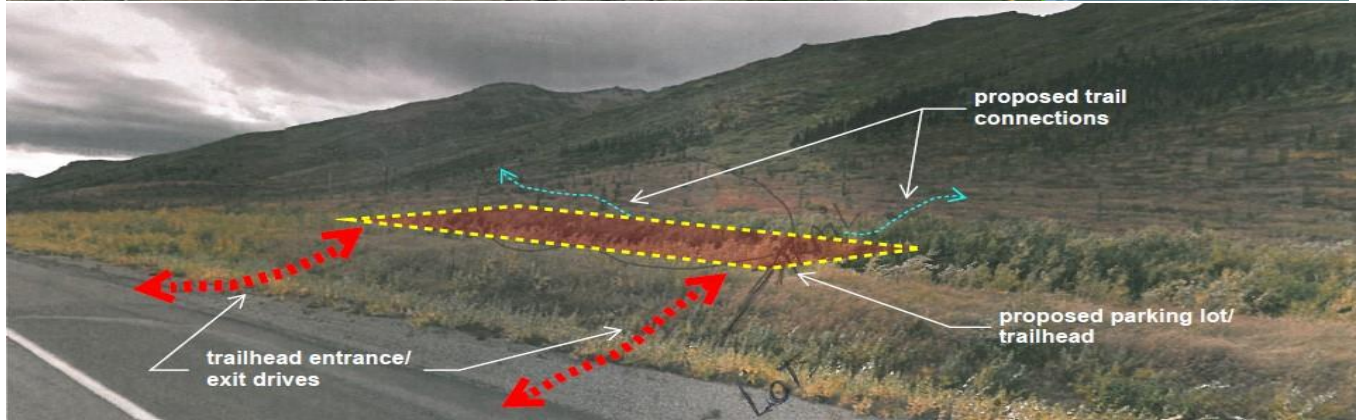
This important, multi-agency project offers an opportunity for creating additional trails in the Denali frontcountry, with convenient access from the Parks Highway and a connection into Denali National Park. The result will be more options for local and visiting trail users to have a convenient, year-round way to enjoy “wilderness” recreation.



Project is located just north of Healy, off the Parks Highway, with trails heading south and west

<i>Project</i>	<i>Lead</i>	<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Challenges*</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Priority &amp; Status</i>
Add trails and other trailhead facilities at Parking Lot to be developed in first phase	Denali Borough & National Park with RTCA and AK Department of Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Better access to the trailhead and trail, with a measurable increase in safety for locals and visitors</li> <li>- Access to a variety of trail lengths and options to suit different abilities and interests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Minimal for the project as a whole</li> <li>- Need to design trail system summer 2020</li> <li>- Need for prompt processing of the trail easement by DNR</li> <li>- Funding to build &amp; operate the planned restroom</li> </ul>	\$554,000 FLAP award (secured in Phase 1):  Phase 2 funding TBD	<b>NEAR TERM –</b> Planning in Progress– For trail design & fundraising

\*where relevant this column includes background on status



**Bison Gulch preliminary concepts for relocated parking area/trail head and trails. Project starts on Denali Borough land, crosses state land and leads in Denali National Park. (courtesy of National Park Service)**



The increasingly impressive views that reward hikers on the Bison Gulch Trail.  
*Source: Trena Haugen*



## 2. MCKINLEY VILLAGE BRIDGE / TRAILHEAD & TRAIL

This project provides overdue safety improvements to the Parks Highway at McKinley village, an important lodging, commercial and recreation area on the eastern boundary of Denali National Park. The project will address significant transportation challenges by reconstructing the Parks Highway from MP 229.7 to 232.3, including a new bridge and highway underpass, turn lanes, and improved pedestrian access to and between commercial development south of the Nenana River and a new NPS trailhead wayside.

The project is designed to resolve the significant safety problems that come from having popular trails on both sides of the Parks Highway north of the river, and major lodging and commercial development on both sides of the Highway south of the river. These uses generate substantial pedestrian and vehicular traffic. There are no turn lanes into the commercial uses, and no safe walking route between these points (see photos following page). From 2007 to 2016 there were eight reported crashes within the project boundary. One of the crashes involved multiple injuries; the remaining seven crashes resulted in damaged vehicles and property.

Safety improvements include barrier separated multi-use pathways and wider shoulders along the highway to allow safe access between commercial development and existing NPS trails (Oxbow Loop and Triple Lakes Trails), and a proposed Nenana River Bluff trail (see next section). Access for the MP 231 commercial facilities south of the bridge will be improved to include a single T-intersection (currently a four-way intersection exists) with the Parks Highway and an underpass between the two lodging facilities which will allow for safe pedestrian connectivity as well as enhanced vehicle access.

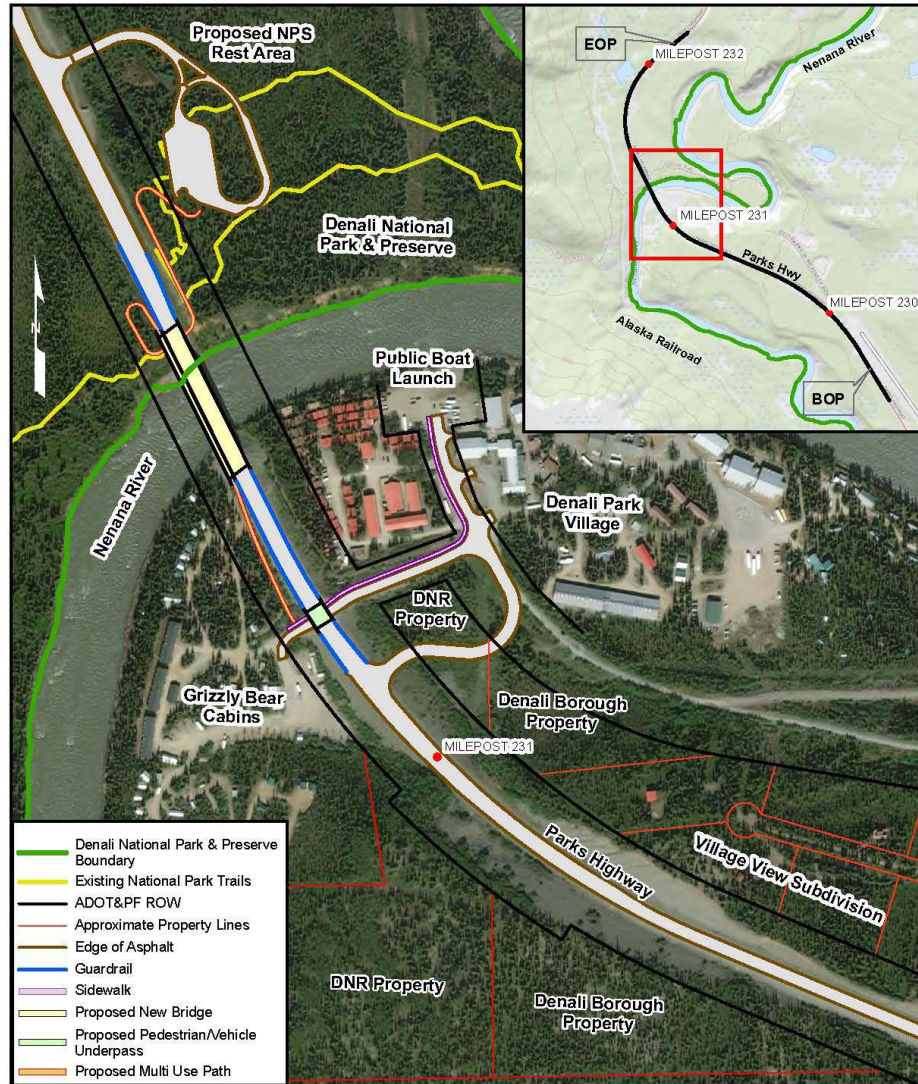
Once complete this project will serve local residents, highway users, tourists, area businesses, the Borough and the AK DOT/PF, and the Park. The project will make this important commercial and recreation node safer, more inviting, and more economically successful. For the Denali Borough and local businesses, this will mean more visitor spending and increased bed tax; for the State of Alaska this will create a highway that is safer, with reduced constraints for through traffic, and reduced summer maintenance from improved drainage, embankment, and pavement.

<i>Project</i>	<i>Lead</i>	<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Priority &amp; Status</i>
Project including bridge, tunnels to safely accommodate growing pedestrian use	Denali Borough, National Park Service, Alaska DOT&PF and community residents and business owners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Avoid accidents due to a lack of turning lanes at major intersections and a lack of pedestrian facilities;</li> <li>- Enhance pedestrian safety and recreation access at an important commercial and recreation destination</li> <li>- Improve quality of life for Denali Borough residents and enhance economic opportunities for this rural community.</li> </ul>	Funding for major transportation projects is very competitive due Alaska’s fiscal challenges	\$48 M request for funding through Federal “BUILD” program was denied, 2020.	<b>Near Term (Shovel Ready)</b> design approximately 75% complete;

\*where relevant this column includes background on status

## McKinley Village Bridge, Highway and Pedestrian Circulation Project

The challenge and the opportunity: multiple commercial and recreational activities on both sides of the bridge, and both sides of a busy, highspeed highway, with no turn lanes and no pedestrian pathways (map by Denali Borough)



Trailhead parking, pedestrians on the highway and narrow bridge, and high-speed traffic. View looking south towards hotel development from the NPS trailhead. Source: Denali Borough



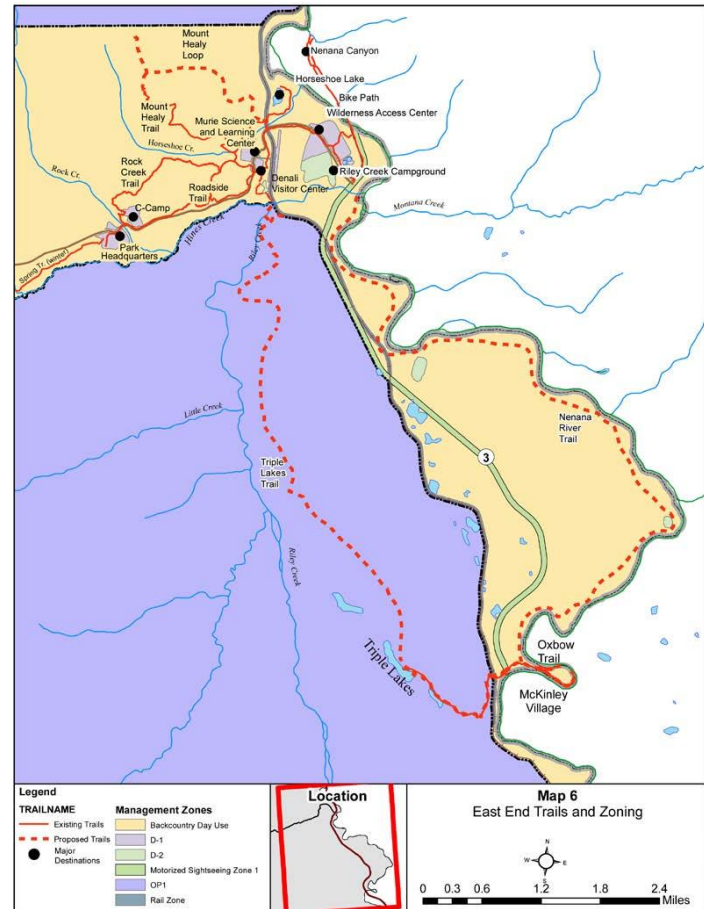
Parked vehicles for trail access, pedestrians on the narrow bridge and tourist traffic immediately north of MP 231. Source: Denali Borough

### 3. NENANA RIVER BLUFF TRAIL

The proposed Nenana River Bluffs Trail would add a strategically located, picturesque 8-mile trail between the concentration of visitor services in the Denali National Park headquarters area and the secondary collection of lodging and other services at McKinley Village. This section of the Nenana River meanders at a low gradient. A trail following the bluff would provide an easy, appealing stroll to people of all levels of fitness and experience, while providing a direct, accessible way to experience a piece of wild Alaska.



**Nenana River Oxbow**  
(Online photo from <https://www.trover.com/>)



This trail is one of the priorities included in the Denali National Park trails management plan. As the map above shows, the trail fits into a larger system of existing and planned trails and trail head improvements, including the existing Triple Lakes Trail. Ideally improvement to the Nenana Bluff trail would be synchronized with the upgrade of safe pedestrian circulation and a new trail head at McKinley Village (*see previous page*).

<b>Project*</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Costs</b>	<b>Priority &amp; Status</b>
Connection from McKinley Village to Park Headquarters.  Portions of trail exist as an informal social trail	National Park Service with Denali Borough	- A valuable addition to needed frontcountry outdoor recreation options, for visitors and residents.  - Another reason to spend more time and money in the Borough	Need to synchronize with infrastructure (trail head, road crossing) in McKinley Village area	\$400,000-600,000 (preliminary estimate)	Mid Term – Planning in Progress  Route included in Denali N.P. Trails Plan.

\*where relevant this column includes background on status



## 4. WINTER RECREATION: CANTWELL/DENALI HIGHWAY

Expanding winter recreation in the Denali Highway/Cantwell area would provide attractive new and improved options for motorized and non-motorized local and visiting users. This spectacular, already popular winter recreation destination region stretches out along the southern edge of the Alaska Range, at the meeting place of the Denali and Matanuska-Susitna Boroughs.

Grooming winter routes greatly expands recreation options. Zack Russell with Denali Snowcat is grooming the west half of the Denali Highway. Alan Echols with McLaren River Lodge is grooming the east half of the Denali Highway, meeting in the middle. He also grooms a 30-mile loop and a 10-mile loop off the highway. This grooming is only possible because of access to State of Alaska SnowTRAC funds. The result is a wintertime path through striking wilderness terrain, open to snowmachiners, dog mushers, skiers, fat-tire bikers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. In addition to a predictable snowpack and impressive scenery there are lodges along the route such as Backwoods Lodge, Clearwater Mountain Lodge, Alpine Creek Lodge, and McLaren River Lodge.

A list of potential projects is shown at right and summarized in the table below. These projects embrace motorized and non-motorized use and aim to open more options for locals and visitors. Taking more advantage of the underdeveloped resources in the area could make this area Alaska’s “go-to” winter outdoor recreation destination, attracting visitors that could bring jobs, provide new local business opportunities, and enhance recreation opportunities for residents.



Groomers meet from the east and west side of the Denali Highway (photo by Zach Russell)

### Recommendations for Action

- Support the continued use of SnowTRAC registration fees for trail grooming. Increase the annual registration fee from \$5 to \$10 and increase enforcement. Use a portion of these funds to support the critical work by volunteer search and rescue organizations.
- Expand the number of areas that are groomed— for example, the Valdez Creek Road running north of the Denali Highway. The existing road runs approximately 17 miles to Roosevelt Lake and would open attractive terrain for a range of users looking to explore the Clearwater Mountains.
- Coordinate with the village of Cantwell, Ahtna and other landowners to determine if and how this area might become a gateway for a range of locally supported, locally beneficial winter recreation activities.
- Developing an integrated trails information and marketing plan, working with landowners, residents, community organizers, local businesses, and boroughs. Aim to increase enjoyment and safe use of this beautiful but remote, rugged wilderness.

Project*	Lead	Benefits	Challenges	Costs	Priority & Status
Roads and trails routes already exist; issue is need for collaborative planning	Denali Borough and Alaska State Parks with local residents and landowners and recreation users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Potential to sustain and expand existing grooming and related recreation options</li> <li>- New job and business opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continued availability of SnowTRAC funding</li> <li>- Work needed to guide process and ensure local support</li> </ul>	Planning & coordination, information & marketing - \$25-50,000	<p><b>Near Term (Shovel Ready)</b></p> <p>Relatively low cost with substantial potential benefits</p>

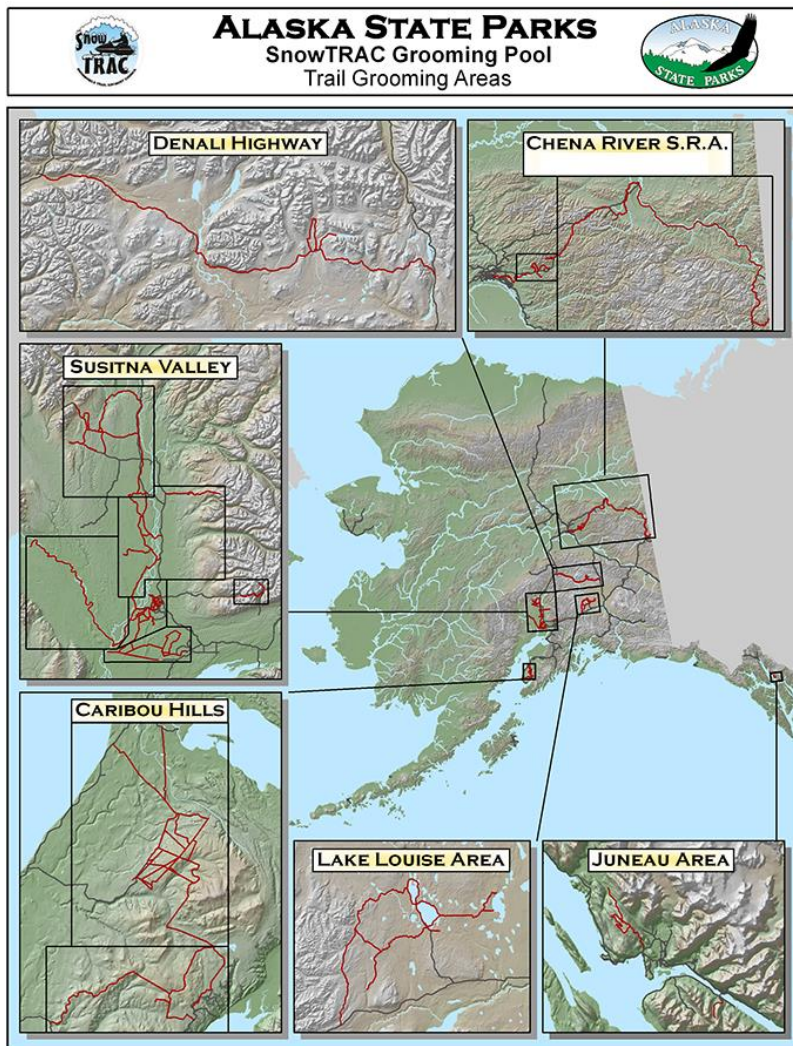
**BACKGROUND INFORMATION: THE SNOWTRAC GROOMING POOL** – the map & first paragraph on this page taken from this website: <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/grants/groompl.htm>

The Snowmachine Trail Grant Program's Grooming Pool uses Snowmachine registration fees to support a system of groomed Snowmachine trails in several regions of the state. Grooming Pool funds are used by Snowmachine clubs, non-profits, and businesses to groom and mark trails. Trails must be legal and approved by the Snowmachine Trail Advisory Council (SnowTRAC). The map at right shows the locations of the Grooming Pool trails throughout the state. To view PDF maps of the individual grooming areas, see the website referenced above.

The SnowTRAC funding that pays for this winter grooming comes from a \$5.00 annual snowmachine registration fee. This funding goes to user groups who leverage these dollars with extensive volunteer hours. SnowTRAC funding has been continuously under the threat of cuts and elimination in recent years. Passionate work by winter recreation supporters has kept the money from being absorbed into the state general fund.

Work is now needed to increase and sustain these funds. Steps needed include:

- Support the proposed increased of registration from \$5 to \$10/year
- Increase compliance with the requirement to register snow machines each year
- Ensure the funds raised through snowmachine registration program go back into winter trail grooming and related trails information and search and rescue organizations.



Right: **Winter biking the Denali Highway.** Source: Anchorage Press [https://www.anchoragepress.com/news/winter-biking-the-denali-highway/article\\_f24ac4f4-5733-51c0-8e74-9da901e92a15.html](https://www.anchoragepress.com/news/winter-biking-the-denali-highway/article_f24ac4f4-5733-51c0-8e74-9da901e92a15.html)

## 5. NENANA RIVER BOAT PUT-INS

Private and commercial rafting trips on the Nenana River are very popular and could be expanded in the future, with options ranging from floats on large rafts, kayaks and canoes to individual pack rafts. A place where Nenana River meets Denali Highway, roughly twenty miles from Cantwell, is a popular currently undeveloped location for boat launches. From this location, the Nenana River bends away from the Denali Highway and takes the river traveler behind the Reindeer Hills, where there are both hunting and fishing opportunities. These areas are only accessible by the river. The former boat launch at this location has washed out. Currently rafters or canoers park on an informal section of Denali Highway shoulder, creating unsafe conditions for drivers and recreators.

Planning is needed to identify one or more strategic locations for improved boat launch facilities, aiming to meet the needs of day and overnight users. Because the boat launch would provide access to hunting and fishing opportunities, the project would lend itself to Pittman-Robertson / Hunter Access funding.



<b>Project</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Costs</b>	<b>Priority &amp; Status</b>
One or more boat launches along the Nenana River south of Park Headquarters	Denali Borough, National Park Service, User Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide safe and easy access to hunting and fishing opportunities along Nenana River</li> <li>- Create additional recreational options along Denali Highway</li> </ul>	Developing launches that are durable and affordable to maintain	To be determined	Mid Term – Planning in Progress