

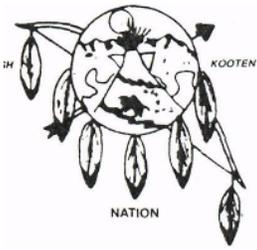
THE CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES
OF THE FLATHEAD NATION

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February 21, 2002

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Mr. Ron Burnett
Western Federal Lands Highway Division
Federal Highway Administration
610 East Fifth Avenue
Vancouver, Washington 98661

Dear Mr. Burnett:

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation have reviewed the Project Identification Report for Thompson River Montana Forest Highway, Milepost 0.0 to 42.6, Sanders and Flathead Counties, Montana. The Tribes wish to provide comments regarding this project.

As you may be aware, the ancestors of the current members of the Salish, Kootenai and Pend O'Reille people have been present in their aboriginal territories in western Montana since time immemorial. Our people have hunted, fished and gathered materials for their subsistence, cultural and spiritual needs throughout western Montana for centuries. In fact, the Thompson River is an area of critical cultural and spiritual significance to the Kootenai people, and the Lolo National Forest has recognized the significance of the area for these factors. Today, under the provisions of the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, Tribal members continue to utilize the natural and cultural resources of the Thompson River drainage as they have done for centuries.

The Tribes are concerned with the content of the report cited above. The inclusion of language regarding the consolidation of the existing dual road system is certainly commendable, in that it would decrease the amount of natural habitat now under the existing roadways. If that happens, we strongly recommend that any areas in which roads are removed be rehabilitated and re-vegetated with appropriate native vegetation and that streams be appropriately reconstructed and restored wherever possible. To do so will assist in the restoration of the drainage and rectify several ongoing hydro logical and aquatic habitat problems. Although the existing gravel roads apparently contribute to sedimentation and erosion, resulting in water quality problems, it would seem that the technology exists to rectify many of these problems without paving the road.

The proposal to pave the surface is an additional cause for concern. This proposal, if completed, will undoubtedly result in a substantial increase in the level of traffic that will use the road as a shortcut between Highway 200 and Highway 2. This increase in traffic will likely have substantial negative impacts upon the natural and cultural resources utilized by Tribal members. For example, the increased traffic will result in higher recreational use of the existing resources in the drainage, putting even more pressure on finite resources. In addition, it is logical to anticipate that the increased volume of traffic and the corresponding increased speed of that traffic will result in a higher level of road-killed wildlife, resources that many tribal families depend upon for subsistence needs. The increase in the volume of traffic that would occur with a paved roadway would also decrease the viability of the Thompson River corridor as a wildlife movement corridor and set the stage for future degradation proper habitat connectivity. Finally, greater pressure for development of homesites in the drainage would result in adverse impacts upon fish, wildlife and habitat, as well as cultural sites that are so important to tribal people.

The Tribes appreciate the opportunity to comment on this report and proposal. While we realize the need to address the problems of the existing Thompson River Road, as noted in our comments, we are very concerned with the current proposal for paving the road and the attendant problems that it will result in. We suggest a re-evaluation of the proposal that will result in better preserving the existing character of the Thompson River drainage. We further request that the Tribes be placed on the mailing list for receipt of any future information regarding this project and notified of any pending actions or opportunities to participate in all levels of planning.

Sincerely,
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

D. Fred Matt, Chairman