



Technical Memorandum

Healy River Airport Challenges

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Subject: Denali Area Airport Planning Study: Healy River Airport Challenges

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Introduction

Healy River Airport (HRR) is the most used airport¹ in the Denali area by commercial air taxi operators, GA pilots, and medevac outfits. The airport is managed and maintained by DOT&PF, but the land is owned by the Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC). DOT&PF previously leased the land from ARRC under a long-term agreement, but the lease transitioned into hold-over status on September 14, 2017.

The HRR site presents challenges for current operations. A key component of the Denali Area Airport Planning Study (DAAPS) is assessing the current use of HRR and identifying alternatives to address the challenges with the airport to meet the needs of the region. This technical memorandum describes the history, status, and key constraints of HRR.

Airport Description

HRR is a public-use airport accessible by road via the Parks Highway, Healy Spur Road, and Healy Access Road. The runway is 2,912 feet long by 60 feet wide, paved, and was in good condition when inspected in 2023. HRR does not have its own weather reporting system; the nearest system is at McKinley National Park Airport (INR) and the weather can vary greatly between these locations.

¹ *Denali Area Airport Planning Study Aviation Forecast*, May 2025





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The airport's location was chosen for its convenience in serving the Usibelli Coal Mine and is still favored for its easy access to Denali National Park and Preserve and proximity to the population center at Healy. The frequent high winds at this location make landing challenging, but pilots report that most airports in the Denali area have high winds. Medevac operators prefer HRR for landing in the region because their larger aircraft can handle the wind and HRR has a long runway, but smaller aircraft struggle with the conditions.

Constraints

HRR is constrained by several factors (see Figure 1):

Alaska Railroad – Railroad tracks are only 700' from the runway 33 threshold and 20' above the runway elevation, which prevent airport expansion to the south without track realignment.

Healy Spur Road – Expansion on the west side of the airport is limited by this road.

Topography – A large bluff and the Nenana River on the north and east sides of the airport limit airport expansion. The surrounding terrain also limits the approach minimums due to significant airspace penetrations (see Figure 2). This same terrain creates turbulent winds at times.



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Figure 1 - HRR's constraints. Photo courtesy DOT&PF Statewide Aviation, September 2023. View to the south.

Operations

There were 1,300 operations at HRR in 2022. These operations involved 1,431 enplaned passengers, 16,781 pounds of deplaned freight, and 2,537 pounds of deplaned mail. There were 10 aircraft based at HRR in 2022.

HRR is predominantly used as a summer airport, given the seasonality of Denali area activity and the difficulty in maintaining this airport in the winter.

The approach minimums are not less than 1-mile visibility with a relatively steep 7:1 approach slope due to terrain penetrating the Part 77 airspace.

Lease Lots

HRR has 15 lease lots, all of which were leased or permitted as of 2023. In previous years, when there were vacancies, several entities held short-term leases at HRR for





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the summer season including Usibelli Coal Mine, Glenn Air, Inc., Ryan Augustine, and the U.S. Army.

There are 7 aircraft tie-downs at the airport not associated with a lease lot, but no program to manage them.

Grant Assurances

When an airport sponsor accepts funds from FAA-administered airport financial assistance programs, such as the Airport Improvement Program (AIP), the sponsor must agree to meet certain obligations or assurances, which may be in effect for up to 30 years from the date of acceptance of the funds.

DOT&PF has met all past and current federal grant assurances for HRR, but because DOT&PF does not own the land on which HRR is located, DOT&PF cannot ensure it can meet future grant obligations tied to federal funds. Therefore, DOT&PF has not accepted federal Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants since 2012.





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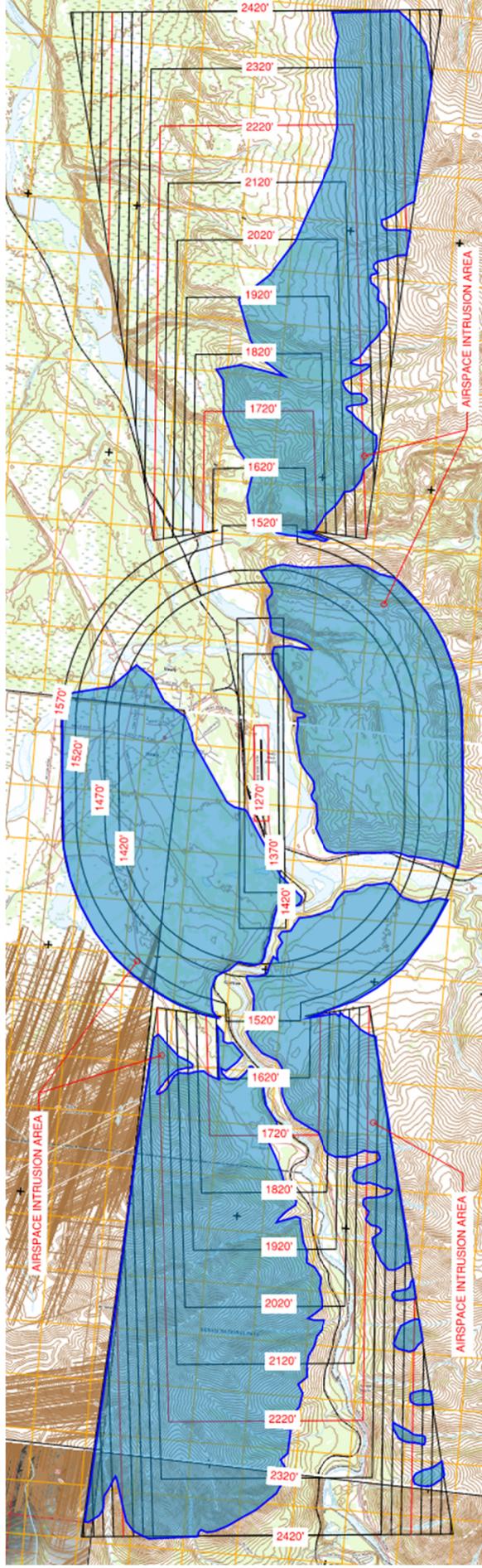


Figure 2 - Airspace penetrations (blue areas on the map) affect a significant portion of HRR's Part 77 airspace.



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Conclusion

The land ownership status of HRR presents a significant challenge to continued investment in the airport. DOT&PF must decide whether to continue investing in HRR. If DOT&PF divests from the airport, it must develop a plan to replace the services offered by HRR. If investments continue, DOT&PF must decide how much to invest and for how long. Key to this decision is commitment to a long-term lease with ARRC.

The ARRC is interested in signing another long-term lease with DOT&PF. As part of the process, there are a few key steps that need to be addressed:

- Submission of an ARRC lease application.
- Remittance of the outstanding balance on lease payments, which include payments that have not been made since 2019 as well as several missing payments from 2018.
- Completion of a new appraisal by an MAI appraiser, either by ARRC or DOT&PF, to determine an updated lease rate.

If DOT&PF commits to HRR in the long run, there will continue to be several limitations.

- HRR's current runway length limits the types of aircraft that can use the airport. Larger aircraft that operate in the area, such as the Pilatus PC-12 and the Beechcraft King Air, require runways that are 3,500' long.
- Terrain limits the approach minimums, which renders HRR unusable in adverse weather conditions.
- The unstable and gusty winds created by surrounding terrain make HRR unusable to small aircraft regularly and larger aircraft on occasion

