



The Resource, Inspiration, and Catalyst for Trail and Park Development in the Mat-Su Borough

8/27/2020

Ms. Sheri Buretta, Chair (via email sburetta@alaska.edu)
Board of Regents
University of Alaska Fairbanks
19530 Wingham Circle
Eagle River, AK 99577

Dear Board of Regents:

I am writing on behalf of the Mat-Su Trails and Parks Foundation (MSTPF) Board of Directors to express our serious concerns about the Matanuska Experiment Farm's proposed resource assessment project located in Palmer, Alaska. We have witnessed damage to portions of the trail network from the heavy equipment used for exploration. We are also concerned about the potential long-term plan of leasing ~70 acres in the middle of the Matanuska Greenbelt for gravel extraction. A local partner has launched a website to share community concerns <https://www.savethematanuskagreenbelt.org/>

While the resource assessment process continues, we hope that the following actions can be taken as soon as possible:

1. **Restore the interconnected farm roads and the Alaska State Parks trails that were damaged by the contractor who dug the test pits in early August.** Portions of the Rabbit Field Road, the Rabbit Field Connector, the Long Lake Connector, and the Long Lake Loop were affected. Hundreds of volunteer hours and thousands of dollars were invested in these trails.
2. **After the assessment is complete, engage in a transparent process that considers public input before the final decision is made.**

The Mat-Su Trails and Parks Foundation is a nonprofit organization, organized nearly ten years ago with a vision to create a world class trail and park system in the Mat-Su Borough. We have served with other land owners and partners, including UAF, on the Matanuska Greenbelt Steering Committee and have invested in connectivity in the system. The Matanuska Greenbelt is an incredibly popular destination for all southcentral residents <http://www.matanuska-greenbelt.org/>. The Greenbelt is a central refuge and a popular destination for walkers, bikers, skiers, horseriders, birders, and anglers — to name some of the use types. These users all comprise the local public who the Experiment Farm needs to work with to stay viable.

The MSTPF Board understands that the 2019 UAF Long Range Plan includes land leasing and sales within the Greenbelt to help make the Experiment Farm sustainable for the future. But developing the parcel located in the middle of the Matanuska Greenbelt trails system does not account for irreversible

ecological devastation of forest lands centered in the fastest expanding Borough in the state. Not to mention degradation of recreational resources used by many people and in all types of modes. The parcel under assessment is mainly boreal forest that will be completely destroyed, removing a part of the carbon sink that is necessary to combat climate change. Keeping carbon sinks intact in a warming world will be crucial as farming (and farm research) in higher latitudes will be relied on in the future.

If the assessment parcel is developed, it will effectively remove interconnectivity between the northern UAF farm roads, the Alaska State Parks Matanuska Lakes Recreation Area to the south, and the Crevasse-Moraine trails on Mat-Su Borough land to the east. Even the UAF 2019 Long Range Plan highlights the fact that these lands are “the largest uninterrupted public space in the core of the Mat-Su Valley.” A gravel pit in the middle of this “uninterrupted public space” will bifurcate the area and forever impact the experience of Greenbelt users.

The UAF 2019 Long Range Plan lists numerous short- mid- and long-term action items that focus on public outreach and community collaboration. Developing a gravel pit in the middle of the Greenbelt will surely harm public sentiment and undo any progress made on programmatic objectives that involve the local community. And the people who love the Farm and the Greenbelt are the most important renewable resource found in the 2019 Long Range Plan. In fact, this plan says it best when weighing what is of the most value to UAF:

With the current reduction in agricultural research, the MEFEC is under increased pressure to sell large parcels of land to raise capital for the university. While land sales may financially benefit the university in the short term, they would effectively eliminate the MEFEC’s natural resource and agricultural research components as an option for the farm in the future. The intrinsic value of the MEFEC land to UAF, the University of Alaska System, and to the people of Alaska far exceeds the monetary value of the real estate, as well as the value of the teaching, research, and outreach that occurs on that real estate. A report published in 2015 concluded there is a \$5.00 return for every \$1.00 of real estate value for maintaining public open spaces in the Mat-Su Valley and not developing the land into private or commercial Facilities.

We urge UAF to restore the trails and engage in a transparent process that considers public input regarding long-term resource development plans in the Matanuska Experiment Farm. **Please feel free to engage our Executive Director Wes Hoskins at whoskins@matsutrails.org or 907 341 9878. We would appreciate an opportunity to be more involved in helping to discuss long-term options to support this community asset.** Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Kathryn Swartz, Chair
Mat-Su Trails and Parks Foundation Board of Directors

CC:

Interim UA President Pat Pitney
UAF Chancellor Daniel M. White

Vice Chancellor Julie Queen
Experiment Farm Manager Jodie Anderson