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2. FORESTS: Whistle Stop train expands Alaskan access

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GIRDWOOD, Alaska -- The train left the station nearly on time, but since this was a special run marking the start of a new "whistle stop" service through the Chugach National Forest, the conductor seemed more concerned with the comfort of VIP passengers than with maintaining a strict schedule.

Among the guests aboard the train on this misty August morning were three members of the U.S. Senate, an associate deputy chief of the Forest Service and dozens of green-uniformed federal employees buzzing with excitement. As part of the celebration of the Chugach National Forest's 100th anniversary, the Forest Service and the Alaska Railroad introduced this new service to bring a new generation of explorers closer the Alaskan interior previously unavailable to any but the hardiest of hikers.



The August 16 ribbon cutting ceremony for new whistle stop service through the Chugach National Forest drew such notables as Forest Service Deputy Chief Gloria Manning, Sen. Lisa Murkowski, Chugach Forest Supervisor Joe Meade, Sen. Ted Stevens and Alaska Railroad chairman John Binkley. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

The destination was a newly carved trail along the Placer River leading to a stunning view of Spencer Glacier, one of the many outstanding features of the Chugach. "And the best thing about it," quipped John Binkley, chairman of the board for the Alaska Railroad Corp., "is that the only way to get here is on the Alaska Railroad."

"This is all about access," added Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R). "History is being made today."

Senior Alaskan Sen. Ted Stevens (R) offered his own personal view of history, recounting how more than 30 years ago his home state managed to hang on to this vital transportation link that runs over 500 miles between Fairbanks and Seward.

"President Nixon wanted to sell the railroad to the highest bidder," Stevens recalled to a gaggle of reporters and cameras that were also on board the train. Instead, with the help of its powerful congressional delegation, Alaska was able to match the high bid to retain the railroad as a state-run enterprise -- essentially what one foreign bidder wanted to pay to scrap the rails and rolling stock.

"It's a lifeblood for the transport of military and

material," Stevens proudly told the reporters. "And it's a lifeblood for the Alaskan economy."

Also aboard was visiting Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii).

Another reminder of history was Forrest Hanahan, an appropriately named guide for the tour, who was dressed in an historic pressed-wool Forest Service uniform that dated from the era of the very first chief of the service, Gifford Pinchot, who served from 1905 to 1910. Lezlie Murray, director of interpretation services for the Chugach Forest's Begich, Boggs Visitor Center, joked that the center's basement was a virtual museum of old uniforms that provided many of the attending Forest Service employees with missing hats, coats and pants needed to complete their official outfits for the rare formal occasion.

Forest Service Deputy Chief Gloria Manning, visiting from Washington, D.C., admitted that she was initially skeptical of the concept of expending scarce agency resources to develop a new train stop and trail system through the remote forest. But she became convinced of the value of the idea after realizing it would open up new possibilities for the agency to partner with a variety of local firms and agencies eager to showcase the Alaskan wilderness.

"What a great opportunity for the future," Manning told the assembled crowd. "This is one way we can entice families to come and experience something that probably will be a once-in-a-lifetime event."

"We believe in partnerships, and we believe in alternative transportation," Manning said. "I'm all for that."

The long-term plan for the whistle stop is to develop five stops on the route between Anchorage and Seward, where passengers can disembark the train to explore the forest trails at their own pace, then flag down a returning train when they are ready. The plan also calls for construction of several cabins that hikers can reserve in advance, allowing them to extend their stay in style as they visit interior lakes, glaciers and high-mountain passes.

Pam Finney, public affairs director for the Forest Service's Alaska Region, told *Land Letter* that so far, the agency has spent \$1.7 million on planning and environmental reviews for the new service and that each of the whistle stops will cost about \$500,000 to build trails, restrooms and other needed infrastructure.

The adult train fare from Anchorage or Girdwood is \$95 and includes rail to Spencer and return to the Portage stop and motorcoach transfer from Portage to Anchorage. The round-trip fare from Portage or Whittier is \$59. Future fees for overnight use are still to be determined.

When established a century ago, the Chugach National Forest was 4.9 million acres but grew to as much as 11 million acres. As a result of land transfers that accompanied Alaskan statehood, the forest is now roughly 5.4 million acres -- still the second largest national forest. Three distinct geographic regions that comprise the forest are the Kenai Peninsula, with over 250 miles of wilderness trails; the Prince William Sound, featuring the greatest concentration of tidewater glaciers in the world; and the Copper River Delta, the most northerly temperate rainforest and a wetlands feeding and nesting ground for some 20 million birds each year.



A view of Spencer Glacier is the scene that rewards hikers who take advantage of new whistle stop train service through the Chugach National Forest. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

As part of the 100th anniversary, the Chugach also recently opened a new Childs Glacier campground, the only Forest Service camping facility available on the Copper River Delta.