

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB) have prepared this draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Hatcher Pass Recreational Area Access, Trails, and Transit Facilities project (Hatcher Pass Transit Project) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 and its implementing Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) (40 CFR 1500-1508), FTA's NEPA regulations (23 CFR 771), and the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). The Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare this Draft EIS was published in the Federal Register in November 2008 (Appendix A).

The proposed project includes construction of the following improvements at both the Northern and Southern Areas:

- Paved access road (upgrade/realignment of existing gravel road in Northern Area; new access road in Southern Area)
- Paved parking lots with lighting (upgrade of existing gravel parking lot in Northern Area [413 vehicles and two buses]; new parking lot in Southern Area [210 vehicles and six buses])
- Enclosed 20- to 30-passenger transit facilities with restrooms (includes heating and lighting)
- Utility extensions (i.e., telephone or fiber optic cable and electrical lines)

Additional proposed improvements in the Southern Area include a paved non-motorized separated pathway that would parallel the new access road.

The proposed improvements are located in two existing recreational areas that are currently used for a variety of outdoor activities (Figures 1-1 and 1-2). For the purposes of this Draft EIS, we refer to these two areas as:

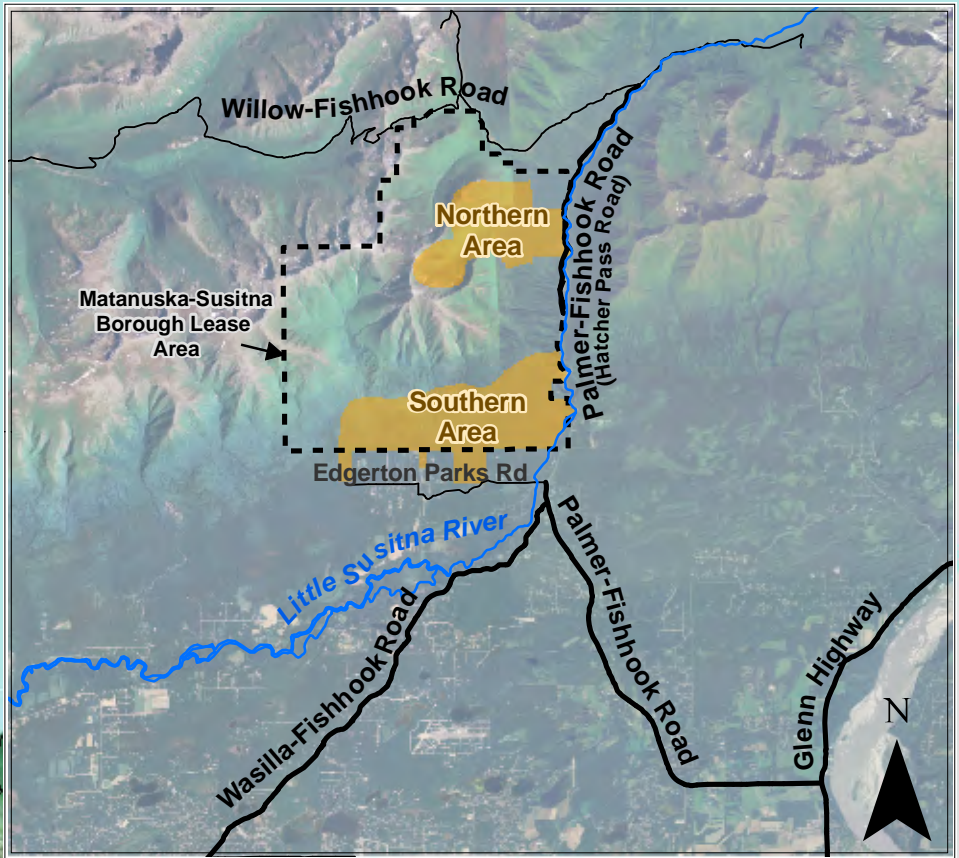
- The Northern Area, and
- The Southern Area.

The MSB is developing a separately funded project that they intend on constructing with the proposed roads, parking lots, and transit facility improvements beginning in 2012. Phase I of the MSB-funded project includes construction of Alpine ski lifts, downhill ski and snowboarding trails, a small day lodge in the Northern Area. In the Southern Area, Phase I of the MSB-funded project includes construction of Nordic and other multiple-use trails, middle- and upper-level parking lots, a stadium, a day lodge, and an access road; hereafter referred to as MSB's proposed Phase I Nordic and Alpine ski area developments or Phase I. During scoping, several state and federal resource agencies emphasized the need to analyze environmental impacts of both projects within this Draft EIS, since the MSB-funded project appears to be reasonably foreseeable (as defined in Chapter 10, Glossary). Thus, the MSB-funded project has been assessed in this Draft EIS as part of the indirect (secondary) impact analysis; however, the proposed transportation improvements are needed whether the MSB's ski area improvements are constructed or not, and thus they have "independent utility" as defined by FTA's NEPA regulations (23 CFR 771).

### 1.1 Overview of the NEPA Process


The NEPA process for completion of a Draft EIS generally includes the following steps:

- Public and agency scoping,
- Environmental studies and analysis,
- Development of alternatives to meet the Hatcher Pass Transit Project purpose and need,
- Preparation of Draft EIS,
- Public meeting and 45- to 60-day public review period,
- Preparation of final EIS,
- Public review of final EIS, and
- Record of Decision to be signed by both the FTA and the MSB.

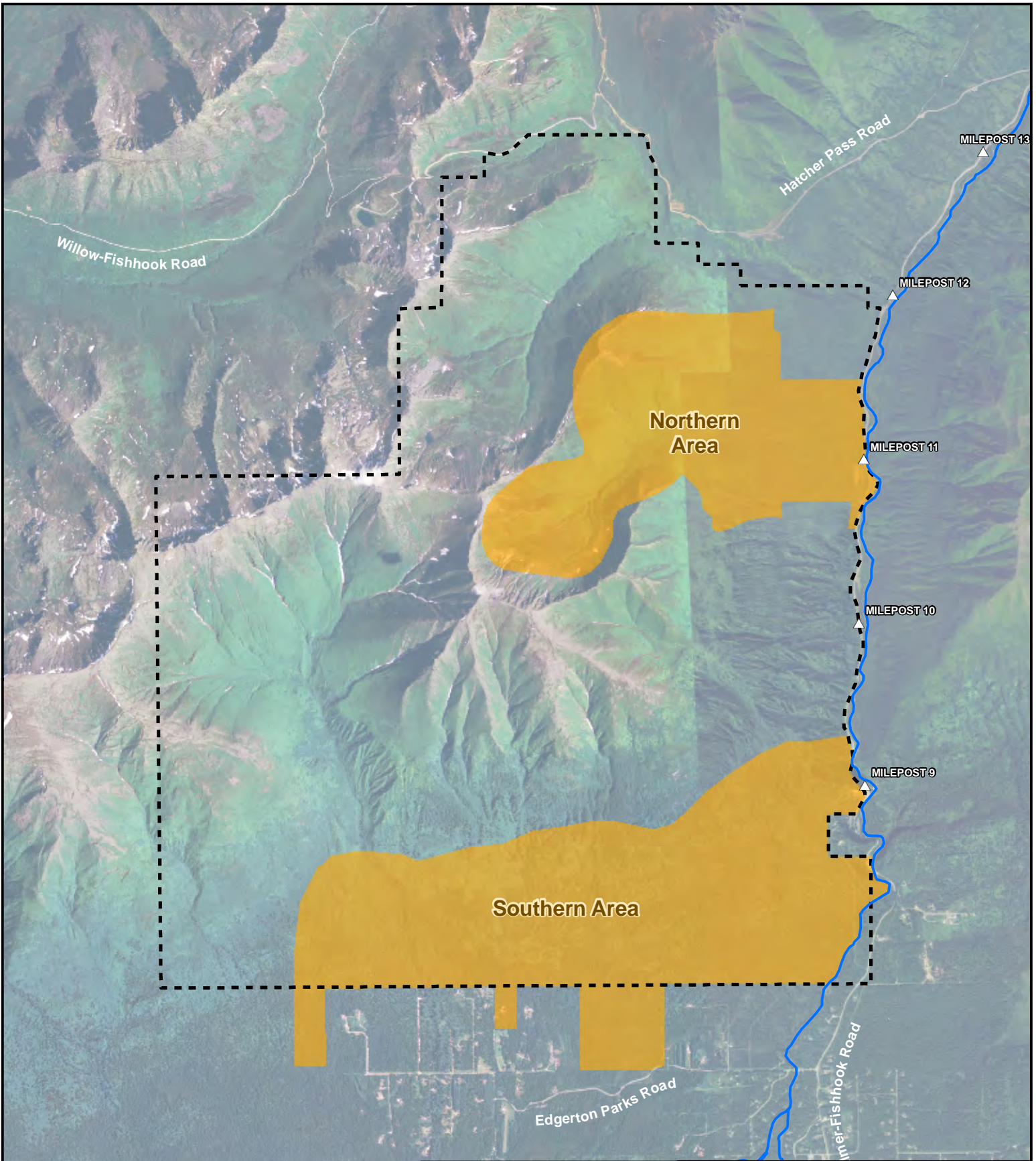


**Figure 1-1**  
**Project Vicinity Map**

Hatcher Pass Recreational Area  
 Access, Trails, and Transit Facilities



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4,000 2,000 0 4,000 Feet



- Matanuska-Susitna Borough
- Lease Boundary
- Little Susitna River
- Mileposts
- Initial Study Area

**Figure 1-2**  
Initial Study Area

Hatcher Pass Recreational Area  
Access, Trails, and Transit Facilities



February 16, 2010

WO: D59609

The NOI to prepare an EIS was published in the Federal Register in November 2008. Public and agency scoping meetings were held in December 2008, with additional public and agency meetings in May and June 2009 to provide Hatcher Pass Transit Project updates.

For purposes of the Draft EIS, the FTA and MSB are acting as co-leads; FTA is the lead federal agency, and the MSB is the lead local agency and project sponsor. Other state and federal agencies were invited to act as either “Participating” or “Cooperating” agencies for the Draft EIS, as defined by SAFETEA-LU. Local tribal entities were also invited to participate in the NEPA process. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) and the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) were the only agencies that elected to act as “Participating Agencies.” All other agencies and tribal entities declined to formally participate in the NEPA process as either “Participating” or “Cooperating” parties; however, most agencies have provided scoping comments and other input throughout the development of this document.

## 1.2 Project Location

The proposed project is located 55 miles north of Anchorage, Alaska, in the MSB, Alaska’s fastest growing area (Figure 1-1).

The Hatcher Pass Transit Project includes development of transportation and transit infrastructure in two separate areas currently used for a variety of year-round recreational activities (Figures 1-3 and 1-4). The Northern Area is located south of Willow-Fishhook Road and west of Palmer-Fishhook Road and the Southern Area is located north of Edgerton Parks Road and west of Palmer-Fishhook Road. Both Hatcher Pass Transit Project areas fall within the Government Peak subunit of the “Hatcher Pass Management Plan” (HPMP). Within this 10,000-acre subunit, the MSB owns and manages approximately 3,000 acres of land. The remainder is owned by the DNR and is leased to and managed by the MSB (Figure 1-5).

## 1.3 Existing Recreation Use of Hatcher Pass

Hatcher Pass is a popular year-round recreational area that has seen a steady annual increase in

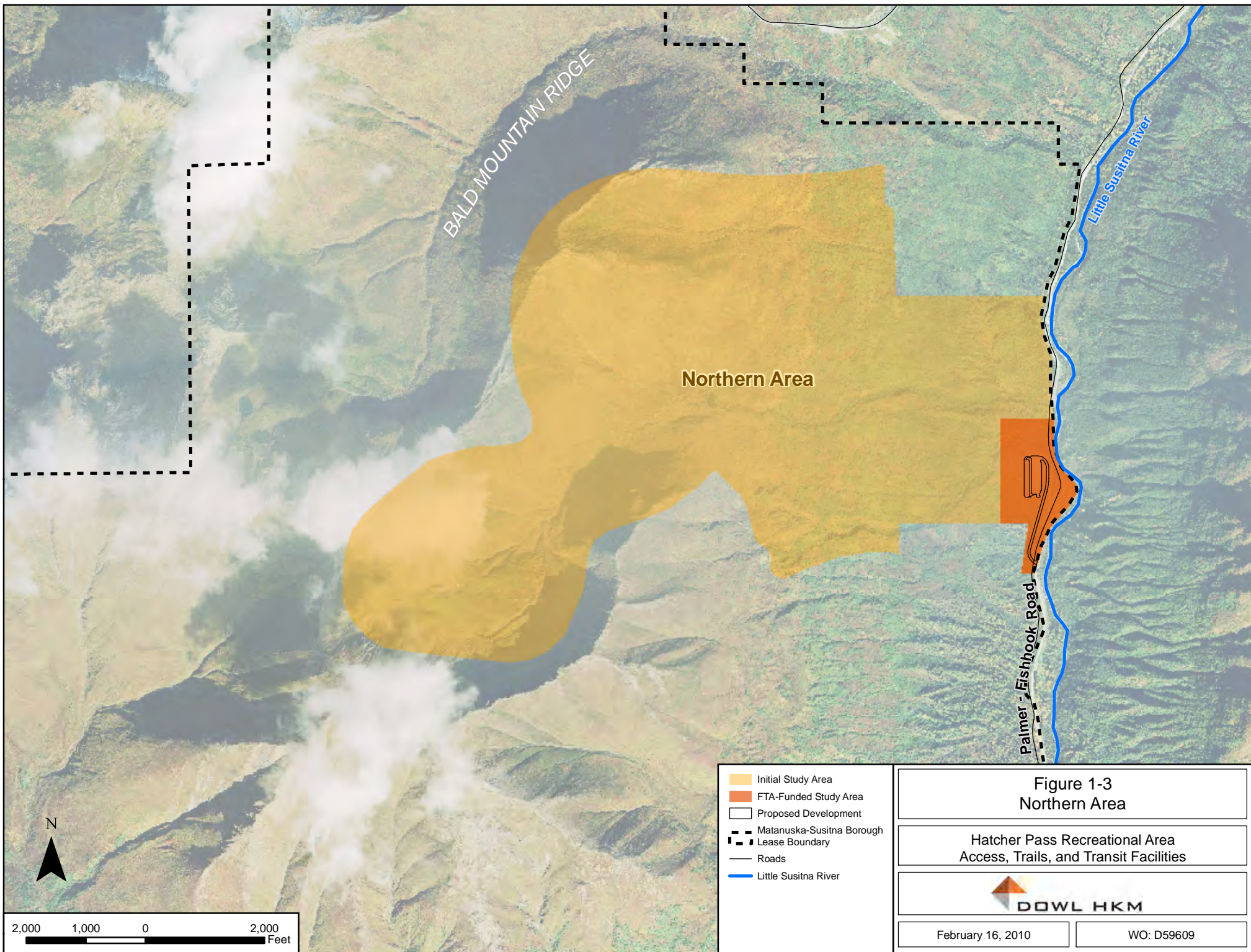
visitation numbers over the past decade. The annual numbers increased by over 34% between 2008 and 2009, according to the DNR (Biessel, personal communication, 2009). The area is located within a one-hour drive of 42% of the state’s population (State of Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development [DCCED], 2009).

In the summer months, the area attracts both tourists and local/regional visitors with activity focused around the Independence Mine State Historic Park and various family hiking and picnic areas. Summer and winter activities include mountain biking, hiking, mountain running, horseback riding, berry picking, paragliding, skiing (both Nordic and Alpine), snowboarding, snowshoeing, ATV and snowmobile use, and sledding.

The Southern Area is currently used for recreational activities, including Nordic skiing, hiking, mountain racing, ATV and snowmobile use, horseback riding, and hunting, due to existing trail systems throughout that area. However, public use is hampered by lack of public access points, parking lots, and transit.

The Northern Area provides Alpine skiing and snowboarding terrain for backcountry skiing and snowboarding. The MSB also sponsors an annual Winter Trails Day, which provides the public opportunities to learn cross-country and downhill ski techniques and provides instruction on snowshoeing, avalanche safety, and rescue and skijoring. But again, the use of this area is hampered due to the limited safe access and parking facilities.

More detail regarding existing use of the Hatcher Pass Transit Project area can be found in Section 2.2, and more detail regarding projected use under the MSB’s planned improvements can be found in Sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2 of the Draft EIS. In addition, the MSB recently developed a document entitled *Hatcher Pass: A New Beginning*, which outlines the MSB’s proposed development plans for both the Northern and Southern Areas. A copy of that document can be obtained from the MSB or via the Hatcher Pass Transit Project website at [www.hatcherpass.com](http://www.hatcherpass.com).



- Initial Study Area
- FTA-Funded Study Area
- Proposed Development
- Matanuska-Susitna Borough Lease Boundary
- Roads
- Little Susitna River

**Figure 1-3  
Northern Area**

**Hatcher Pass Recreational Area  
Access, Trails, and Transit Facilities**



February 16, 2010

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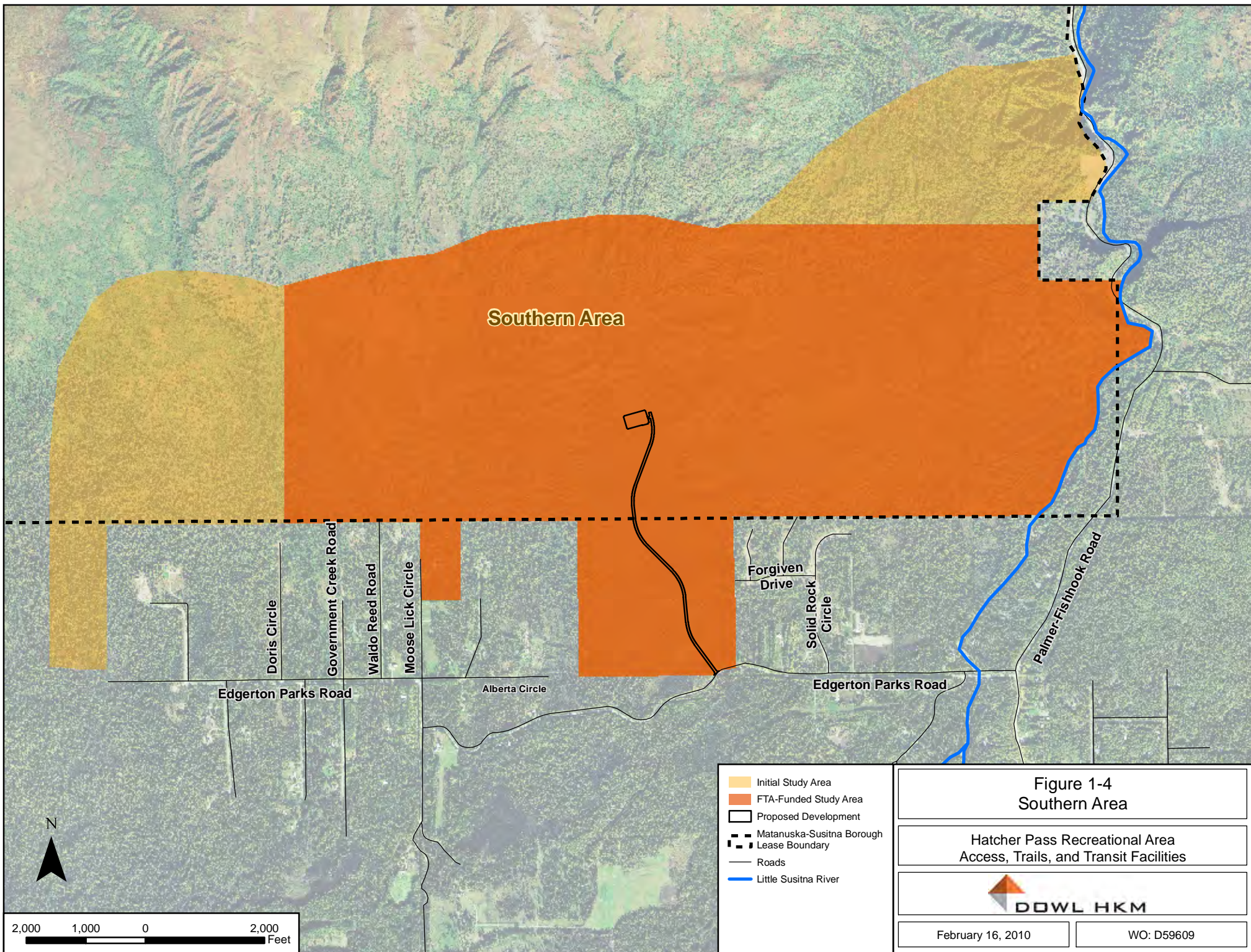
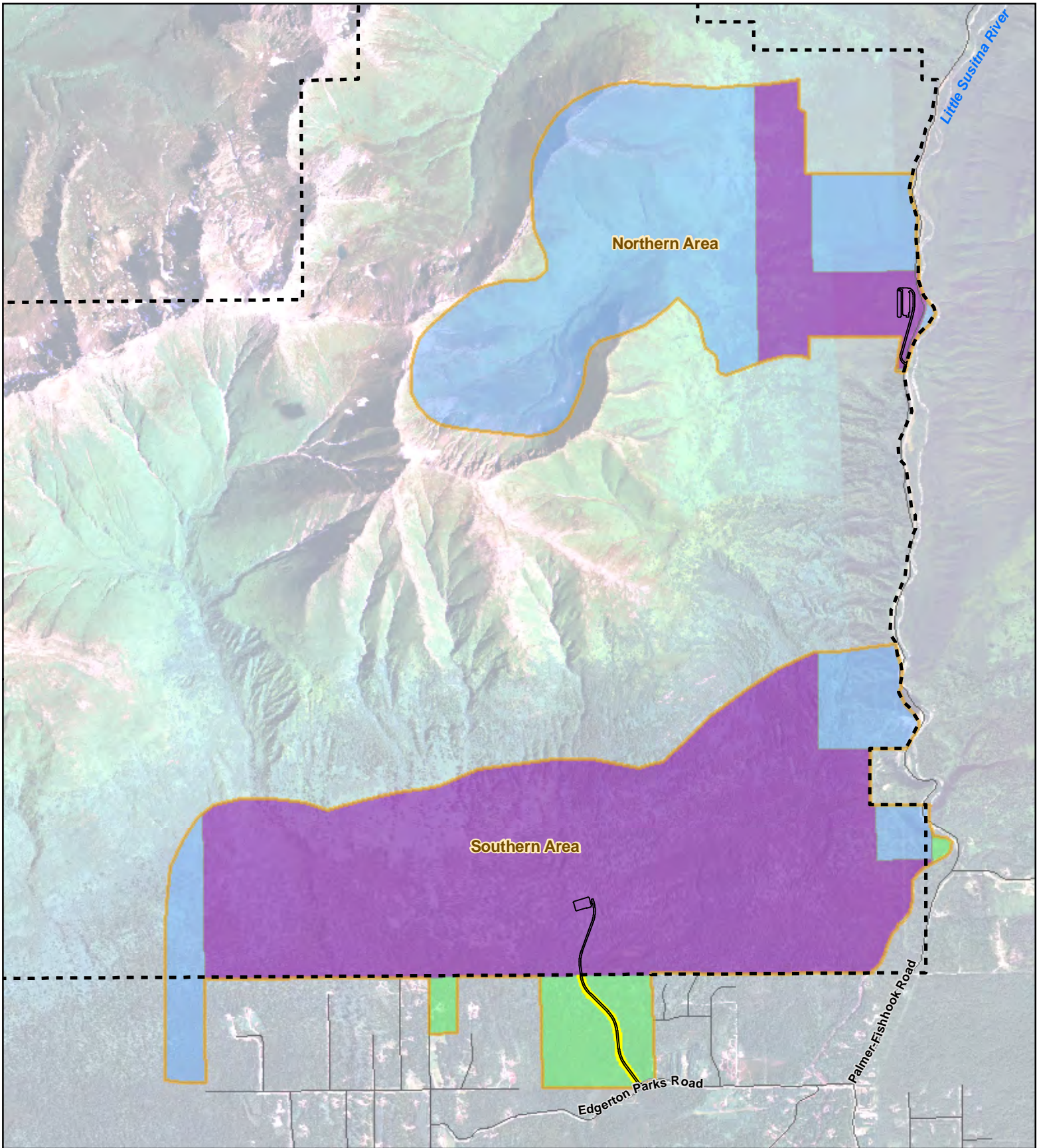


Figure 1-4  
Southern Area

Hatcher Pass Recreational Area  
Access, Trails, and Transit Facilities





- State Owned Lands
- MSB Owned Lands
- Privately Owned Lands
- Impacts to Private Property: 13.6 acres
- Matanuska-Susitna Borough Lease Boundary
- Proposed Development
- Initial Study Area

Figure 1-5  
Land Ownership Within  
Hatcher Pass Transit Project Area

Hatcher Pass Recreational Area  
Access, Trails, and Transit Facilities



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