

**From:** [Bob Sattler](#)  
**To:** [donlingoldeis, POA](#)  
**Cc:** [Paul Mayo](#)  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Donlin Gold Draft EIS comment  
**Date:** Wednesday, May 25, 2016 7:38:41 PM  
**Attachments:** [2016\\_MayDonlin\\_EIS\\_comments.pdf](#)

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Dear Sirs,

Please find attached, comments on draft EIS on the proposed Donlin Creek Gold Mine.

Thanks you,

Robert Sattler  
Environmental Quality Analyst  
Tanana Chiefs Conference

May 25, 2016  
Army Corps of Engineers  
Alaska District  
Re: Donlin Gold Mine Draft EIS comments

Dear Sirs,

These comments provide written comment on the draft environmental impact statement for the proposed Donlin Creek Gold Mine sites on the middle Kuskokwim River. You may know that Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) is the regional ANCSA non-profit consortium for Native villages, or federally recognized Tribes of Interior Alaska. Members of the TCC include the Upper Kuskokwim villages of Nicholia, McGrath, Takotna and Telida and these villages constitute an ethnogeographic subregion of Interior Alaska. The Upper Kuskokwim villages are potentially affected parties in the federal environmental review for the Donlin Gold Project. Project managers Donlin and the Army Corps have met and consulted with representatives of the Upper Kuskokwim villages during the National Environmental Policy Act review for the proposed mining project and must continue a meaningful dialogue to address their concerns, sentiments and perspectives. The consortium of Upper Kuskokwim villages should be afforded the opportunity to understand the socioeconomic and demographic implications of the project as the Donlin project advances through the permitting and beyond.

#### Consultation and Coordination

Comment provided here are compilations based on previous meetings between Donlin, Army Corps and Tribal leadership of the Upper Kuskokwim villages, public hearings on the project, conversations between Tribal members and TCC staff, a review of the EIS by internal professional staff at TCC and discussions between TCC staff, tribal leaders, ethnographers and linguists familiar with the cultural landscape of the region. Though many of the observations expressed in these comments are based on communications between multiple interested parties, these comments are provisional and subject to change as the project evolves. Similarly, as the lead federal agency, the Army Corps, should advance consultations with Upper Kuskokwim villages and ensure that their interests, concerns and perspectives are considered throughout the project planning and operation phases of the proposed project. Consideration of their views throughout the life of the Donlin Mine project is a primary Tribal issue to conform to Tribal consultation and coordination, socioeconomics and environmental justice considerations.

With this background, these comments are not intended to supercede interests and perspectives of the Upper Kuskokwim village members and leadership. Consequently, the Army Corps and other cooperating agencies in the Donlin EIS need to continue a meaningful dialogue with those villages. Consultation and coordination with the Upper Kuskokwim villages during the planning phase should serve their interests in the construction and operational phases of the project. In this sense, the Upper Kuskokwim villages need to be included in the Mitigation Monitoring and Adaptive Management plans for the project. Membership in the monitoring component should ensure that the villages in the headwaters of the Kuskokwim River have a voice in the process for perceived and inadvertent adverse effects.

## Natural Gas Pipeline

What has emerged as one of the largest concerns among discussions with tribal members and leadership are issues over the placement and activities relating to the proposed natural gas pipeline. The siting of the pipeline happens to fall in the high-yield subsistence areas and poses interference to the habitats and home ranges of large mammal subsistence taxa. Further concerns were expressed at the McGrath public hearing about access the pipeline corridor may provide into the northern Alaska Range from the large population center in southcentral and percolate user conflicts, trespass and encroachment problems for Upper Kuskokwim peoples throughout their customary and traditional use areas. The construction of new airfields along the routing to support construction and maintenance also poses significant user conflicts.

To offset this concern, however, are interests of bringing lower cost energy to the villages. Should the pipeline be designed to accommodate the energy needs of the Upper Kuskokwim villages, the potential benefit may offset the negative repercussions of the pipeline that traverses their traditional and customary subsistence lands. In the McGrath public hearing, suggestions were offered to relocate the pipeline footprint to reduce the impacts to the natural habitats of game animals, the visual environment and the socio-cultural environment relating to the geography along the northern foothills of the Alaska Range

## River Barging

The transportation system proposed in the Kuskokwim River is another large topic of concern among stakeholders in the reaches of the river. Barge traffic to the extent proposed in the draft EIS causes concern to the fish populations and other habitats. Particularly, anadromous salmon make their way beyond the project area into the Upper Kuskokwim to spawn where fry develop in the freshwater habitats and return to the ocean as smolt in a year or two after they hatch. The extent of the proposed barge traffic may pose significant adverse effects to the adult salmon migrating upstream through the barging reach of the Kuskokwim River and the heavy barge traffic may affect smolt as they descend the river from the headwater spawning grounds.

For example, a comparable case where a large boat wake has adversely effected migratory salmon comes from the Upper Yukon River. The leisure cruise company, Holland America, formerly ran a large catamaran between Dawson and Eagle during summer months as a transportation link between boat and bus transport of their customers. Local residents observed and voiced concerns over adverse effects including noise, hazards posed to small boaters capsizing, and effects to salmon smolt in their outmigration to the ocean. Particularly disturbing were observations that the wake upon breaking along the shoreline would displace schools of migrating smolt onto the dry ground where the smolt would desiccate. Another significant adverse effect observed included accelerated erosion along riverbanks, especially during high water that contributed to rapid bank retreat. This latter issue would be a potential complication to barge traffic in a particularly shallow river system such as the middle Kuskokwim. Accelerated erosion along the margin of channels would increase the sediment supply and contribute to the formation of shoals. Shallow reaches, or shoals, formed by increased erosion would impede or halt barge traffic.

The potential interference the barge traffic may cause to the riverine habitat and associated salmon migration is a concern that needs further assessment. People in the Upper Kuskokwim have begun seeing a return of large salmon the headwater spawning grounds and care to preserve this trend. The proposed several-fold increase in barge traffic poses intermittent or cyclical effects to river erosion,

shoal development, disturbances to upstream migratory pathways of salmon and possible increased mortality to ocean returning smolt.

### Socioeconomic

In the socioeconomic human environment, a universal issue and promotional theme of the mine project is job creation and the opportunity for long-term employment. The villages in the Upper Kuskokwim region are particularly sympathetic to the socioeconomic environment the mine would bring to the region. As an area upstream of the immediate census domain of the project, residents are very interested in employment opportunities and associated socioeconomic improvements to the region. Along with employment are related private sector opportunities, job training and related technical and profession education workforce development components. Employment is a big concern since it is one of the largest potential benefits to moderate, or balance, the potential impacts the project poses to the upper Kuskokwim communities.

### Cultural Resources/Subsistence

The cultural resources section of the environmental review may be expanded to include sensitive ceremonial or other religious use of places, plants, animals and minerals. These types of resources go beyond the conventional physical archaeological site survey methodology within a corridor or project facilities footprint and may be classified as traditional cultural properties, sacred sites, cultural and ethnographic landscapes or historic mining landscapes. As you may know, traditional cultural landscapes are places associated with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that are rooted in that community's history and are important in maintaining continuity in cultural identity of that community. These are often areas that represent locations where important traditional events, activities, or cultural observances have taken place in the past, yet remain active in the community's or tribes's cultural practices (quoted from definition of TCPs, Parker and King 1992, National Register Bulletin, National Park Service).

Shortcomings of the cultural resources and subsistence portions of the affected environment include ethnographic, linguistic and subsistence literature sources. Noticeably absent are the Alaska Division of Fish and Game subsistence reports for the natural gas pipeline route. Further, the archaeological surveys sponsored between 2004 to 2014 apparently did not make use of all the background documents that may have augmented their search for potential sites. Archival collections that pertain to the ethnographic landscape of the Donlin gold pipeline route include Ray Collins archival collection of his Upper Kuskokwim notes and recordings which date from 1963. In that collection are significant recordings made by Chief Miska Deaphon (1903-1984) of Nikolai, a compilation that detail accounts about hunting, wildlife, places, and trails throughout the Upper Kuskokwim language area. A supplemental source is the Mixe Mellick Collection, a group of tape recordings of middle Kuskokwim between Crooked Creek and McGrath. Further information about the ethnographic context of Athabascan groups that have occupied the areas of the Donlin Pipeline route for the Cook Inlet Basin can be found in Kari and Fall (2003).

### Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Donlin Gold Mine, federal environmental review and welcome the Army Corps and cooperating agencies to continue meaningful dialogues with the

Upper Kuskokwim villages. In the spirit of NEPA, the federal environmental review needs to accommodate the interests of the Upper Kuskokwim communities. We urge the Army Corps to invite and designate, as appropriate, the coalition of Upper Kuskokwim villages and their technical advisors, such as Tanana Chiefs Conference, to be involved in deliberations as a cooperating agency entity on the mitigation, monitoring and adaptive management initiatives that evolve during the project.

For further information, please contact me at [bob.sattler@tananachiefs.org](mailto:bob.sattler@tananachiefs.org) or Paul Mayo, Director of Natural and Cultural Resources, at [paul.mayo@tananachiefs.org](mailto:paul.mayo@tananachiefs.org), or at 907-452-8251, ext. 3261 and 3343, respectively.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rob Sattler", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Robert Sattler

Environmental Quality Analyst