

Recommends Rail Extension To Kobuk, Gubic

When the Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall recently stated that he cannot recommend construction of the proposed Rampart Canyon Project "at this time," he offered alternatives among which was the recommendation that the government owned Alaska Railroad be extended west to Kobuk then north from Alatna to Gubic.

He recommended that early surveys and planning by the Department of Transportation be done to determine how the Alaska Railroad should be extended to provide economical all-season bulk surface transportation to presently remote Alaska areas of great economic promise.

Governor Walter J. Hickel, who has been a strong proponent of the extension of the Railroad to Nome, has now

(Continued on page 6)

Udall Recommends

(Continued from Page 1)

taken up the ball and has now "undertaken as a major project of his administration an ambitious extension of the Alaska Railroad to the Arctic."

The following is the Interior Department's recommendation:

EXTENSION OF ALASKA RAILROAD

In most parts of the United States, the substantial extension of an existing railroad would properly be viewed as folly. The circumstances which prevail in the portion of Alaska north and west of the Railbelt Area, however, make extension of the wholly government-owned Alaska Railroad appear a developmental imperative.

Here lie proven and indicated minerals and other resources, many of which await only economic transportation for their development. Here, also, economical, regular, all-season, bulk surface transportation could result in great economic growth; but water transportation must be seasonal, major road construction and associated maintenance costs are discouraging, and air costs are limiting.

Thus, extension of the Alaska Railroad to serve this area may be justified to open up this portion of the last great frontier of the Nation as construction of the transcontinental railroads was justified to open up the West.

It would be comparable to the recent construction by the Canadian Government of northward extensions of its railroad system, which are contributing significantly to the rapid development of the mineral and other resources of Canada's northwestern areas.

On the basis of presently proven mineral resources, the most appropriate plan would involve a two-step extension of the railroad from its present interior terminus area at Dunbar (immediately west of Fairbanks) first to Kobuk

and then north from Alatna to Gubic as indicated on Plate 3.

The first would be an extension of 405 miles and the second an additional 250 miles. Rough estimates indicate sector costs of \$157 million and \$107 million, respectively. This would provide access to a presently remote area equal to California and Indian combined.

Construction of the two sectors would be phased not only because of the obvious engineering advantages to be had from so doing, but also because the immediacy of high yields dictates that the Kobuk segment should have priority.

The massive mineral exploration activity and rich finds along the south slope of the Endicott Mountains make this the prime routing. The known and growing economic geology of the north slope of the Brooks Range (at present, oil and gas finds) makes the line to Gubic a natural add-on.

The result, essentially, would be a bisecting of the State, with a railroad system effectively bringing tens of thousands of square miles and hundreds of existing and potential settlements within striking distance of mass transportation.

With military installations of various kinds scattered over the area, and perhaps others contemplated, logistical difficulties could be substantially relieved in terms of supply requirements and costs.

Present high-cost barriers to economic activity in this vast area of the State would be reduced as supply and product flows increased, until cost decreased, and transport times to, from, and within the State shortened.

Of considerable significance is the effect the extension would have on the complexion of the river transportation on the Yukon (see Plate 3).

The present difficult and

(Continued on page 8)

Recommends . .

(Continued from Page 6)

costly transshipping of freight down the shallow Tanana River from Nenana to Tanana would be eliminated.

Shifting the rail/river interchange point to Tanana on the Yukon would allow the use of efficient, deeper draft water equipment, effectively changing the character of carriage on the Yukon River at almost zero cost. Finally, the general impact on land value and use as great areas are brought into reach and productive commitment (including recreational) would have its effects on the fiscal soundness of Alaska as the tax and revenue base broadened.

In summary, the time is right in terms of expected returns for a major extension of the Alaska Railroad to open up the great area north and west of Fairbanks.

To not embark on such an undertaking would very likely be to seriously limit the pace and extent of development of the State to a degree incompatible with the national interest.

That such action merits consideration is unquestionable. A necessary first step is accomplishment of the engineering, market, and other surveys required to measure the problems, potentialities and desirable timing for the proposal.

Thus, planning for the extension of the Alaska Railroad should accompany the previously proposed expedited mineral exploration and research program.

The engineering surveys contemplated would include photo reconnaissances to further define route selection, soil analyses, preliminary designs, and other actions estimated to cost \$4.70 million for the Dunbar to Kobuk sector and \$2.25 million for the Alatna to Gubic sector.