

America's Arctic Lifeline

by William J. Robertson

A narrow thread of land, called the Utility Corridor, is far more than a passageway for energy resources.

In the farthest reaches of the United States, a narrow thread of land winds from Alaska's heartland through the rugged Brooks Range to the vast open spaces of Alaska's North Slope. Often controversial, this stretch of Federal land called the Utility Corridor, provides a vital link to Alaska's vast energy resources.

At its northern end lies the Prudhoe Bay oil field and, far to the west huge coal deposits that could supply this nation for centuries. Both onshore and offshore exploration continues to reveal more fields of gas and oil. Many of America's strategic minerals are to be found throughout the area. These and other resources, when tapped for use, will likely pass through the Utility Corridor.

The strip of land is far more than a passageway for energy resources. Recreation, forest products, minerals, watershed, commercial uses and wildlife each play their part in tug-of-war for land. Environmental concerns, present land ownerships, mining interests, traditional use by Native cultures and historical values all have their effect. It is an area that has set precedents in the way government and industry do business. Procedures for obtaining use of the land and maintaining Alaska's unique environmental quality re-

quires special effort.

The land was withdrawn by Public Land Order 5150 in 1971 for a Transportation and Utility Corridor across Federal lands linking state-owned lands 60 miles south of Prudhoe Bay to state-owned lands 35 miles north of Fairbanks. About 336 miles long, the Corridor is 6 to 24 miles in width and contains about 3.5 million acres. Surrounded on both sides by lands withdrawn by Congress for a National Park and Wildlife Refuges, and by lands managed by the State and Native groups, the corridor presents the only access through the entire 600 mile east to west sweep of Alaska's Brooks Mountain Range.

Within the corridor, the four-foot diameter, 800 mile long trans-Alaska pipeline meanders on its way to its tide-water terminal at Valdez. Pumping 1.5 million barrels of oil per day, the line has pump stations and related housing facilities within the Corridor's boundaries. A large diameter pipeline to transport natural gas and associated liquid products is proposed to be constructed. It too, would lie within the Corridor. Two nearly abandoned gold mining camps are also within the area. A State owned and maintained road runs the corridor's entire length. In adjacent areas, world

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class mineral deposits of tungsten, copper, lead, zinc, and uranium are buried. If developed, access from the Corridor will have to be provided.

Land north of the Brooks Range is a storehouse of energy which supplies this lifeline corridor. The Prudhoe Bay oil field now supplies nearly 16% of the Nation's energy. The proposed gas line could provide still more energy. Additional oil and gas fields are now being tapped on Federal, State and Native lands. Newly opened to exploration, the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska continues to improve the U.S. outlook for petroleum reserves.

Energy reserves are one thing, getting them out is yet another. Even hardened Alaska sourdoughs describe the North Slope climate as "terrible." The permanently frozen subsoil supports a thin layer of vegetation that thaws in summer to a spongy, water-soaked mat interspersed with innumerable small water filled pot holes. These provide a breeding ground for the hordes of mosquitoes that rise in clouds whenever the wind is calm — which is not often. Over the arctic ice cap, there is almost always a wind blowing that is cold and moist in the summer. Overcast skies or low, dense fog are common. In winter, the five months without sun-

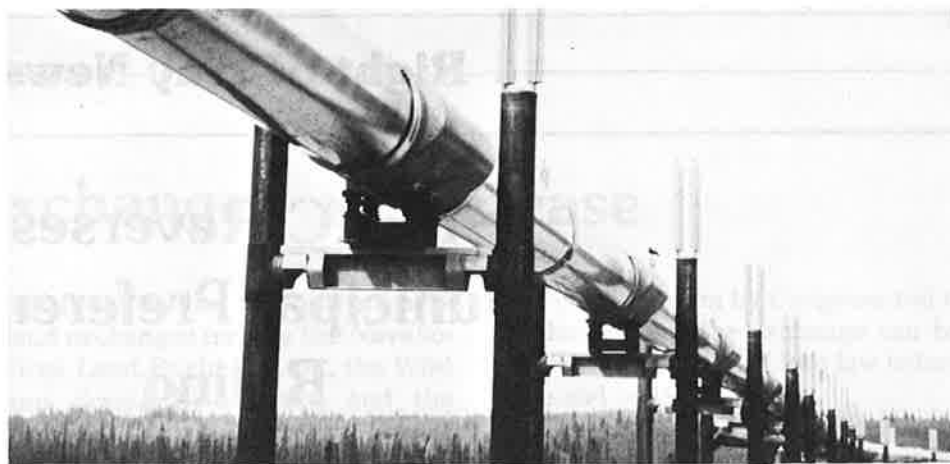
light added to the intense cold, wind and constantly blowing snow make the North Slope an inhospitable place. Workers are seldom without heavy down clothing winter or summer. They face constant breakdown of equipment. Permanent roads, except for areas of long term activity, are nonexistent. Travel is by air and subject to the hazards of low visibility, darkness and severe weather.

Heavy equipment is moved in winter over temporary snowroads constructed of snow and ice or by use of low ground pressure all terrain vehicles. All surface activities are by permit and closely monitored by BLM to ensure surface protection while allowing industrial development.

It was recognized early in the development of the Prudhoe Bay oil field that the Corridor would highlight a number of conflicting interests. It was a narrow piece of Alaska real estate abounding in natural resources — land dedicated to transportation and utility uses and land subject to many public and economic demands. Recognizing this potential for conflict between varying land uses, the Bureau of Land Management, in 1972, embarked on an extensive land use planning effort for the corridor. The plan was to establish a rational method of land use, providing for multiple use when possible and maintaining high standards of environmental quality.

After several drafts, and review by numerous State, Federal and public interest groups, the document was published March 1, 1980. One significant feature of the plan is a provision for service facilities along the Dalton Highway. Even if the road is open only to industrial use, the need will always exist for service facilities. These could be located randomly along the Corridor, depending on projected use. An alternative was to cluster facilities for all uses at a few planned locations or "nodes." These nodes were the previous locations of pipeline construction camps and have State airport leases. Once areas were selected, public interest was high to provide commercial service facilities.

At the present time, the BLM can-



not sell land within the Corridor. Development of long term leases or right-of-way grants is governed by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act and the Federal Aid Highways Act. Short-term permits are issued for seasonal activities.

In 1981, the BLM issued the first of two long-term leases for public service facilities in the corridor. These leases were to provide the bare minimum of fuel, food and lodging at the Yukon River bridge Crossing and at Coldfoot, south of the Brooks Range. In addition, a bulk fuel storage facility to supply miners and nearby villages has been proposed at the Yukon Crossing. A school has been proposed near this site. Other areas that may see development are at Prospect and Chandalar.

To the jaundiced eye of the city-dweller, development is common place, but in a land where only six years ago there was none, the present activity is like a modern day gold rush — only this rush is being accomplished in an orderly manner. Because the Corridor has become a rallying point for political interest, industrial use, recreation use and Native interests, close cooperation between all interests has been the vital element for planning.

Access to the Corridor will increase in the future. The State of Alaska has several existing, undeveloped right-of-ways under the old federal RS2477 law and the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1981 provided for two access routes from the Corridor. In addition, reasonable access is guaranteed to valid mining claims.

Development and use of the Corridor lands will doubtlessly escalate in the years to come. New energy discoveries will be made, critical minerals will need to be extracted and the public will have to be served in their need for use of the public lands. A land use plan is only the first step in providing for these needs. The next step is to implement and carry out those objectives and goals identified in the plan. The test of a suitable plan is its ability to provide the desired effects in a timely and efficient manner and at the same time protect the natural values of the land involved. It is not an easy task and not all will be satisfied completely. But failure to plan and to grow with the activity in the Corridor can only cause a piece meal result. The very resource that is to be protected will suffer from hesitancy and failure to act in a timely manner. BLM will continue to direct activities on the public lands in the Corridor using the land use plan as a guide. The planning system is flexible and allows the land manager to use discretion on activity decisions. As situations change, the plan must be able to change also. For instance, negotiations still continue between the State and BLM on possible future exchanges or selection of Corridor lands.

The Utility Corridor will continue to be the lifeline for the Nation now and for the foreseeable future. The challenge to BLM is to provide for this use and to use wisely the land management concepts and mandates that this Nation now demands of its Federal land managers.