

Statement of Significance

Sterling Highway

(A portion of the current Sterling Highway is designated as Interstate Highway System and under the Interstate Exemption [2005] is exempt from consideration as a historic property during Section 106 Review)

Prepared for

**Alaska Department of
Transportation and Public
Facilities**

December 2014

*DOT&PF Note October 2015:
Rept does not address integrity;
NRHP eligibility status of
non-exempt segments not determined*

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1. Introduction

This statement of significance was prepared as a component of the Applied Historic Context of Alaska Roads Project completed in 2012-2014 for the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF). The project began with the development of the *Alaska Roads Historic Overview: Applied Historic Context of Alaska's Roads* (Roads Overview) (February 2014) and the *Methodology for Assessing National Register of Historic Places Eligibility* (Roads Methodology) (December 2014).

For the project a select number of roads with potential for individual National Register of Historic Places (National Register) eligibility were identified for evaluation of significance. This study is limited to the evaluation of the road's significance. If a road meets one or more areas of significance, identification of essential physical features and an assessment of integrity needs to be completed to determine National Register eligibility. These statements of significance apply the Roads Methodology and utilize contextual information from the Roads Overview. The Roads Methodology outlines that the entire length of a road should be considered when evaluating significance. The entire length of the road and bypassed segments were considered in the development of this statement of significance.

This report identifies and describes the important historic themes associated with the Sterling Highway. It summarizes these important themes to place the development of the Sterling Highway within an appropriate historic context to evaluate its historical significance.

2. Description of the Road

The Sterling Highway (Alaska Heritage Resources Survey [AHRs] numbers SEW-01558, KEN-00653, and SEL-00379; Coordinated Data System [CDS] number 110000) is approximately 138 miles long and runs from the Seward Highway to the end of the Homer Spit. The highway is owned by the Alaska DOT&PF and is located within the Kenai Peninsula Borough. From the eastern terminus at Mile 36.495 on the Seward Highway, the Sterling Highway runs west through a portion of the Chugach National Forest and continues through the community of Sterling and the city of Soldotna, where it provides access to the Kenai Spur Highway leading to Kenai and Nikiski. The Sterling Highway then runs south, approximately parallel to the western coastline of the peninsula and the Cook Inlet, providing access to Kasilof and passing through the communities of Ninilchik and Anchor Point before terminating in Homer at the ferry terminal located at the end of a 5-mile sand spit.

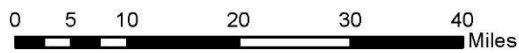
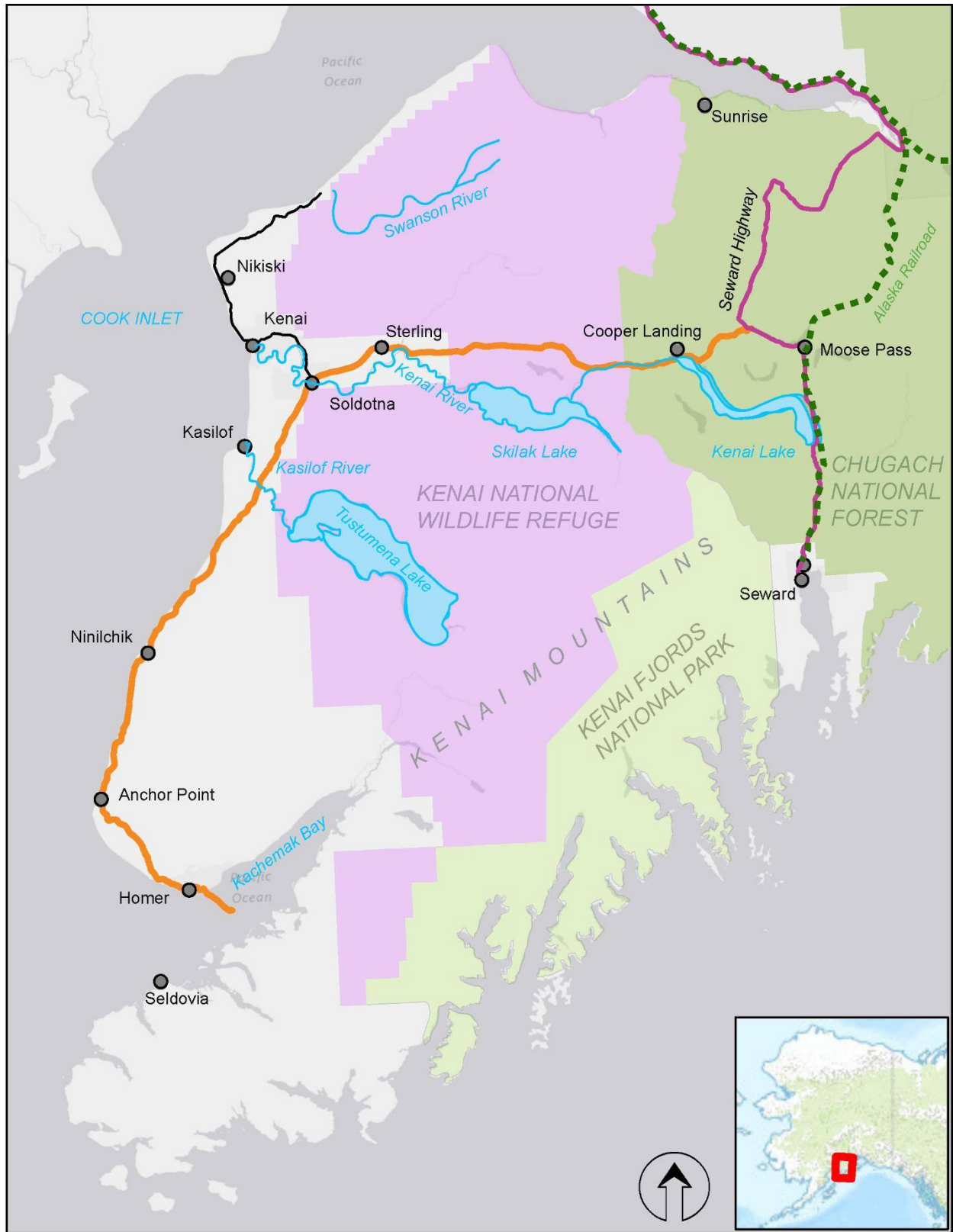
Construction began in 1947 and the highway was formally opened to the public in 1950. The Sterling Highway is the principal artery on the western Kenai Peninsula and open year-round. The entire route is asphalt surfaced and is a two-lane undivided highway for the majority of its length, although a few short segments are four lanes wide. The entire route is part of Alaska Route 1, and the portion of the route between the Seward Highway and Kenai Spur Highway (Milepost 0 to 57.17) was designated as part of Interstate A-3 in 1981.

As the Sterling Highway was improved, portions of the road were realigned resulting in bypassed sections of roadbed that are generally known today as Old Sterling Highway.¹ Bypassed sections of roadbed that once carried the Sterling Highway are considered part of the road for the purposes of this evaluation of significance.

A map illustrating the location of the Sterling Highway in relation to other major features is provided on the next page.

¹ The Alaska DOT&PF's Coordinated Data System lists five sections of road named "Old Sterling," which are bypassed segments of the original alignment that range in length from less than one-tenth of a mile to over 8.5 miles in length.

Section 2
Description of the Road



- Sterling Highway
- Alaska Railroad
- Seward Highway
- Chugach National Forest
- Kenai Fjords National Park
- Kenai National Wildlife Refuge



3. Historic Context

A. Early development

Fishing served as the primary economic pursuit on the western side of the Kenai Peninsula in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Communities such as Kenai, Kasilof, and Ninilchik pre-date the U.S. acquisition of Alaska in 1867; established as Native villages or Russian settlements, they are coastal settlements located at natural harbors. The rich fisheries of the Cook Inlet provided the most important industry in the area with regard to value, volume, and the number of persons employed.² The Alaska Commercial Company established commercial fish salting and packing operations near present-day Kenai in 1878, although large-scale canning operations did not begin until the 1880s with the opening of the cannery at Kasilof in 1882.³

Most transportation during this period was water-based, and residents of these coastal communities traveled by boat on the Cook Inlet. The Kenai River was navigable for the first 9 to 10 miles inland from the coast, and smaller boats could travel on Kenai Lake and Skilak Lake. Boats could also travel up the Kasilof River to Tustumena Lake when water levels were high.⁴ Aside from Native trails, land-based travel was limited in the nineteenth century; some wagon roads were built to serve mining areas on the east side of the peninsula, but the west side of the peninsula was served only by pack trails during the summer and sled trails during the winter.

In addition to fishing, mining provided economic activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coal was discovered on the south side of Kachemak Bay as early as 1786, and some mining activity began in the vicinity in the mid-1800s under Russian supervision. After the U.S. purchased Alaska in 1867, the operation was abandoned. Coal prospecting began on the north side of the bay in 1888 with an exploratory tunnel on Fritz Creek, 6 miles north of Homer, but it did not yield any commercial quantities. Companies continued to prospect coastal coal deposits in the creek canyons and along the shoreline northeast from Homer in the late 1890s, establishing piers and coal bins, although these too were unsuccessful. The most productive area proved to be at the base of the Homer Spit, where the Cook Inlet Coal Fields Company developed a large dock at the end of the spit and a narrow-gauge railway to transport coal from the mines to the dock.⁵ The operation proved to be short-lived; the first tunnel was driven in 1900, but all work on the property ceased in 1902 and the original town that had

² Richard Grey Smith, *A Geography of Contemporary Settlement on the Western Kenai Peninsula, Alaska*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1965, 10, 75.

³ James A. Fall, et al., *Cook Inlet Customary and Traditional Subsistence Fisheries Assessment, Technical Paper No. 285*, prepared by Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence, July 30 2004, 18-19; Tarleton H. Bean, "The Fishery Resources and Fishing-Grounds of Alaska," from *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, Section III-The Fishing Grounds of North America*, in Miscellaneous Documents of the Senate of the United States for the First Session of the 47th Congress, (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1887), 92.

⁴ G.C. Martin, B.L. Johnson, and U.S. Grant, *Geology and Mineral Resources of Kenai Peninsula, U.S.* Geological Survey Bulletin 587 (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1915), 24-25.

⁵ Fred H. Moffit, "Gold Fields of the Turnagain Arm Region," from *Mineral Resources of Kenai Peninsula, Alaska*, U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 277 (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1906), 54.

developed at the tip of the spit was essentially abandoned.⁶ Future development was hindered when President Theodore Roosevelt withdrew all federally owned coal lands in the U.S. and its territories from public entry in 1906, prohibiting companies from obtaining patents to the coal claims in the Homer area.⁷ By the time the coal fields were reopened nearly a decade later, the Matanuska Valley had become the coal source for the Alaska Railroad and the Homer deposits were not further developed.⁸

Gold was discovered on the Kenai River in the 1840s, although very little mining activity actually occurred on the west side of the Kenai Peninsula. Modest placer deposits were found at Anchor Point and Ninilchik, as well as along the Kenai River; the most extensive operations consisted of intermittent mining at Anchor Point between 1889 and 1911.⁹ A hydraulic plant was initially constructed at Anchor Point to work the placer deposits, but by 1906 had been deemed a failure and was dismantled.¹⁰ To the north, attempts were made to use dredges above Skilak Lake on the Kenai River, but this too proved unsuccessful and all mining on the river ceased by 1913.¹¹

By the end of the nineteenth century the Kenai Peninsula was recognized as a promising location for agricultural development. Beginning in 1898 the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) established agricultural experiment stations in locations throughout Alaska in order to determine what agricultural practices would be best suited to the state's various regions. Anticipating an influx of pioneer farmers to the region, the USDA established an agricultural experiment station at Kenai in 1899. Contrary to expectations, the Kenai Peninsula was not rapidly settled and the station was closed in 1908.¹²

In the 1910s, communities on the shores of the Cook Inlet were primarily dependent on fishing, resulting in the establishment of a number of salmon canneries on the Cook Inlet, including facilities at Kenai and Kasilof. Seldovia, on the south side of Kachemak Bay, was the port at which passengers and cargo transferred from steamships to smaller boats before proceeding into the Cook Inlet, the primary means of access to the western side of the Kenai Peninsula. The year-round population of the peninsula for 1910 was less than 1,700, although seasonal work related to gold mining and commercial fishing increased the population during the summers. Located on the east side of the peninsula, Seward was the most substantial town, with a population of 534. Seward was the southern terminus of the Alaska Central Railroad (precursor to the Alaska Railroad), established in 1901 with service along a 50-mile corridor

⁶ Moffit, 55.

⁷ Janet R. Klein, *Kachemak Bay Communities* (Homer, Alaska: Kachemak Country Publications, 2008), 73.

⁸ Janet R. Klein, *A History of Kachemak Bay* (Homer, Alaska: Homer Society of Natural History, 1981), 45.

⁹ Edward H. Cobb, *Placer Deposits of Alaska*, U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin 1374, (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1973), 36.

¹⁰ Moffit, 44.

¹¹ Cobb, 37.

¹² C.C. Georgeson, *Annual Report of Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1908* (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1909), 20.

northward.¹³ Seward served as the primary year-round port and transfer point for the peninsula, but its location was not easily accessible overland from communities along the Cook Inlet. On the western side of the peninsula along the Cook Inlet, Kenai was the largest town, with a population of 250, and was accessible only by boat.¹⁴

Following the closure of the coal mines at the tip of the Homer Spit, the settlement that had developed remained virtually uninhabited from 1902 until 1915. A dairy colony comprised of Finnish immigrants was planned near the head of Kachemak Bay during the 1900s, but the leading promoter died before the project could be realized.¹⁵ However, as fishermen and homesteaders came to the area, gradually a new town site grew on the shore to the west of the Homer Spit.¹⁶ The first official homestead in the Homer area was established in 1915, located east of the spit at what became known as Miller's Landing. Other homesteaders and fishermen took up sites several miles to the west at Homer. By 1925 short wagon roads began to connect the two settlements and more homesteaders took up land in the area, although less than half of the settlers would stay long enough to receive the patent for their claim. Fox farming briefly developed into a profitable enterprise on the Kenai Peninsula during this period. Although activities were centered on the thriving community of Seldovia, on the opposite side of Kachemak Bay, fox farming operations were also established near Homer, which also developed into a population center. A network of local roads developed, but remained cut off from the rest of the road and rail system on the peninsula; mail and supplies still arrived by boat from Seldovia.¹⁷

Precursors to the Sterling Highway

Land transportation to the Kenai Peninsula prior to the Sterling Highway included trails and early wagon roads that provided access to the area and to the village of Kenai. The Alaska Road Commission (ARC) maintained one major east-west sled trail across the Kenai Peninsula in the early decades of the twentieth century. Known as the Kenai-Russian River Trail, the route ran roughly parallel to the Kenai River. The trail was connected to the railroad via the Moose Pass-Sunrise Road, a "lightly constructed wagon road" that ran north from the railroad at Moose Pass to Sunrise. In 1920 the village's year-round population consisted of approximately 500 people, and the Kenai-Russian River trail was the only overland transportation route providing access to necessities such as medical aid once the Cook Inlet froze for the winter; however, the trail proved to be inadequate to serve the needs of area residents.

In 1923 an ARC surveyor traveled the trail to determine the feasibility of upgrading the entire route to a wagon road. The Bureau of Public Roads (BPR), which was responsible for road and trail construction within the Chugach National Forest, had already built a light wagon road roughly 7.5 miles long along the

¹³ Mary J. Barry, *A History of Mining on the Kenai Peninsula* (Anchorage, Alaska: Alaska Northwest Publishing Co., 1973), 114.

¹⁴ Martin et al., 30.

¹⁵ C.C. Georgeson, *Annual Report of Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations for 1908*, 20; C.C. Georgeson, "Annual Report of the Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations, 1904," in *Annual Report of the Office of Experiment Stations for the Year Ended June 30, 1904* (Washington D.C.: US GPO, 1905), 279.

¹⁶ Klein, *A History of Kachemak Bay*, 59-61, 76.

¹⁷ Klein, *A History of Kachemak Bay*, 76.

south bank of the upper Kenai River west of Cooper Landing, after which the route reverted to a trail that was partially cleared and ungraded for the remaining distance to Kenai. East of the BPR's wagon road, the portion of the trail from Cooper Landing east to the Moose Pass-Sunrise Road had never been widened to accommodate a dog team. As a result, mail carriers traveling to Kenai were forced to use shorter, more maneuverable sleds due to the poor trail conditions, resulting in postal delays. The surveyor noted that not only was Kenai underserved, but that the entire section of the territory was in need of trails. He suggested that another route extending from Kenai south to Homer be considered to provide needed access for the existing population along the coast, and that construction of roads and trails would benefit future homesteaders.¹⁸

A decade later, limited efforts were made to increase overland access between the route of the Alaska Railroad and the western half of the peninsula. Under the supervision of the U.S. Forest Service, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) began work in 1933 upgrading the existing trail from Cooper Landing east to the Moose Pass-Sunrise Road to provide a connection to the railway. While the Forest Service's previous efforts in this portion of the Chugach National Forest had focused on constructing trails to encourage prospecting and to facilitate fighting forest fires, the trail from Cooper Landing served a different purpose; it provided the only means by which some 60 settlers on lower Kenai Lake could get in or out of the area during the winter.¹⁹ In 1937 CCC assisted in upgrading this route to a service road known as the Cooper Landing Truck Trail.²⁰ The road extended westward to the forest boundary at the 150th meridian, beyond which the only route west to Kenai was the sled road.

Although automobile use in some areas of Alaska increased after World War I, the Great Depression reduced the amount of funds available to the ARC and no work was undertaken to provide an automobile road to the western side of the peninsula. Local demand for a road along the western Kenai Peninsula predated the construction of the Sterling by a decade. ARC annual reports from the mid-1930s consistently recommended the extension of the existing road at Homer to better serve the farms and communities of the Kachemak Bay area, and by the late 1930s residents of the Kenai Peninsula repeatedly petitioned the ARC to make a location survey for a proposed "Homer-Russian River Road," so would-be homesteaders could locate their claims along it.²¹

Some additional homestead activity occurred in the western Kenai Peninsula during the Great Depression years, although few of these newcomers remained permanently and little agricultural growth occurred. In the 1930s approximately 165 homesteaders settled on the northern side of Kachemak Bay, in the vicinity

¹⁸ Claus-M. Naske, *Paving Alaska's Trails* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986), 102-106.

¹⁹ "Tells of Forest Work Under Way in Kenai Area: District Ranger Sherman Reports Progress Under National Program," *Anchorage Daily Times*, 5 July 1933; Catherine Cassidy, Andrew Berg, and Gary Titus, *Alaska's No. 1 Guide: The History and Journals of Andrew Berg, 1869-1939*, (Soldotna, Alaska: Spruce Tree Publishing, 2003), 257.

²⁰ Alison T. Otis, William D. Honey, Thomas C. Hogg, and Kimberly K. Lakin, *The Forest Service and the Civilian Conservation Corps: 1933-1942* (n.p.: United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 1986), 67-68.

²¹ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Territories and Insular Affairs, Settlement and Development of Alaska, 76th Congress, 3rd Session (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), 57-58.

of Homer and further northwest at Anchor Point. By 1940, however, only 27 farmers were active in that general area and most residents were employed in fishing, trapping, canneries, or construction work.²²

Fishing remained the primary source of employment and also provided a tourist attraction. While both Native Alaskans and non-Native residents practiced commercial and subsistence fishing on the coast and in freshwater lakes into the postwar period, the construction of the railroad enabled sportsmen to travel from Seward to Kenai Lake and Cooper Landing, which developed into a sport-fishing area. As word of exceptionally large rainbow trout spread, the area attracted sportsmen from the lower 48 states and Europe. By the 1930s and 1940s Kenai Lake had become a destination for trophy fishing, and moose and bear hunting lodges and guide services were established.²³ A presidential executive order in 1941 established the Kenai National Moose Range, which encompassed much of the peninsula west of the railroad. Intended to protect the Kenai moose population, the establishment of the Moose Range (now known as the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge) prohibited settlement and mineral leasing within a large portion of the Kenai Peninsula.

B. Construction of the Sterling Highway

In the years immediately after World War II, Alaska's importance for strategic defense contributed to a massive increase in federal appropriations for road construction in the territory. In 1946 the ARC received \$800,000 to initiate construction of a road to Kenai and Homer from Kenai Lake. The new Kenai Lake-Homer Road was to begin at the edge of the Chugach National Forest boundary (near the western end of Kenai Lake) and extend to Homer via Kasilof and Ninilchik, which was to include a 10-mile branch road to access the town of Kenai.²⁴ Surveys began on the 125-mile route the same year, and work continued over the next several years, but progress was hampered by the difficulty in obtaining supplies and parts to repair equipment.²⁵ Construction on the Seward Highway between Anchorage and Seward began in 1948, which became the eastern terminus of the Kenai Lake-Homer Road and provided the first vehicular link between the Kenai Peninsula and the rest of Alaska.²⁶

After World War II, the federal government opened up new lands for settlement that had previously been withdrawn in 1941 for the Kenai National Moose Range. With the additional connection soon to be provided by the Seward Highway on the east side of the peninsula, the new road to Homer was intended to create overland access to homesteading areas along the western side of the Kenai Peninsula. The government also relaxed the laws that governed homesteading, giving preference to veterans.

²² R. B. Hinton, *Soil Survey, Homer-Ninilchik Area, Alaska* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Soil Conservation Service, 1971), 4.

²³ James A. Fall, Ronald T. Stanek, Brian Davis, Liz Williams, and Robert Walker, *Cook Inlet Customary and Traditional Subsistence Fisheries Assessment* (Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence, 2004), 19.

²⁴ Alaska Road Commission, *Summary of Activities 1946*, 9.

²⁵ Alaska Road Commission, *Summary of Activities 1946*, 9; Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report for Fiscal Year 1948*, 11.

²⁶ John R. Noyes, *Report of Operations of the Alaska Road Commission for the Fiscal years 1949, 1950 & 1951*, (Juneau, Alaska: Department of the Interior, 1951), 2.

Homesteaders were previously required to reside on their claim for five years and cultivate a portion of it, but veterans could now apply their service towards the requirements and obtain a patent after only seven months without cultivation. The promise of the highway and new land made available brought an influx of homesteaders to the western side of the peninsula in the late 1940s, and by 1948 many of the available lands that directly abutted the new highway had already been claimed. This increase in the population resulted in the expansion of existing communities such as Kenai and Homer, and the establishment of new ones along the Kenai River such as Sterling and Soldotna, which benefitted from the junction of the new road and the spur to Kenai. A post office was established at Soldotna in 1949.²⁷ By the early 1950s the population of Kenai had doubled, and what had once been a Russian and Native fishing village had grown and now offered electricity and a telephone system.²⁸

The new road was expected to have a substantial impact on agriculture in the region. As of 1949 the Tanana and Matanuska Valleys were considered to be the best agricultural areas in Alaska. The Kenai Peninsula region was still comparatively isolated and more difficult to access, as the railroad was not connected by a vehicular road to the western side of the peninsula, where much of the arable land was found.²⁹ The farmers already located near Homer were far from sizable markets, with few roads and a dock that was not adequate to serve large-scale commercial shipping. The USDA anticipated that the completion of the new highway connecting to Anchorage via the Seward Highway would provide means to transport Homer's produce to larger markets and would make more land accessible in the areas near Kenai, Kasilof, and Ninilchik.³⁰

By 1950 initial construction was completed and a formal ceremony was held on September 6 on the Kenai River Bridge at Soldotna, dedicating the highway in honor of Hawley Sterling.³¹ Formerly the assistant chief engineer of the ARC, Sterling had supervised the construction of the Steese Highway, the Glenn Highway, and had laid out and begun construction of the route of the new highway to Homer before his death in 1948.³² In the same year that the highway was formally dedicated, the ARC entered into agreements with the BPR regarding the reconstruction of the portion of the highway within the Chugach National Forest between Kenai Lake and the Seward Highway.³³ Designated as (ARC) Route 511, the completed Sterling Highway was classified as a feeder road in 1951 and was maintained year-

²⁷ Clark Fair, "Soldotna Cabin Gets Stamp of Approval," (Soldotna) *Redoubt Reporter*, 12 November 2008.

²⁸ Harry F. Lins, Jr., "Energy Development at Kenai, Alaska," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, June 1979, 292.

²⁹ United States Department of Agriculture, *Report on Exploratory Investigations of Agricultural Problems of Alaska* (Washington, D.C.: Agricultural Research Administration, USDA), 7-8.

³⁰ United States Department of Agriculture, 55-56.

³¹ AMRC-B1990-014-5-Pol-13-32, "Gov. E. Gruening Cutting Ribbon to Dedicate Sterling Highway" Image from the Steve McCutcheon Collection, Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, available at <http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/cdmq2/id/7178/rec/4>.

³² Naske, 239.

³³ Noyes, 34.

round, providing the only overland link for residents on the eastern shore of Cook Inlet to reach the Alaska Railroad and the rest of the Alaskan road system via the Seward Highway.³⁴

In addition to facilitating long-distance travel, the highway enabled residents of the western coast of the peninsula to commute between their residences and places of employment. Historically, fishermen had lived within the handful of communities with protected harbors where their boats could be stored. The opening of the highway meant that these residents could reside further from harbors, and that farmers could commute daily to off-farm jobs to supplement their income.³⁵ While limited, the role of the U.S. military in the area included the construction of several ancillary facilities. Wildwood Army Station, a military communications base, was constructed near Kenai in 1953, and a few years later construction began on an early warning radar station at Ohlson Mountain, 8 miles northeast of Homer. By the mid-1950s the gravel surfaced highway was already overtaxed by an average daily traffic count of over 1,000. Additional subgrade reinforcement and crushed-rock surfacing did not alleviate the problem, and in 1955 \$1.5 million was finally appropriated to begin asphalt surfacing of the highway.³⁶

C. Post-highway development

In the decade after the completion of the highway, the western Kenai Peninsula saw its greatest period of increase in population. Over the decade between 1950 and 1960, the region showed an average overall population growth of 76 percent, although within population centers the rate was much higher as previously isolated villages became accessible via the new highway.³⁷ The population of Kenai doubled during this period to 778, and Homer quadrupled to 1,247.³⁸ As existing communities began to grow, the new highway became a geographic factor in their development. In some cases, older coastal communities shifted away from their original cores to develop along the highway corridor instead. At Anchor Point, an area first homesteaded in the 1920s, older properties were gradually abandoned as a new development pulled the community eastward to develop at a new site on the Sterling Highway by 1962.³⁹ In Ninilchik, an old village located at the mouth of the Ninilchik River, a new commercial district grew along the highway to the south. The airstrip was relocated from the beach to a site on the east side of the highway and the community continued to expand into the area south and east of the highway as additional branching roads were constructed in the 1960s.⁴⁰

The growth of existing communities was offset by relatively little development along the stretches of highway in between communities. While the opening of the highway made more land accessible for

³⁴ Noyes, Table 14.

³⁵ Smith, 13.

³⁶ Alaska Road Commission, *Annual Report of the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1955* (Juneau, Alaska: U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Territories, 1955), 26, 33.

³⁷ Smith, 5, 119.

³⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1960* (Washington, D.C.: US GPO 1961), Vol. 1 Part 3, 10.

³⁹ Smith, 72; USGS 15' Quadrangle, Seldovia D-5, 1951; 1958; 1962; 1967.

⁴⁰ USGS 15' Quadrangle, Kenai A-5, 1954; 1960; 1972; 1978.

homesteading, many of the claims in the postwar period were abandoned for a variety of reasons, and homesteaders turned to easier and more lucrative alternatives elsewhere, such as construction work.⁴¹ Much of this land was located along the stretches of road between established communities and remained vacant into the 1960s.⁴² Some additional lands also remained reserved as part of the Kenai National Moose Range redesignated the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Although agriculture continued to develop, by 1954 the Kenai Peninsula still ranked fifth in production value out of Alaska's six agricultural divisions. The Matanuska Valley accounted for over half of the territory's total value of agricultural produce, followed by the Tanana Valley; in comparison, the Kenai Peninsula produced roughly five percent.⁴³ The region has a relatively short growing season, soil fertility and rainfall are not uniformly favorable, and the scarcity of local markets did not favor the development of large-scale production. By the mid-1960s the region only had two commercial dairy farms, both of which sold their milk to the creamery in Soldotna. Most milk sold locally came from the Matanuska Valley or the lower 48 states. Beef cattle ranches were established in the early 1960s in several locations including the Funny River area south of Sterling, inland from Anchor Point, and at the head of Kachemak Bay. Despite a rise in the total value of agricultural products for the region between 1953 and 1963, the Kenai Peninsula region still lagged far behind the Tanana and Matanuska Valleys; the combined numbers for these two regions accounted for over 80 percent of the state's total value of agricultural production in 1963.⁴⁴

Prior to the construction of the highway, salmon fishing on Kachemak Bay was centered on Seldovia, the site of numerous canneries. Following the completion of the Sterling Highway, the dock facilities at Homer were upgraded. With the improved access provided by the road and docks, Homer's fishing industry began to expand. When Seldovia's waterfront was damaged by the 1964 earthquake, Homer emerged as the leading seafood processing community on Kachemak Bay.⁴⁵ In the period that followed, Seldovia never recovered its place as the commercial hub of the lower Cook Inlet, while the infusion of emergency funding after the earthquake allowed Homer to improve its waterfront facilities and replace Seldovia as the commercial fishing center of the lower Kenai Peninsula.⁴⁶

Elsewhere in Alaska, the Cold War resulted in the expansion of military facilities; however, those located on the western Kenai Peninsula were of relatively minor importance. The early warning radar facility at Ohlson Mountain Air Force Station was deactivated after only five years of operation. Wildwood Army Station, the military communications base near Kenai, was transferred to the United States Air Force in 1965, and was renamed Wildwood Air Force Station. The facility was one of the numerous switching

⁴¹ James R. Shortridge, "The Collapse of Frontier Farming in Alaska," in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, December 1976, 602.

⁴² Smith, 12.

⁴³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Agriculture, 1954, Vol. 3: Special Reports Part 2, Ranking Agricultural Counties* (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 1956), 12.

⁴⁴ *Alaska Farm Production* (Palmer, Alaska: Statistical Reporting Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1963), 1.

⁴⁵ Klein, *A History of Kachemak Bay*, 69-70.

⁴⁶ Klein, *Kachemak Bay Communities*, 142-145.

centers in the U.S. and worldwide that made up the Automatic Digital Network (AUTODIN). The network was used by the Department of Defense until it was superseded by more modern technology in the early 1970s.⁴⁷ After the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971, the Wildwood facility closed the following year and ownership transferred to the Kenai Native Association.⁴⁸

The greatest economic change on the western Kenai Peninsula came from the boom in the petroleum industry that occurred in the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Oil companies discovered onshore deposits near the Swanson River in 1957, and the federal government approved leases to begin production the following year. In addition to oil, deposits of natural gas were found at several locations near the Sterling Highway, mainly concentrated in a triangle formed between Sterling, Kenai, and Kasilof, with an additional field near the coast between Ninilchik and Kasilof.⁴⁹ The rapid development of the oil and natural gas industries had the greatest impact on the communities along the northern portion of the Sterling Highway. Kenai and Soldotna experienced the greatest growth, and by 1965 Soldotna was home to the largest number of persons associated with petroleum production in the region.⁵⁰ In the decade that followed the initial discovery of oil and natural gas, 20 additional on- and off-shore deposits were discovered and a marine terminal established at Nikiski, north of Kenai. A pipeline carried natural gas underneath Turnagain Arm from the refinery at Kenai to Anchorage, and a second pipeline ran between the Nikiski marine terminal and Swanson River oil field, eliminating the need for roads to transport petroleum products.⁵¹ The region was the sole petroleum producer in Alaska until 1968, when new discoveries at Prudhoe Bay began to overshadow those at Kenai. The Kenai fields continued to dominate Alaskan oil production until the Trans-Alaska Pipeline opened in 1977, although the initial “boom” phase had ended by 1970, when the oil companies in the area were no longer in their exploratory phase and focused instead on routine operations.⁵²

In addition to ongoing commercial fishing, recreational fishing remained an important part of the local tourism industry. Beginning in 1958 the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) began to stock lakes along the highway between Kenai and Homer.⁵³ The Moose, Swanson, and Russian Rivers on the Kenai Peninsula also continued to provide renowned rainbow trout fishing in the 1960s.⁵⁴ In 1970 the ADF&G Game Division established the Moose Research Center in the Kenai National Moose Range, one of the first facilities of its type in North America. The same year, a research station was established on

⁴⁷ Fritz E. Froehlich and Allen Kent, eds., *The Froehlich/Kent Encyclopedia of Telecommunications, Vol. 1*. (New York: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1991), 341.

⁴⁸ “Wildwood Air Force Station, Kenai, Alaska, 1965-1972,” 5074th ABS & 1935th Communications Squadron Veterans, <http://wildwoodafs.com/index.html> (accessed 10 July 2014).

⁴⁹ Smith, 91-92.

⁵⁰ Smith, 93.

⁵¹ Smith, 92, 97.

⁵² Lins, 289, 292-296.

⁵³ Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Annual Report, 1958, 63.

⁵⁴ Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Annual Report, 1963-64, 61.

Lower Russian River Lake to assist in ongoing study of the red salmon population.⁵⁵ The red salmon sport fishery on the Russian River is one of the largest fisheries in the state. Between 1964 and 1972 the Russian River saw a 350 percent increase in the number of annual recreational anglers, making it the state's most popular freshwater salmon fishery.⁵⁶

The Sterling Highway continues to provide access to conservation and recreation areas. In 1980 the Kenai National Moose Range was redesignated the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (KNWR), and its mandate was expanded to encompass all species of wildlife.⁵⁷ Much of the land within the refuge is open to hunting, attracting sport hunters in search of game such as moose, caribou, and Dall sheep.⁵⁸ Fishing in the KNWR remains popular, and the Kenai River is one of Alaska's most utilized fresh-water fisheries. In order to protect the river system, the state legislature established the Kenai River Special Management Area within the state park system in 1984.⁵⁹ The Sterling Highway is the only arterial road through the KNWR, and provides direct access from Anchorage to these recreational activities via its connection to the Seward Highway.

The segment of the Sterling Highway between the Seward Highway and Kenai Spur Highway (Milepost 0 to 57.17) was designated as part of Interstate A-3 in 1981. In the early 1990s Alaska established a state Scenic Byway program to recognize routes that provide access to scenic, cultural, and recreational areas and focus enhancements on roads that served tourism and recreation. The state program grew out of the 1991 National Scenic Byway and All-American Roads Programs, federal programs recognizing important American transportation routes.⁶⁰ Two segments of the Sterling Highway were designated as Scenic Byways in 1998: the northern segment consists of 38 miles between Skilak Lake and the junction with the Seward Highway at the Sterling Wye, and the southern segment consists of the first 29 miles north from the southern terminus at the end of the Homer Spit.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Annual Report, 1970, 9.

⁵⁶ Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Annual Report, 1972, 29.

⁵⁷ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "Refuge Establishment," <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/Kenai/about/establish.html> (accessed 15 September 2014).

⁵⁸ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "Recreation & Education Opportunities," <http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/recEdMore.cfm?ID=74525> (accessed 15 September 2014).

⁵⁹ Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks & Outdoor Recreation, "KRSMA Advisory Board," <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/krsma/krsmaindex.htm> (accessed 12 November 2014).

⁶⁰ Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities, "About the Scenic Byways Program," *Alaska's Scenic Byways*, <http://dot.alaska.gov/stwdp/plng/scenic/org-themes.shtml> (accessed 7 November 2012).

⁶¹ Mead & Hunt, Inc., *Alaska Roads Historic Overview*, prepared for Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, February 2014, 136.

4. Significance

The Roads Methodology provides guidance on the application of the National Register Criteria for Evaluation, identifying areas of significance, and evaluating significance under *Criteria A, B, C, and D*.

A. *Criterion A: Events*

To meet the threshold for significance under *Criterion A*, a road or bypassed segment must possess a direct and important association in one or more supplemental areas of significance as identified in the Roads Methodology in addition to *Transportation*. The Sterling Highway includes sections of bypassed roadbed that may represent the road's significance. This evaluation of significance under *Criterion A* considered all potential areas of significance identified in the Roads Methodology for the current alignment and any bypassed sections of roadbed. Based on research and context development, only the applicable areas of significance for this road are addressed below.

Transportation

The Sterling Highway has an association with *Transportation* because its construction by the ARC provided important regional access. When the road was complete, it provided the first direct vehicular link between the communities on the western side of the Kenai Peninsula and the rest of the Alaskan road system via the Seward Highway. The period of significance for *Transportation* will relate to the historical purpose this road had in the conveyance of people and goods as defined in one or more supplemental areas of significance.

Industry

The Sterling Highway does not meet the requirement for significance in the area of *Industry*. Mining activities related to both coal and gold were small in scale compared to those found in the greater Anchorage vicinity and Matanuska region, and other parts of the territory. Cessation of these activities occurred prior to the highway's construction and road access did not revitalize these industries. While the fishing industry played a major role in the area's industry and settlement patterns, these activities were related to marine transportation on the Cook Inlet. The discovery of petroleum deposits in the Swanson River area and Cook Inlet was the single greatest factor in the expansion and development of population centers on the western Kenai Peninsula, but the petroleum industry was not reliant on the highway to open up new areas for development. Some activity was marine-based, and pipelines were used to transport petroleum onshore. Additional onshore roads were built by private companies and operations did not depend on the highway directly. The highway allowed employees involved in the fishing and petroleum industries to commute between their homes and work, but this relates to *Transportation* rather than *Industry*, as the access provided by the highway did not greatly affect production levels or methods for either the fishing or petroleum industries.

Agriculture

The Sterling Highway does not meet the requirement for significance in the area of *Agriculture*. While the highway provided improved access for farmers and played a role in local agriculture, the region itself did not develop as a significant agricultural area in Alaska. Although long considered an area of great potential, agricultural development did not reach the levels originally anticipated. The Matanuska Valley

and Fairbanks-Tanana region remained Alaska's primary agricultural regions, producing the vast majority of agricultural products, while the Kenai Peninsula remained a distant third.

Military

The Sterling Highway does not meet the requirement for significance related to military activities. Military installations at Homer and Kenai were of relatively minor importance and were not mission-critical. Both Ohlson Mountain Air Force Station (c. 1955) near Homer and Wildwood Army Station at Kenai (1951-1953) were constructed after the highway was built, and when the Sterling Highway was opened it did not provide access to military facilities deemed critical for national defense. Ohlson Mountain Air Force Station was deactivated only five years after it was completed in 1958. Both facilities were part of larger networks of many communications facilities and were not individually important.

Community Planning and Development

The Sterling Highway has a direct and important association with *Community Planning and Development* and is significant at the local level. The highway had a distinct impact on the physical structure of communities along its route, as older communities shifted away or abandoned their historic cores to develop new community sites adjacent to the highway. At Anchor Point, an earlier settlement first homesteaded in the 1920s was gradually abandoned as the community gravitated toward a site a mile to the east on the Sterling Highway. Near the old village of Ninilchik, located at the mouth of the Ninilchik River, a new commercial core developed along the highway. The period of significance begins with completion of the Sterling Highway in 1950 when communities began to focus development along the road in anticipation of the connection it would provide to Anchorage the following year with the opening of the portion of the Seward Highway between Anchorage and the Sterling Highway. The period of significance ends in 1965 when historic sources and maps identify the physical relocation of the communities near the highway.

Entertainment/Recreation and Conservation

The Sterling Highway meets the requirement for significance in the area of *Entertainment/ Recreation and Conservation* at the state level. This area of significance focuses on the specific use of roads to provide critical and direct access to important recreational and conservation activities. The Sterling Highway, via its connection with the Seward Highway, provides the only arterial road to the Kenai Peninsula and the KNWR and also traverses through portions of the CNF. The highway provides critical access to fishing and hunting activities, including world famous salmon fishing. Although this area was used for recreational hunting and fishing and conservation activities prior to the construction of the Sterling Highway, the road provided more direct and easier access and greatly increased the activities related to this area of significance. For example, the Russian River saw a 350 percent increase in visitors between 1964 and 1972. The direct and critical access provided by the road that led to substantial increases in fishing and hunting transcends routine recreational development seen in other areas of the state due to the access provided by a road. As such, the Sterling Highway meets the threshold for National Register significance in the area of *Entertainment/Recreation and Conservation*. The period of significance is 1950 beginning with the completion of the Sterling Highway and ends in 1964 at the 50-year guideline of the National Register. Recreational activities and designation of recreation/conservation areas have historically continued to be important and continue to the present day, and research has not revealed an appropriate date beyond the 50-year guidance to serve as the ending date of the period of significance.

B. Criterion B: Persons

As outlined in the Roads Methodology, a road is not likely to qualify for National Register significance under *Criterion B* for association with a significant person. To qualify under *Criterion B*, the road would need to best exemplify a person's contribution to history. Mere association with a road, such as involvement in design or construction, or roads named for an individual that is commemorative in nature, would not render a road significant under *Criterion B*. The Sterling Highway is named for Hawley Sterling, formerly the assistant chief engineer of the ARC. Sterling died in 1948, two years prior to the completion of the route, and the designation of the highway for him is commemorative. No other individuals were identified through research to have played a significant role in the Sterling Highway that would qualify it under *Criterion B*.

C. Criterion C: Design/Construction

The Roads Methodology explains how a road would meet the threshold for significance under *Criterion C*. Roads will generally reflect patterns of features common to a particular road type, and under the Roads Methodology this does not convey significance on its own. In order to possess significance, a road must also reflect other important or distinctive design features and/or construction practices or be a surviving example of a rare type. This evaluation of significance under *Criterion C* considered the current alignment and any bypassed sections of roadbed according to the Roads Methodology.

The Sterling Highway was constructed between 1948 and 1950, a period when the ARC had already established a body of institutional knowledge of road construction in Alaska. By this time, the ARC had already constructed the Richardson, Steese, Elliott, and Glenn Highways, and had several decades of experience building roads in Alaska's varied climate and terrain.

A review of the ARC's annual reports and other materials from the period in which the highway was constructed yielded no evidence of any engineering design or construction features important in road engineering that serve to distinguish it from other roads. The highway does not represent extraordinary challenges or solutions that transcend normal methods of road construction. Nothing in the literature noted any engineering or construction significance; the highway's design and construction fall within the ARC's established standard practices of the time and it does not represent innovative developments in highway construction or contain segments that are a surviving example of a rare road type. Early segments of the Sterling Highway resulting from realignments or bypasses do not constitute significance under *Engineering* because they were designed and constructed utilizing routine methods employed in road construction during the period and therefore would not represent a rare road type.

Neither the Sterling Highway nor its bypassed segments meet the threshold for significance in the area of *Engineering*.

D. Criterion D: Information Potential

Criterion D is most often applied to archaeological properties. As outlined in the Roads Methodology, roads in vehicular use are not likely to be significant under *Criterion D* for the ability to yield information. The Sterling Highway is in vehicular use and remains an above-ground property type. No evidence was found for potential significance under *Criterion D*.

5. Recommendation

The Sterling Highway possesses significance at the local level under *Criterion A* for its direct and important association with *Transportation* and under the supplemental area of significance of *Community Planning and Development* and possesses significance at the state level under *Criterion A* for its direct and important association with *Transportation* and under the supplemental area of significance of *Entertainment/Recreation* and *Conservation*. The Sterling Highway has an association with *Transportation* because it provided the first direct vehicular link between the communities on the western side of the Kenai Peninsula and the rest of the Alaskan road system via the Seward Highway.

The Sterling Highway has a direct and important association with *Community Planning and Development* at the local level because it had a distinct impact on the physical structure of communities along its route, as older communities shifted away or abandoned their historic cores to develop new community sites adjacent to the highway. The period of significance begins with completion of the Sterling Highway in 1950 when communities began to relocate along this new transportation corridor, even though the connection to Anchorage would not be achieved until the following year with the opening of the Seward Highway segment between Anchorage and the Sterling Highway. The period of significance ends in 1965 when historic sources and maps identify the physical relocation of the communities near the highway.

The Sterling Highway meets the requirement for significance in the area of *Entertainment/Recreation* and *Conservation* at the state level. The Sterling Highway, via its connection with the Seward Highway, provides the only arterial road to the Kenai Peninsula and the KNWR and provides critical access to fishing and hunting activities, including world-famous salmon fishing. Although this area was used for recreational hunting and fishing and conservation activities prior to the construction of the Sterling Highway, the road provided more direct and easier access and greatly increased the activities related to this area of significance. The period of significance is 1950 beginning with the completion of the Sterling Highway and ending at the 50-year guideline of the National Register. Recreational activities and designation of recreation/conservation areas have historically continued to be important and research has not revealed an appropriate date to serve as the ending date of the period of significance; as a result, the 50-year ending date is defined to end the period of significance following National Register guidance.

The Sterling Highway does not possess significance under *Criteria B, C, or D*.

Portions of the Sterling Highway (Alaska DOT&PF CDS number 110000) has an Interstate Highway System designation, and under the Federal Highway Administration Interstate Exemption (2005) these segments are exempt from section 106 consideration as a historic property. However, portions of the highway and bypassed segments not covered by the exemption possess significance under *Criterion A*. Identification of essential physical features and an assessment of integrity would be needed to determine National Register eligibility of those segments.