

Denali Aircraft Overflight Advisory Council Meeting
December 4, 2008

Call to order

Meeting called to order at 8:20am. Quorum was confirmed.

Roll Call and Confirmation of Quorum

Council members present:

Joan Frankevich	Lt. Col. Scott Babos
Tim Cudney	Erika Bennett
Charlie Sassara	Sally Gibert
Suzanne Rust	Tom George
Nancy Bale (arrived at 9:24am)	

Absent Council members:

Nan Eagleson
Brian Okonek
Jim Edwards

NPS staff present:

Paul Anderson, Superintendent, Denali National Park and Preserve
Miriam Valentine, Designated Federal Officer
Jenni Burr, Park Planner, Denali National Park and Preserve
Jared Withers, Physical Scientist, Denali National Park and Preserve

Superintendent's Welcome

Mr. Anderson welcomed the public and members of the Council. He reaffirmed the role of the Council which is to identify voluntary measures to mitigate sound impacts caused by aircraft over the national park and to assure the safety of passengers, pilots, and mountaineers. The Council will seek measures that help to achieve desired future resource conditions as described in the park's Backcountry Management Plan.

Chair's Welcome, Introductions, and Review and Approval of Agenda

Ms. Gibert welcomed the group and invited the audience to introduce themselves. She noted that the meeting format will change starting with this meeting since the Council was moving from information gathering to formulating recommendations. As Council members deliberate the audience will be asked to save comments for designated public comment periods. Audience members expressed concern about this format. Ms. Rust and Mr. George noted that they will make a recommendation later in the meeting to create working groups to further involve the public. Ms. Gibert assured the public that they will be involved in the process of creating recommendations.

Mr. Cudney noted several of his constituents requested presentation times be determined in advance so they could attend key portions of the meeting. It is difficult for members of the interested public to attend for an entire day. He also expressed concern that three Council members were absent and that he felt the Council needs to operate in its entirety to be successful.

Ms. Rust voiced concern about limiting public involvement during meetings. In response, Ms. Valentine suggested that the group review the frequency of defined times for public comment allowed for on the agenda. She asked the Council and audience to try this new format since the

formality provided greater accountability to the FACA process and ensured all public comments – both written and oral – were heard.

The Council discussed the agenda and decided to start new business at 11:00am and to add a comment period after Ms. Rust's presentation.

Member Reports

Assumptions Document

The council discussed the working Assumptions document and agreed to consult the absent Council members before finalizing.

Constituent Reports

- Ms. Bale, Mr. Sassara, Mr. Cudney, and Ms. Frankevich had nothing to report.
- Mr. George attended two meetings of aircraft groups to update them on the Council and its proceedings. He was unable to find information on generalities that could be made about the types of aircraft most commonly flown over the park and their sound signatures.
- Ms. Rust presented an update on the Council at a tourism meeting. She also met with air services and will present key points from that meeting later in the day.
- Ms. Gibert reported what she learned regarding state regulations that address preventing wildlife harassment. The wildlife harassment regulation covers all public uses, including aircraft overflights.
- Ms. Bennett reported that she spoke with commercial aircraft operators. Most fly over Denali on IFR above 24,000 feet and will not change patterns unless told to do so.
- Lt. Col. Babos reported the military has no plan to directly fly over Denali. The military may be willing to reduce flights over the Susitna Military Operating Area (MOA) if military flights are negatively impacting the soundscape.

Consideration of a vice-chair position

The group discussed the need and logistics required for an assistant to the Council Chair. The group determined that Ms. Bennett will be the primary contact for helping Ms. Gibert but the entire group is willing to help out; therefore, a formal vice chair was not named.

Consideration of member alternates

Ms. Gibert revisited this with the Council and members concurred to not pursue adding member alternates to the Council.

Consideration of replacement members

The group discussed terms and decided to recommend to the NPS that the current members be reappointed; that two year terms be replaced by 4 year terms; and that Council membership remain the same until the group has finished its work. Ms. Valentine gave the Council an overview of the FACA selection process. Neither the Council nor the NPS can dictate these matters, but Mr. Anderson was supportive of the Council's goals. Since the Council can't automatically renew itself, Ms. Valentine recommended that the Council suggest one candidate to be considered for each position in addition to a current member seeking reappointment. Ms. Gibert requested that by the next meeting Council members be prepared to submit recommendations for membership seats that will be expiring in fall 2009. [Editor's note: The Council members serving on 2 year terms that

would be seeking reappointment or replacement are Lt. Scott Babos , Nancy Bale, Tim Cudney, Nan Eagleson, Joan Frankevich, and Tom George.]

Agency and Public Comments

Mr. Denklewalter suggested inviting experts on wildlife harassment by aircraft present at upcoming meetings.

Mr. Denklewalter and Mr. Roderick noted that they see military flights more often than was being discussed. Mr. Roderick also noted that the sound from military aircraft is more intense than other types of aircraft and that climbers have seen chaff release from fighter planes within the park. Lt. Col. Babos said that he'd look into it and at the next meeting provide background on chaff release and regulations.

Mr. Hudson commented that the Susitna MOA extends into the Ruth Amphitheater and noted seeing military traffic along the eastern border of the park. He felt there were significant sound impacts from military flights in both areas.

Lt. Col. Babos commented that both Elmendorf and Eielson Air Force Bases have 1-800 numbers to call when military aircraft appear to be in the wrong place or about sound complaints. He will bring more information about the complaint reporting process to the next meeting. He also noted that the more detailed the information about the type of aircraft, location, time, etc., the more effective the military can be in addressing the situation.

Ms. Frankevich noted that flights in the Susitna MOA may be legal but may not be appropriate for the backcountry standards. Lt. Col. Babos commented that the Council may choose to make recommendations to the military to change operations in this MOA. Mr. George noted that a future task for the military might be to cross-reference the NPS sound monitoring data to determine what impacts military flights are having. Lt. Babos noted that he planned to do more outreach with military personnel to increase understanding of areas within Denali with increased backcountry use.

Ms. Valentine shared written comments from Beth Pike and Liz Hamilton. The public and Council discussed the letters.

Revisiting Member Reports

Ms. Rust gave a presentation on current practices of air tour operators, and recommendations based on meeting with aircraft operators and Mr. Cudney, Mr. George, and Ms. Bennett.

Ms. Gibert opened up the meeting to public comment on the presentation. Council members and the public discussed the suggested recommendations. Mr. Withers suggested that the Council take into account overflight trends for the next 15-20 years. Mr. Sassara suggested that the group needed to do more than suggest "study it more" and that specific actions needed to be identified (such as changing typical flying routes). There was a discussion of the need for both additional data and specific actions, and there was a suggestion to develop a timeline to ensure that the process moves along towards action.

Mr. Sassara suggested that the air tour operators need to tell the Council how to most effectively and practically mitigate the negative impacts of sound. Operators suggested that they have already made changes that have mitigated sound impacts. Ms. Rust said that the Council needs to proceed slowly to fully understand the issue and get the feedback from constituents about it. Operators need

a working list about specific problems that need to be addressed and whether or not they are solvable. Ms. Frankevich said that the problem had already been identified. Ms. Gibert suggested identifying specific ideas to work on and Mr. George suggested creating working groups to address the highest priority problems. Ms. Bale said that the Council should use the recommendations created by Ms. Rust as the basis for creating more specific recommendations.

The Aviation Best Practices Working Group was established for air tour operators and other aviation stakeholders to consider “best practices” with regard to soundscape impact, while preserving aviation safety. The working group will evaluate input received from the National Park Service and other stakeholders on the council, to examine best practices, and hopes to capture lessons learned from the key air tour operators who are most active in the park. Findings from the working group will be brought back to the full council for consideration.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 for one hour.

Superintendent and NPS Staff Reports

Jared Withers responded to sound information questions from the Council. He indicated that some information will require a new study and that there will soon be a Denali soundscape website hosted by the Central Alaskan Inventory and Monitoring Network website. To do a better job in defining the problem, Mr. George thought it was important to look at the time of day that aircraft are flying over. Ms. Rust would like to know the duration of the aircraft sound events. The Council requested that Mr. Withers post relevant papers on people’s perception of sound to the website as well as a summary of the papers. Ms. Bale wondered if the Council could make a suggestion about where the non-random sound stations are placed for next summer. Mr. Withers said that the Council could make the request. Ms. Bale suggested that recordings be made this summer before changes are implemented and then record the following summer after changes are made. The Council discussed additional areas about which they would like more information.

Ms. Valentine shared a new system for gathering information requests as the meeting occurs. The Council added that they should be judicious with their requests.

Public Comment

Mr. Fuller commented that it would be helpful to know the sound levels created by certain planes at certain elevations and with different behavior (ascending, descending, etc). This would help operators in making decisions about what type of aircraft to use or the elevation at which to fly to reduce impacts. Mr. Withers commented that a study such as this is beyond the capacity of the current soundscape program to evaluate.

Superintendent and NPS Staff Reports continued

Ms. Valentine responded to information requests stemming from Karen Fortier’s September backcountry use presentation. The Council cannot shape the visitor survey currently scheduled to be implemented for 2009, as the questions were determined two years ago and are awaiting final approval through the national process. In response to the Council’s question about the park implementing a social science survey on soundscape development, this process won’t begin until 2010 or 2011. Currently, the best information available regarding public perception is the surveys and data used to develop the Backcountry EIS.

Ms. Valentine presented a map showing the density/concentrations of backcountry users in each backcountry unit from 2006-2008. She also shared visitor comment cards that addressed

overflights. The Council discussed the comment cards and how they are collected and responded to. Mr. George suggested that NPS responses to overflights complaints include a discussion of the positive benefits and role of aviation in the park.

In response to the Council's question on Amanda Peacock's thesis model that was discussed at the September 2008 meeting, Ms. Valentine reported that it did not account for differences between aircraft climbing versus cruising.

The Council discussed whether they wanted additional information from NPS about seasonal concentrations of animals within the park and decided they'd like any information readily available.

The Council discussed the relative numbers of climbers in the Alaska Range, passengers landing on glaciers, and passengers flying over the park.

Ms. Burr presented challenges associated with posting PowerPoint's on the NPS website. After discussion, the Council's preference was to post PowerPoint's and to use either a Google group to distribute or to host them off of the State of Alaska website. NPS will look into the appropriateness of these options based on FACA regulations and will send out a best practices for future PowerPoint documents. Mr. George, Mr. Cudney, and Mr. Worrell (Alaska Tourist Industry Association) will work together to set up the Google Group.

Ms. Frankevich presented areas of concern for the Council to examine. She also recommended needing to identify ways to increase the distance between the people on the ground and aircraft flying over the park. She presented Brian Okonek's thoughts on mitigating disturbances.

The Council discussed forming work groups to more fully discuss the specific issues and potential solutions. An aircraft operator work group was suggested with Mr. George, Ms. Rust, Ms. Bennett, and Mr. Cudney identified as primary group members. The group discussed the recommendations presented by Ms. Rust.

Agency and public comments

No comments.

The Council continued discussion of the Aviation Best Practices Working Group and scheduling of the work group meeting(s) to coincide with the next Council meeting. Lt. Babos suggested that holding two work group meetings before having a Council meeting might be problematic if the work group moved in a different direction than the entire Council. After discussion which included several members stating they would attend the workgroup, the Council concluded that it would be beneficial to hold two work group meetings before the Council meeting.

The next Council meeting will be April 7, 2009 in Fairbanks. Suggested dates for the workgroup meetings were February 10, 2009 or February 12, 2009 (first choice), and March 23, 2009 (first choice) or March 24, 2009 from 10:00am - 4:00pm. NPS will check flight times for Fairbanks meeting. A second Council meeting was suggested for May in Talkeetna on May 14, 2009 from 10:00am-5:00pm. [Editor's note: The first work group meeting was cancelled due to scheduling conflicts. The April 7 meeting will be held at the National Park Service Building located at 4175 Geist Road, Fairbanks, AK 99709; (907) 457-5752.]

The group discussed the option of the public videoconferencing during the April meeting. After discussion and feedback from the public still in attendance, the Council asked to have videoconferencing available at the NPS facility in Talkeetna (Anchorage as a second choice). NPS will confirm the availability at the Talkeetna site. The meeting was adjourned at 4:55pm.
[Editor's note: Videoconferencing will be available at the Talkeetna Ranger Station.]