

Kantishna Airport Overview

Issues: Ownership and improvement of Kantishna Airport

Existing Airport Facility: Kantishna Airport lies on a gravel bar to the east of Moose Creek at the terminus of the state maintained portion of the Kantishna Road. The runway is 1845 by 45 feet and slopes downhill at a 2% grade. The runway surface is composed of a mixture of river run gravel, mine tailings and silt. The runway has no defined crown and there are soft areas due to poor drainage. There is no defined taxiway, but an informal parking area exists northeast of the runway (approximately 50 by 200 feet). The airport is unlighted. There is insufficient safety area to meet minimal (A-I) FAA standards, and a road traverses one side of the runway within the operational surfaces.

Background: The Kantishna Airport dates from the early 1900's when Fanny Quigley cleared an airfield so that miners in the area could receive mail and freight by air. In 1926 the Territorial Board of Road Commissioners contracted with John E. Anderson of Wonder Lake to construct a 200 x 800 foot aviation field near Kantishna. Known as "Quigley Landing Strip," the airport was located "on the gravel bench on the left limit of Moose Creek near the mouth of Lake Creek" and the cost of construction was about \$675.00. Between 1932 and 1939 this airport was abandoned and a new 150 by 1750 foot airport was constructed near Friday Creek. By 1941, this airport had been extended to 150 by 1750 feet, and is currently listed in the Alaska Aviation Supplement as 35 by 1850 feet.

The Kantishna area has a long history of mining commencing in the early 1900s, before Mt. McKinley National Park was established in 1917. In the early mining days, access to and from Kantishna was chiefly via trails following a "northern route" connecting Kantishna to the rail station of Lignite (near Healy, Alaska) and the rail town of Nenana. Mining activity in Kantishna continued for approximately 70 years after the national park was established. In 1980 the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) expanded the park boundaries to include both the Kantishna and Dunkle mining districts. Shortly thereafter the NPS curtailed mining activity in these areas, although tourism continued to grow and airport access was still critically important.

Road/Airport Ownership: The ownership of the Denali Park Road ("Denali Highway") traversing the original Mt. McKinley National Park has long been a subject of federal/state debate. Fortunately, the less disputed "Kantishna Road" running from the original park's boundary through the 1980 park addition is the route relevant to the airport's legal status.

The State claims road ownership based PLO 601, 8/10/49, which withdrew lands 100 feet on each side of the road centerline "subject to valid existing rights and to existing surveys and withdrawals other than highway purposes." Secretarial Order 2665 dated October 16, 1951 converted the land withdrawal to a right-of-way easement and specifically identified the "North Park Boundary to Kantishna Road" as a feeder road, subject to a right-of-way 100 feet each side of centerline. This right-of-way was subsequently

conveyed to the State via the June 30, 1959 “Omnibus Act” Quitclaim deed. The right-of-way is described herein as “Federal Aid Secondary Class “B” Route 6021 – Kantishna Road – from North boundary of McKinley Park at end of FAP route 52 (Denali Highway) northwesterly to Kantishna Airfield – 4.5 constructed miles.

A related issue is which end of the Kantishna Airport represents the end of FAS route 6021. If the road essentially ends where the airport begins, then the airport cannot benefit from its 200-foot width. Because FAS routes were never surveyed the terminus is unclear. However, several historic RS 2477 road/trails converge at Kantishna where they consolidate as part of the road leading around the airport. These historic routes include the following: RST 344, Lignite-Kantishna, RST 343, Kobi-Kantishna, RST 346, Nenana-Kantishna, and RST 341 Roosevelt-Kantishna. Miners used these access routes in the early 1900s during the heyday of Kantishna mining activity. Although no court case has formally validated their legal existence, these routes were extensively researched, mapped, and administratively adjudicated by the State, which claims a 100-foot right-of-way width for each.¹

1997 MOU: Because the State and National Park Service dispute the ownership of the Kantishna Airport but agree safety improvements may be needed, the two entities signed a Memorandum of Understanding to set out a process for the preparation of an airport master plan for the airport. The purpose of the MOU was: “to define a process of cooperation between NPS and DOT&PF to plan for long term safe aircraft access to Kantishna in a manner consistent with the purposes of Denali National Park and Preserve.” The parties agreed to work to develop standards for maintenance of the airport to ensure continued safe, year round access to Kantishna consistent with National Park Service policy. To accomplish this objective, they agreed to cooperate on an airport master plan and environmental assessment.

2002 Master Plan: In 2002 the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities worked cooperatively with the National Park Service to complete an airport master plan for Kantishna Airport. This plan examined several alternatives to resolve aviation issues at the existing airport. The preferred alternative is to extend the runway to 2070 feet in its existing location. Other alternatives considered included lengthening the runway to 2600 feet in its existing location and relocating the airport to various other sites. The plan was completed in order to set the framework for future airport improvements, but deferred a construction decision to the future when funding for improvements is obtained. An Airport Layout Plan showing future improvements to the airport (as established through the master plan process) was completed.

May Creek and Chisana Airports: Other Airports under disputed ownership with the National Park Service include May Creek Airport, which is located along May Creek Road, another FAS/Omnibus quitclaimed route within Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. This legal situation is quite similar to Kantishna. Another disputed airport is Chisana

¹ RS 2477 routes are historic routes established prior to other withdrawals by use and/or construction (Revised Statute 2477, Mining Law of 1866). All these routes easily predate the establishment of Mt. McKinley National Park on February 26, 1917. See also AS 19.30.400.

Airport, located along a historic RS 2477 right-of-way also in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, and the focus of a 2001 master plan. As with Kantishna, the extent of construction activities at Chisana would be negotiated with the NPS once project funding becomes available.

AIP Non-primary Surface Maintenance funding: Recently DOT&PF negotiated with the National Park Service to conduct a surface maintenance project at Kantishna (2004), and is working to set up a similar project at Chisana. By allowing NPS to accept the funding and perform the maintenance work itself, both airports will see minor improvements. For the moment, larger federally funded construction projects appear unlikely. **I had no Idea that was what M&O had done – It seems like in doing this it we have given up our argument on ownership.**