

### 5.3.9.2 Milford Road

The Milford Road (State Highway 94) between Te Anau and Milford Sound / Piopiotahi is one of the country's leading tourist routes. It provides access to Milford Sound / Piopiotahi, which is an internationally recognised icon tourist destination. More than 450,000 people visit Milford Sound / Piopiotahi each year; however the road is much more than just an access route to the sound. It is a visitor attraction in its own right, passing through some of the most spectacular forest and alpine scenery in the country, if not the world. The road is a unique journey into the heart of Fiordland National Park. Some of the most striking features of Te Wāhipounamu - *South West New Zealand* World Heritage Area are revealed along its route. There are many opportunities for visitors to stop and discover the short walks or viewing sites along the way.

The road is located in the Milford Road Frontcountry Visitor Setting. This is defined as 200 metres each side of the road centreline except for the following:

- The western boundary for the Milford Road frontcountry corridor, between the Fiordland National Park perimeter and the outlet of Lake Gunn, will be the true left bank of the Eglinton River.
- In the Hollyford Valley, where the frontcountry setting encompasses Milford Road and the Hollyford Road, the boundary will be the true right bank of the Hollyford River / Whakatipu Kā Tuka on the river side of the roads, and 200 m from the road centreline on the other side.
- In the Cleddau Valley from the Chasm to Milford Sound / Piopiotahi the western boundary will be the true left of the Cleddau River.

A number of the implementations in this section also relate to areas adjoining this frontcountry zone or to matters at Milford Sound / Piopiotahi.

Visitor use of the road has increased at a rate of about seven percent annually. This trend is expected to continue or to increase. Approximately 75% of road users are international visitors. The main reasons people use the road are to undertake a scenic cruise on Milford Sound / Piopiotahi, for sight-seeing or for access to the more remote walking tracks in Fiordland National Park. The majority of visitors (nearly 90%) travel the full length of the road (120 km) from Te Anau to Milford Sound / Piopiotahi.

The state highway itself is outside of Fiordland National Park and is managed by Transit NZ. The road-side visitor sites are generally within Fiordland National Park. An integrated approach to managing the road and adjacent Fiordland National Park and visitor sites is essential to

ensure that any developments do not impact on the natural characteristics and values of Fiordland National Park surrounding the road. Natural hazards, particularly avalanches and landslips, strongly influencing use patterns in this place; safety of visitors both at the visitor sites and those using the road is an important consideration for all parties.

The Milford Road is a frontcountry visitor setting (refer to section 5.3.9) and the intention is that it should continue to absorb the greater part of any increased use of Fiordland National Park. It is recognised that further development may be desirable to effectively manage visitors and ensure a range of quality experiences is available to them. However, proposals must still consider effects on the natural environment and existing recreational opportunities. An important consideration will be the impacts any proposed development might have on landscape vistas and the unique character of this road experience in this popular part of Fiordland National Park, and any alternative sites that could be used to avoid such impacts.

There are a number of matters that can affect the Milford Road offering a world class visitor experience. Some of these include:

- Daily peaks in traffic volumes and visitor numbers at key sites resulting in congestion and overcrowding;
- Congestion and overcrowding at Mirror Lakes and Pop's View
- Pedestrian and traffic safety at Falls Creek, Mirror Lakes and Pops View;
- Shortage of toilet facilities;
- Demand for improved signage and information;
- Inappropriate developments alongside the road that detract and or are inconsistent with the natural characteristics and values of the surrounding national park.
- Demand for a more prominent Fiordland National Park entrance; and
- Traffic and pedestrian safety matters.

Within the timeframe of this plan it will be necessary to address these matters. A number of mechanisms have been identified. These vary from engineering solutions and voluntary mechanisms by tourism operators through to the use of regulation as a tool.

While the road is acknowledged as a destination in its own right, it is also the main access route to Milford Sound / Piopiotahi. Section 5.3.9.1 outlines that the management of visitor flows is a key tool for reducing the perceptions of congestion and overcrowding at Milford Sound / Piopiotahi. The Department of Conservation considers that managing flows on the Milford Road through regulation is one tool that

could assist in ensuring the experience at Milford Sound / Piopiotahi is restored back to its iconic status and reflects, more appropriately, national park values. This is an opportunity that the Department of Conservation will strongly advocate to Transit New Zealand to investigate. A number of options have been mooted including a park and ride option located within the Te Anau area; and restrictions on use of the road during the winter months because of avalanche risks. There are likely to be many more options that require consideration. Suggestions have also been made about alternative transport options providing solutions for managing the perception of crowding and congestion at Milford Sound / Piopiotahi.

Existing visitor sites along the road provide plenty of opportunity for visitors to enjoy the scenic splendour of the area and for the Department of Conservation to interpret the natural history. Similar opportunities in terms of the rich human history surrounding the exploration and settlement of the area are currently lacking.

Further commercial development in this visitor setting which enhance the visitor appreciation of the natural characteristics and values or the national park setting are likely to be acceptable. The Department of Conservation considers that the preference would be for proposals to make use of existing modified sites (e.g. Knobs Flat) and to provide new opportunities that are not offered elsewhere in Fiordland National Park or the surrounding area, but are still in keeping with the national park setting.

## **Objectives**

1. The Fiordland National Park that adjoins the Milford Road will be managed to provide for and protect the following attributes:
  - a) The spectacular views of forested catchments, open grasslands, lake systems and outstanding mountainscapes;
  - b) Its significant indigenous flora and fauna;
  - c) A place which is a destination in its own right;
  - d) The Eglinton Valley's open and uninterrupted views of the surrounding mountains and valleys and its overall sense of naturalness;
  - e) The steep, winding and narrow character that forms large parts of the adjoining road;
  - f) The easily accessible and safe visitor opportunities at designated sites;

- g) The valuable access for many who are accessing remote parts of Fiordland National Park;
- 2. To provide for the integrated management of the Milford Road and Fiordland National Park adjacent to the road in a way that ensures visitor safety, protection of park values and a high-quality visitor experience.
- 3. To provide sufficient opportunities for a wide variety of recreational activities compatible with national park purposes.
- 4. To consider opportunities for facility development which will enhance public enjoyment of Fiordland National Park, and appreciation of the natural values without impairing or diminishing its natural values.
- 5. To promote future growth in visitor use of the Milford Road outside of existing daily peaks.

### **Implementation**

- 1. Work with Transit NZ and its consultants and contractors to provide an integrated approach to management of the road corridor.
- 2. In conjunction with Transit NZ, and tourism interests, provide information to road users on the following:
  - a) The best time of the day to travel to avoid congestion;
  - b) General driving conditions;
  - c) Winter driving conditions, the use of tyre chains and avalanche awareness;
  - d) What to expect at the Homer Tunnel;
  - e) The distance and duration of the journey;
  - f) The facilities that are provided and those that are absent but may otherwise have been expected; and
  - g) Sites of interest to visitors.
- 3. In conjunction with Transit NZ and tourism interests, review visitor site signage along the route with the purpose of improving its visibility and usefulness to road users without adversely impacting on the natural character and values of national park setting.
- 4. Work with the tourism industry and Transit New Zealand on matters relevant to the use of visitor sites adjoining the State Highway.

5. Consider proposals such as Maintain by Community (refer section 5.8) for access points that will improve access from State Highway 94 to Lake Te Anau. The following criteria will apply:
  - a) Access will be low key and the road will be gravel;
  - b) Access will not affect the safety of the State Highway;
  - c) A weed management programme will be necessary;
  - d) The access will not involve any commercial use;
  - e) The access will be for recreational use only (not as a 4WD driving opportunity);
  - f) The access will not be at the exclusion of the public;
  - g) The access will be developed and maintained to the Department of Conservation's standards; and
  - h) The access will not adversely affect natural, cultural and recreation values of the area.
6. All development proposals including those proposed by the Department of Conservation and Transit NZ will demonstrate how the adverse effects on natural, cultural, historical and recreational values can be avoided, remedied or mitigated. Rooding proposals will need to be consistent with the provisions of section 5.7 and will need to demonstrate that existing facilities are being used to their full capacity and potential and that there is a proven demand for the new facility beyond what the existing infrastructure can cope with.
7. In conjunction with Transit NZ and tourism interests, investigate options for engineering solutions to congestion and road safety concerns. In particular, seek that the works achieve to separate pedestrians and vehicular traffic at:
  - a) Falls Creek;
  - b) Mirror Lakes;
  - c) Monkey Creek;
  - d) Pop's View; and
  - e) East Homer Tunnel.

The Department of Conservation will seek support from Transit New Zealand and other funding agencies to ensure these projects are undertaken. (For matters relating to other sites refer to Implementation 10.)

8. Consider options for the development of a more prominent Fiordland National Park entrance. An analysis will be

undertaken to determine a possible site. The following criteria will be considered (but is not limited to) when undertaking the analysis:

- a) The ability for the site to adequately express that visitors are entering Fiordland National Park;
  - b) The ability of the site to provide for safe and adequate parking;
  - c) Whether detailed interpretation is needed at the gateway; and
  - d) The ability to avoid adverse effects on the natural, historical and cultural values of Fiordland National Park.
9. In conjunction with Transit NZ, Southland District Council and Milford Sound / Piopiotahi tourism interests, explore options for the funding and provision of additional toilet facilities along the road.
10. In addressing the perception of congestion, overcrowding and safety at visitor sites along the Milford Road the Department of Conservation, in conjunction with Transit New Zealand and the tourism industry, will utilise various options including:
- a) Limits should be imposed on concessionaires as to the overall number of visits, frequency and timing of visits, and the actual sites to be visited along the road;
  - b) Assessment and determination of whether engineering solutions can resolve problems within the constraints of funding and the attributes identified in Objective 1;
  - c) Assessment and determination of whether voluntary mechanisms implemented by tourism operators can resolve the problems. Such tools could include varying scheduled visits and the length of stay at sites; and
  - d) Assessment of the appropriateness of each option relative to site specific constraints.
11. To assist with managing visitor flows into Milford Sound / Piopiotahi and to ensure a world-class visitor experience along the Milford Road, advocate to Transit New Zealand and other parties to investigate options for regulating visitor flows on the State Highway and for assessing the effects of alternative transport options to Milford Sound / Piopiotahi. In particular advocate the following:
- a) That an analysis of options for managing flows be undertaken in consultation with the Department of Conservation and other interested parties;

- b) That part of this analysis will consider the ability of options to assist in meeting the objectives of section 5.3.9.1 and 5.3.9.2; and
  - c) That any option for regulating traffic flows provides for the following:
    - i) The ability for the public to access the roadside visitor sites within the Fiordland National Park on a regular basis;
    - ii) The ability for those accessing the more remote parts of Fiordland National Park to be able to do so on a regular basis;
    - iii) Access for the Department of Conservation’s management purposes and other servicing vehicles as required;
    - iv) Opportunities for essential traffic such as those towing boats to Milford Sound / Piopiotahi; and
    - v) Better flow of traffic so as to avoid the perception of congestion and overcrowding at roadside visitor sites along the road and at Milford Sound / Piopiotahi.
12. Advocate to the New Zealand Bus and Coach Association and users of the Milford Road the following:
- a) Turn vehicle engines off while parked at visitor attractions and at terminus areas;
  - b) Vehicles travel appropriate distances apart and that buses leaving Milford Sound / Piopiotahi and Queenstown have staggered departures so that vehicles remain out of sight of one another;
  - c) Inbound tourist companies share buses to ensure full buses; and
  - d) The Bus and Coach Association Code of Practice and associated accreditation mechanisms for drivers addresses the matters listed in points a) - c).
13. Activities associated with commercial recreation or tourism proposals, including new facilities, should only be authorised where:
- a) They are consistent with the attributes identified in Objective 1 of this section;
  - b) They can be sited to minimise adverse effects on the natural and landscape values;
  - c) The design is sympathetic to the national park setting;

- d) The visitor experience is not compromised through overcrowding and where other adverse effects can be managed.
- e) New proposals for travellers' accommodation should be considered in accordance with Chapter 9 of the General Policy for National Parks 2005; however, in general it is considered that there is adequate travellers' accommodation provided within Fiordland National Park or at nearby locations; and
- f) Preference should be given to any facility development that utilises previously modified sites and provides new opportunities for Fiordland National Park visitors, but is still in keeping with the national park setting.