

Denali National Park and Preserve Aircraft Overflights Advisory Council

Actions, Decisions and Recommendations made at the April 7, 2009 Meeting

Documentation of meetings. The Council will no longer ask Park staff to draft meeting summaries. The Council will compile a list of actions, decisions, and recommendations. Sally Gibert will draft the April 7 compilation for Council member and National Park Service (NPS) review. Formal transcripts will be continued for those needing more detailed documentation.

Renewal of Council members with expiring terms. To preserve continuity, the Council wishes to perpetuate our initial membership in recognition of the investment made by the current Council members in learning new information and building an understanding of fellow member interests. The Council encourages the NPS to work expeditiously with appropriate parties in Washington, DC to recommend reappointment of those original members with 2-year terms that will soon expire.

Working Assumptions adopted April 7, 2009:

1. Maintaining and enhancing public safety is an essential goal in all of our deliberations and eventual recommendations.
2. The Overflights Council recognizes the intrinsic values of the Denali National Park and Preserve. These values include habitat and wildlife, scenic mountain landscapes, wilderness recreational opportunities, and wilderness values, including natural soundscapes.
3. The Denali Backcountry Management Plan acknowledges that overflights and backcountry landings are an important and necessary part of the range of Denali National Park and Preserve experiences.
4. Human-caused sound, including the sound of aircraft, can diminish the experience of park visitors, including the experience of those visitors who rely on aircraft to get to the park. These park experiences, ranging from highly accessible to remote, include wildlife viewing, climbing, hiking, camping and other opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation.

Thus our challenge on the Overflights Council is to balance the needs of public safety, public use and access, and protection of natural resources and values in a way that is fair to all parties. Our timeframe is 20 years – the projected lifespan of the existing Backcountry Management Plan.

Military Overflights. On behalf of the US military, Lt. Colonel Scott Babos requests that anyone with complaints about military overflights call this toll free recorded hotline: 1-800-JETNOIS –or- 1-800-538-6647. By providing as much information as possible (time, location, description of aircraft, estimated altitude, etc.) authorities will be able to follow-up more effectively.

Plenary Council discussion points. To provide a context for the Best Practices Working Group report below, the following wide-ranging topics were discussed in concept. *Note* – these are not recommendations, although some could evolve into recommendation in the future:

- Develop a better system to collect ground-based user feedback on the impact of aircraft noise;
- Spreading overflights over a wider area to reduce impacts on certain high-use areas – recognizing the potential unintended consequences of shifting flights to other areas;
- Look at the pros and cons of recommending flights follow (or avoid) the Denali Park Road corridor. (The Superintendent confirmed there is no general prohibition on flying above the Park Road, although traditionally it has been discouraged by the Park);
- Flying higher as a voluntary measure to reduce impacts, including over Denali State Park;
- Educating backcountry users to expect more aircraft sounds in certain backcountry units;
- Educating the public about the role of aviation in the park, including the role of the military;
- Consideration of reducing or relocating scenic glacier landings;
- Consideration of avoiding the side valleys when flying down the Ruth Glacier; and
- Discouraging pilots from making climbers the focal point of close-up flightseeing.

Best Practices Working Group. The Council commends the efforts of the informal Best Practices Working Group established at our December, 2008 Council meeting. The Council encourages the Working Group and its individual participants to continue to refine and build support for short-term voluntary measures that can be field-tested during the 2009 spring and summer season. Preliminary expectations include:

- Refinement of an informational, internal working map of sound sensitive areas for aircraft during the spring and summer season.
- Refinement of an informational map of the commonly used overflight areas during the spring and summer season.
- Refinement of selected voluntary measures that could be implemented by participating air tour operators during the 2009 field season to reduce sound impacts on the ground without unduly compromising safety, economic viability, or visitor enjoyment.
 - Tim Cudney will coordinate north-side efforts, specifically steering flights over the Headquarters area during pre-determined time periods to avoid the Triple Lakes area. By alternating between Triple Lakes and Headquarters the NPS will be able to monitor ground responses from both flight patterns.
 - Suzanne Rust will coordinate south-side efforts with operators testing the effects of two identified changes in operations and their effects on ground users. One operational change will be to have airplanes be well established at a high altitude before reaching Kathiltna Pass. This would eliminate the need for the airplane to circle or climb near Kathiltna Pass. The second operational change will be to modify Mt. McKinley summit flying patterns to stay generally more east and north of the summit to avoid the 14,000 and 17,000 foot climbing camps when possible. These operational changes would be in effect only during the 2009 climbing season.
- Once specific voluntary measures are identified, Tim and Suzanne will inform the Park Service (including John Leonard in Talkeetna) so that Park staff may deploy sound monitoring station(s) to best advantage to monitor the results of these test measures, and to advise backcountry and climbing rangers of opportunities to record anecdotal sound observations.
- A follow-up working group meeting in the fall (probably the week of September 21) to examine the effectiveness and viability of the 2009 voluntary measures.

Aircraft sound listening session. The Council scheduled a voluntary aircraft sound listening session in a controlled field setting to become more familiar with the relative human impact of the sounds of several aircraft types at various altitudes and power outputs (ascending/descending). The purpose of the exercise is to help determine the effectiveness of a potential recommendation to “fly higher.” This will take place on July 17 north of Trapper Creek on the Chulitna River bluff near an existing DOT/PF highway camp (rest area at milepost 121.5 of the George Parks Highway). Participating air tour operators will be observed in their normal course of business to minimize additional costs. If bad weather precludes these observations, the fall-back alternative will take place the next day (July 18) at Denali Park using park aircraft. Brian Okonek will coordinate details and keep Council members apprised of last minute scheduling decisions and directions.

Next full Council meeting. The next meeting of the full Overflights Council will be October 2, 2009. Time and location will be arranged by the NPS, with the following priority for location: Talkeetna (if the CIRI hotel is available off-season), Wasilla, or Anchorage. Preliminary topics for the agenda include:

- Report from the Best Practices Working Group on 2009 voluntary measures.
- Report from the Best Practices Working Group on the informational mapping of sound sensitive areas and common overflight areas.
- Report from the Park Service on sound monitoring, including observations about the effectiveness of the voluntary measures tested in 2009.
- Report from Council members attending the July aircraft sound listening session.
- Visual presentation by Charlie Sassara
- Visual presentation by Brian Okonek
- Impacts of aircraft sound on wildlife, if applicable and available:
 - National Park Service studies
 - State Game Refuge recommendations
- Report from the Park Service on 2009 efforts to monitor its own administrative use.

New Denali Park soundscape website: <http://science.nature.nps.gov/im/units/cakn>

- Click "Reports & Publications"
- Scroll down to "Soundscape" for links to Denali Annual Soundscape Reports