



# The Hickel Highway: An Early Road Across Arctic Alaska



Photo Courtesy of Harold Tilleson

**Crew worker Fred Hobson on the newly-constructed Hickel Highway north of Anaktuvuk Pass, 1969.**

During the late 1960s, Alaska was abuzz with news of oil discoveries along the Arctic coastline and on the immense tundra landscape north of the Brooks Range known as the North Slope. Exploration confirmed that a field southwest of Point Barrow contained an estimated 9.6 billion barrels of oil—the largest field ever discovered in North America.

For a short time, this highway, unofficially known as the Hickel Highway, became Alaska's most controversial roadway and a potent symbol of pioneering innovation, of ecological destruction, and of rapid cultural change for some of Alaska's most isolated indigenous peoples.

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*...it's an ugly slash that winds its way across the virgin silence of Alaska's vast interior...*

—Jane Pender  
*Anchorage Daily News*

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The oil companies that rushed north found the Arctic a difficult place to extract oil. Petroleum engineers and drilling rig workers faced severe cold, persistent darkness, and permafrost, which would turn into a quagmire when heavy equipment disturbed the vegetation insulating the ice below. The most immediate obstacle, however, was simply reaching the region with equipment and supplies. At great expense, the companies used flotillas of barges and C-130 cargo planes to get materials to the coast at Prudhoe Bay. Then Alaska's Department of Highways attempted to open the Arctic oil fields to truck travel by punching a rough road through the Brooks Range—and through the area that would later be designated as Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve.

Alaska's governor, Walter J. Hickel, had been elected in 1966 on a platform that included widespread resource development. He approved the plan to use bulldozers to scrape the road north so that private companies could also profit from the Arctic oil boom.

## **Building the Hickel Highway**

By November 1968, plans for the quick and dirty "pioneer" road to the north were in place, and the state was accepting bids from contractors for the work. Fearing the window of opportunity was closing for the year, the Alaska Department of Highways opted to build the road with its own Caterpillar bulldozers and a road grader. The four bulldozers pulled skid-mounted units, or wannigans, that served as cafeteria, machine shop, and sleeping quarters for the workers. From the beginning the task was fraught with difficulty.

Extremely low temperatures and rough terrain troubled the bulldozer operators, but they scraped away trees and soil to create a roadbed for semi-trucks and other heavy-duty hauling machines. When the road-building crew reached the Yukon River, the workers constructed an ice bridge using water pumps and spruce poles. They repeated this process over the Koyukuk River near Bettles. While they advanced up the John River toward Anaktuvuk Pass, newspaper reporters began to hitch rides on fuel trucks and to describe the project to the world.



Alaska State Library

Walter J. Hickel was elected Governor of Alaska in 1966 on a platform of resource development.



Anchorage Museum

Caterpillar vehicles and trucks move up the Hickel Highway in March 1974.



Anchorage Museum

Crossing the Yukon River on the Hickel Highway ice bridge in March 1970. The culverts are headed for Prudhoe Bay.

Dozers move up the Hickel Highway in 1974 to construct the service road for the Alaska Pipeline.



Anchorage Museum

Mike Dalton reported for the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* from Anaktuvuk Pass, where one of Alaska’s most isolated Native communities was facing the prospect of rapid cultural change once it was linked to the outside world. After making friends with young Harold Paneak, Dalton painted a picture of the changes the road might bring: “Perhaps by the time Harold grows up and there is a highway...[he] will be buying his meat at the local trading post (or supermarket) and will be earning his livelihood by driving a freight truck, or...working on an oil drilling rig on the North Slope.”

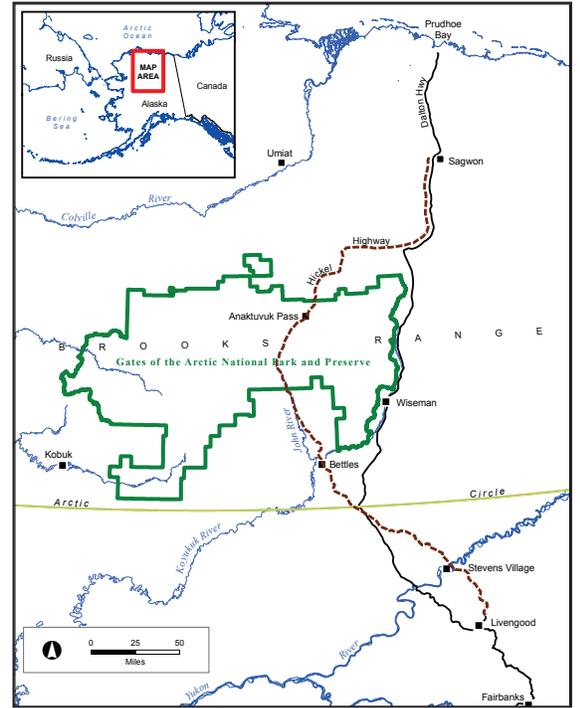
Environmentalists in Alaska were increasingly concerned that the road would rapidly degrade one of the continent’s great wild places while offering the state only limited economic return. Robert Weeden, president of the Alaska Conservation Society, was one of the very first to sound the alarm. In a letter to Governor Hickel early in the road-building process, Weeden spoke for the conservation community:

*Their concern is that...the trail will quickly become an ugly, useless scar on the face of Alaska when erosion, thawing, and changing transportation needs cause abandonment; and that the devil-take-the-hindmost aura of the whole project will lead to unnecessary destruction of scenery, streambeds, and game habitats.*

#### Road completion, use, and legacy

On March 10, 1969, just over 100 days after the crew began work in Livengood north of Fairbanks, the bulldozers reached their goal at Sagwon, the North Slope airstrip and supply station. While the construction crew was fêted by the governor and the Alaska Carriers Association in Fairbanks, the newsletter of the Alaska Conservation Society described the road as the “boondoggle of the year.” Reports of melting and erosion in the roadbed prompted critics to name it the “Hickel Canal,” the “Hickel Ditch” and the “Hickel Canoe Trail.”

Over the next two years, the oil companies pumping oil at Prudhoe Bay made it clear that they had no need for a land supply route; the state government balked at paying for maintenance; and the winter road fell into disuse. It was used briefly in 1974 to transport heavy equipment and supplies north to use for construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline service road, but after that, it became entirely obsolete.



In 1969, the 550-mile Hickel Highway crossed the Brooks Range, where the Wilderness Act now protects this corridor in Gates of the Arctic.

During road construction, Jane Pender of the *Anchorage Daily News* had commented, “Seen from the air, it’s an ugly slash that winds its way across the virgin silence of Alaska’s vast interior...” Today, even though natural forces have blurred the original roadbed, it still can be seen from an airplane, and people and wildlife still use it as a convenient travel route.

Although it is tempting to dismiss the road as a minor chapter in the state’s history, the Hickel Highway remains a powerful symbol of Alaska’s ongoing land use debate and of the mixed feelings many have about the costs and benefits of development above the Arctic Circle.

#### For more information

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