



Technical Memorandum

Emergency Preparedness in the Denali Area

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Subject: Emergency Preparedness in the Denali Area

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A well-designed aviation system should support emergency preparedness, community access, and long-term sustainability without compromising the region's unique character and natural resources. Enhancing the aviation system in the Denali area minimizes the reliance on a single mode of transportation or access point in emergency or disaster scenarios, strengthens the broader transportation network, and ensures the continuity of vital connections for communities, people, and goods across the region.

Strategic investments in each airport should result in a more reliable, adaptable, and future-ready aviation network. To understand what investments may be needed in Denali area airports to ensure such a network, the project team interviewed key stakeholders and reviewed comments received from community members. A few key takeaways from these conversations are that the region requires certified weather reporting at Healy River Airport (HRR) and Summit Airport (UMM), the airspace restrictions at Clear Airport (Z84) may be impacting life safety of the nearby communities, and though airport infrastructure doesn't seem to be hindering the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR's) abilities to fight fires in the Denali area, fuel availability is a constraint.



Firefighting Capabilities

The Alaska DNR manages wildfire response in this region and provided the RESPEC team with insight into aviation needs that support firefighting activities in the Denali area.

Firefighting operations in the borough are primarily supported from Fairbanks, where fixed wing aircraft are based and typically refuel due to limited fueling capabilities at Nenana Airport (ENN). However, the Nenana fuel tanks were recently brought back online after being out of service for about a year and a half, which could provide greater flexibility for base operations in the future.

While Nenana Airport provides some support, Healy River Airport is used extensively for helicopter operations. DNR also maintains a leased lot with a cabin at the Clear Airport, which is occasionally used to preposition a helicopter and crew when fires occur in the northern part of the borough, reducing response time by roughly 30 minutes. Summit Airport offers little benefit, as fires are rare at higher elevations. Although Healy River Airport is recognized for its extensive helicopter use, many of the area's airports have been or could be used by helicopters to support firefighting, depending on the fire's location.

Thanks to the local road system, much of the logistics and transport of personnel and supplies can be handled by vehicle. Overall, DNR does not view limited airport infrastructure as a barrier to effective firefighting in the area. However, the lack of commercial vendors was noted as a constraint, likely referring to fuel availability.

Medevac Operations

To better understand the needs of medevac outfits operating in the Denali area, RESPEC reached out to several contacts at LifeMed and Guardian. As of July 30, 2025, only one contact responded.

The contact who responded is the Program Aviation Manager at Aero Air, LLC, which serves as the fixed wing operator for LifeMed. The Aero Air manager shared contact information for the Program Manager at Air Method who oversees LifeMed's helicopter operations. RESPEC interviewed both the Fixed Wing Operations Manager and the Helicopter Operations Manager. Because both Aero Air and Air Method operate on behalf of LifeMed, this memorandum refers to all operators as "LifeMed."



Helicopter Operations

LifeMed has a helicopter based at Wolf Lake in Wasilla, south of the Denali Borough. The Air Method Program Manager stated that LifeMed does not respond to many calls in the Denali area, but when they do, they typically land on the road or in a field. They only fly using Visual Flight Rules (VFR) and can land in any 100-foot by 100-foot cleared area. They have no infrastructure needs and rarely land at airports, though they have landed at Kantishna (5Z5) a few times in the past.

Fixed Wing Operations

RESPEC and the Program Aviation Manager discussed operations at several airports in the Denali area to understand pilots' needs and preferences. Ultimately, the Program Aviation Manager said that Healy River Airport is currently the best operating airport in the Denali area for medevac operations. If Healy River Airport closes in the future, Summit Airport would be the preferred option for its approaches, but it would need lighting and weather reporting. Denali Park Airport (AK06) may also be a good option if it became public-use and had lighting and weather reporting.

McKinley National Park Airport

McKinley National Park Airport (INR) has a nice, long runway (3,000 feet) and on-site weather reporting, but weather conditions often make it impossible to land there.

Healy River Airport

LifeMed lands at Healy River Airport a couple dozen times per year and it is their best operating airport in the area, though it lacks reported weather. The instrument approach procedure for Healy River Airport uses weather from McKinley National Park Airport, approximately 10 miles away. The runway is sufficiently long to support medevac operations (2,910 feet).

LifeMed is comfortable with the current system, but if Healy River Airport is going to close they would like to see it maintained until a replacement airport is available. The replacement would require lighting and weather reporting.

As of November 1, 2025, the Interior Community Health Center satellite clinic in Healy has closed.¹ With this closure, the nearest clinics are in Cantwell and Nenana, with Fairbanks being more than 100 miles away. Interior Community Health Center will continue to provide the option for Healy residents to meet with providers virtually, from

¹ Interior Community Health Center – Notice of Healy Clinic Closure:
<https://www.interiorcommunityhealth.org/contents/healy-clinic>



the main clinic in Fairbanks. There is still one other clinic located in Healy, but it is only open during the tourist season, from May through September.²

Denali Park Airport

LifeMed has used Denali Park Airport, which they feel has a nice, long runway (4,000 feet). It is a private strip, however, and does not have weather reporting or good runway condition reporting; LifeMed once landed there and sunk into the runway because it was soft.

Summit Airport

LifeMed has operated out of Summit Airport several times. Like Healy River Airport, the instrument approach procedure for Summit Airport requires use of the weather reporting at McKinley National Park Airport, approximately 37 miles away. Because Summit Airport has a long straight valley on either end, LifeMed anticipates that the approach would be better than at Healy River Airport. Additionally, the runway is sufficiently long to support medevac operations (3,814 feet).

Medevac Summary

LifeMed's helicopter operations are largely unaffected by airport infrastructure. For fixed wing operations, Healy River Airport is sufficient even with its approach challenges, but an alternative would be welcome. Summit Airport is a promising replacement for Healy River Airport, especially since it is outside of the valley, but Denali Park Airport could work if it was a public-use airport with reliable runway condition reporting. LifeMed indicated their preference would be to keep Healy River Airport in operation until a replacement airport was ready to take on medevac operations.

LifeMed stated that any replacement airport for Healy River Airport will need lighting and weather reporting³ to support medevac operations and that a runway of 3,500 feet is “more than adequate” for the turboprops they have in their fleet.

Community Perspective

Community members have expressed concern about the lack of medevac access in certain parts of the Denali area, specifically the Clear/Anderson/Ferry region in the

² Alaska Public Media – <https://alaskapublic.org/news/alaska-desk/2025-09-24/healys-only-year-round-medical-clinic-will-close-in-november>;

³ As an on-demand operator, LifeMed must follow the requirements of 14 CFR Part 135, which include operating limitations and weather requirements.



north and Cantwell to the south. The project team has received comments that community members in the Clear/Ferry area have died because medevac operators were unable or unwilling to land at Clear Airport.

Community members from Cantwell have noted that Summit Airport lacks certified weather reporting, and although operators can land there using McKinley National Park Airport's reporting, sometimes flights are unable to land because of the weather differences at the two distant airports.

Additionally, some community members in Healy have requested that Healy River Airport remain open indefinitely to support medevac operations close to this primary population center.

Conclusion

Ensuring robust emergency preparedness in the Denali area requires strategic investment in airport infrastructure to support both firefighting and medevac operations. Stakeholder interviews and community feedback highlight the need for certified weather reporting, reliable lighting, and adequate runway length at key airports such as Healy River Airport and Summit Airport. While current firefighting activities are generally well-supported, limited fuel availability remains a constraint. For medevac operations, Healy River Airport is the preferred airport; however, alternatives such as Summit Airport or Denali Park Airport could serve as replacements if upgraded. Maintaining Healy River Airport until a suitable replacement is available is strongly recommended to ensure continuity of emergency services.

Community concerns about limited medevac access in remote areas underscore the need for improved airport capabilities. The recent closure of the Healy clinic has further increased reliance on emergency transport, making dependable aviation infrastructure even more critical. Maintaining and upgrading airport facilities with a focus on lighting, weather reporting, and runway condition improvements will help address these challenges, safeguard the region's communities, and ensure the Denali area remains prepared for emergencies while preserving vital connections for people and goods.

