

Juneau Access Improvements Project
Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement
WILDLIFE FACT SHEET

Hundreds of wildlife species live within or pass through the study area for the Juneau Access Improvements (JAI) Project. The Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) focuses on about 30 representative species, including bald eagles, Steller sea lions, humpback whales, moose, brown and black bears, mountain goats, wolverines, and several bird species.

Most of the project area is forested with areas of wetland and riparian habitat. The direct loss of terrestrial habitat from the build alternatives that include a highway would have a minor effect on wildlife because that loss would be a small (less than 1 percent) part of the habitat available in the project study area. The two alternatives that involve more miles of highway (Alternatives 2B and 3) would have greater impacts to wildlife than the other alternatives evaluated in the Draft SEIS.

Alternative 2B would create a potential barrier to wildlife passage and increase the odds of involvement in vehicle collisions. To reduce such impacts, wildlife underpasses would be constructed at several streams and high-use wildlife corridors. Alternatives 3, 4B, and 4D would have similar but smaller impacts to wildlife than Alternative 2B.

Bald Eagles

Alternatives 1 (No Action), 1B, 4A, and 4C would have no road construction or blasting and no impacts on bald eagles. The alignments of Alternatives 2B, 3, 4B, and 4D have been shifted, to the extent practicable, to maximize the distance between nest trees and project construction work limits. No eagle nest trees are anticipated to be removed.

DOT&PF would apply for permits to engage in construction activity that might disturb bald eagles in nests within 660 feet of the work limits for construction and for eagles in nests within 0.5 mile of any blasting activities. For alternatives that require widening of 2.9 miles of the existing Glacier Highway (Alternative 2B, 3, 4B, and 4D), DOT&PF would obtain permits to disturb bald eagles in nests within 660 feet or as determined necessary in consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS).

Traffic noise from a Lynn Canal highway could cause eagles to move to other nest trees, but they would likely stay in their nesting territory. Eagles less sensitive to noise would probably grow accustomed to having a highway near their prime feeding areas. A highway on either side of Lynn Canal is not likely to have negative impacts on the overall population of bald eagles in the Lynn Canal area.

Steller Sea Lions and Humpback Whales

Alternatives 2B, 3, 4B, and 4D would include the construction of ferry terminals, and Alternatives 2B and 3 would include construction of multi-span bridges, both of which would require pile driving. Such activity could disturb Steller sea lions or humpback whales in the project area. Vibratory hammers would be used during pile driving as much as practicable to minimize the intensity of underwater noise impacts. Monitors would be engaged during pile driving to notify construction teams of Steller sea lions and humpback whales in the area to avoid and minimize impacts to these species.

The two primary haulout areas for Steller sea lions in the project area are on the east side of Lynn Canal at Gran Point and Met Point. Highway construction activities that take place near these haulout locations would cause noise that could be heard by Steller sea lions at the haulouts. Blasting would be required for two tunnels near the Gran Point haulout, and for slope cuts near both Gran Point and Met Point. Mitigation measures to avoid and minimize impacts at these haulout locations are included in the Draft SEIS.

All the build alternatives would increase ferry traffic in Lynn Canal. There is concern that ferry traffic in Berners Bay under Alternatives 3, 4B, and 4D could negatively affect Steller sea lions and humpback whales during spring by disrupting the spawning of two of their food sources, herring and eulachon.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has begun what is called “formal Section 7 consultation” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for Alternative 2B, the preferred alternative. This consultation is required if there is a possibility that a protected species or its habitat could be adversely effected by an alternative; the western population of Steller sea lions and humpback whales are listed as endangered species under the ESA. The results of the consultation will be documented in the Final SEIS and Record of Decision.