

Open Haul Road?

In a recent editorial setting forth our objections to allowing oil and gas exploration within the Arctic National Wildlife Range, we tried to explain the critical relationship between the productivity of wildlife resources and the integrity of the land that supports it. We tried to explain that the impact of any human development goes far beyond the small acreage that is actually devoured by structures and facilities.

This principle applies no less to another northern issue which has been the subject of recent action by both the Governor and the Legislature. We refer to the question of opening the North Slope Haul Road to the general motoring public.

At least 19 legislators have put their names on several bills that would require the state to open the road, at least seasonally, to every motorist that wanted to take a rubber ramble up to the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Hammond has proposed limiting access to bus tours, and maintaining the road on a year-round basis.

This paper for years has carried the consistent rural reaction to the idea of highways to far-flung communities: NO. This reaction is no less vocal, or valid, today. Those communities that have been blessed with the black asphalt ribbon through their graveyards and game habitat often lament the longest and loudest, urging their fellows to look long and hard at the state's present highway system and what it has done to the fabric of rural society.

Although we are not thrilled with the Governor's proposal, we tremble more at the thought of what may happen if the urban legislators succeed in their noisy onslaught on the best interests and expressed desires of most rural Alaskans, represented by a feisty, but small, number of rural legislators.

Based on even a cursory glance at the history books, we can state without qualification that if the road to Prudhoe Bay is opened wide, that the ability of the land to nourish and sustain viable wildlife populations, which in turn feed the nutritional and cultural needs of a significant number of Alaskans, will be sharply diminished within a few short years. We are also convinced that while the voracious lions of commerce and urban free enterprise may lay low for awhile, they will inevitably rely on the example of the North Slope Haul Road to wrench the rest of rural Alaska out of the hands of rural Alaskans and deliver it up to their clients, fleeing to the northland from the excesses of their living standards.

We believe the Haul Road issue provides as good an opportunity as any to assert the notion that there is a point beyond which rural Alaskans cannot be expected to tolerate public policies that permit a continuous violation of the land and the isolation that are so much a part of what make the bush so precious. Their response to alternately sweet and sour demands that they step aside and let the motoring public in, for reasons ranging from patriotism to the lure of many greenbacks, has been simple and consistent: NO.

We believe that there comes a time when ands, ifs and maybes don't cut it. This is one of those times. We're nervous about Hammond's approach, but we cannot live with opening the Haul Road to the general public.