Sterling Highway MP 45-60 Project



WELCOME

CULTURAL RESOURCES MITIGATION UPDATE

Wednesday, October 14, 2026

5:00 to 7:00 p.m.

The Sterling Highway Milepost (MP) 45-60 project (Project) is centered in the unceded territories of the Dena'ina people. The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) acknowledge the sovereign Indigenous communities that have called this area home for thousands of years and appreciates their engagement in and support of the cultural resources identification, documentation, and preservation activities within the project area. Please note, due to the sensitive nature of cultural resource sites, the Project team is not able to share detailed information about—or locations of—archaeological finds. **DOT&PF would especially like to thank the Kenaitze Indian Tribe for their contributions to this effort.**

Meeting Purpose

To provide an update on mitigation activities specific to the Project's cultural resources program.

Cultural resource site location and other confidential site information is restricted in order to protect sites from unauthorized disturbance under Alaska state law (AS 40.25.110) and under the federal Freedom of Information Act (PL 89-554). The restriction of cultural site information is allowed by AS 40.25.120(a)(4), Alaska State Parks Policy and Procedure No. 50200, the National Historic Preservation Act (PL 89-665, 16 U.S.C. 470), and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (PL 96-95).

The environmental review, consultation, and other actions required by applicable federal environmental laws for this Project are being, or have been, carried out by DOT&PF pursuant to 23 U.S. Code 327 and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) dated April 13, 2023, and executed by FHWA and DOT&PF.

Sterling Highway MP 45-60 Project

We respectfully acknowledge the Kahtnuht'ana and other Dena'ina Peoples on whose traditional lands we reside. We honor the Kahtnuht'ana and other Dena'ina Peoples who have and continue to be stewards of Alaska's air, lands and waters from time immemorial, the Elders who lived here before, the Dena'ina People of today, and future generations to come.

Thank you for participating in today's meeting.

Background

Human settlement in the Project area dates back more than 10,000 years.

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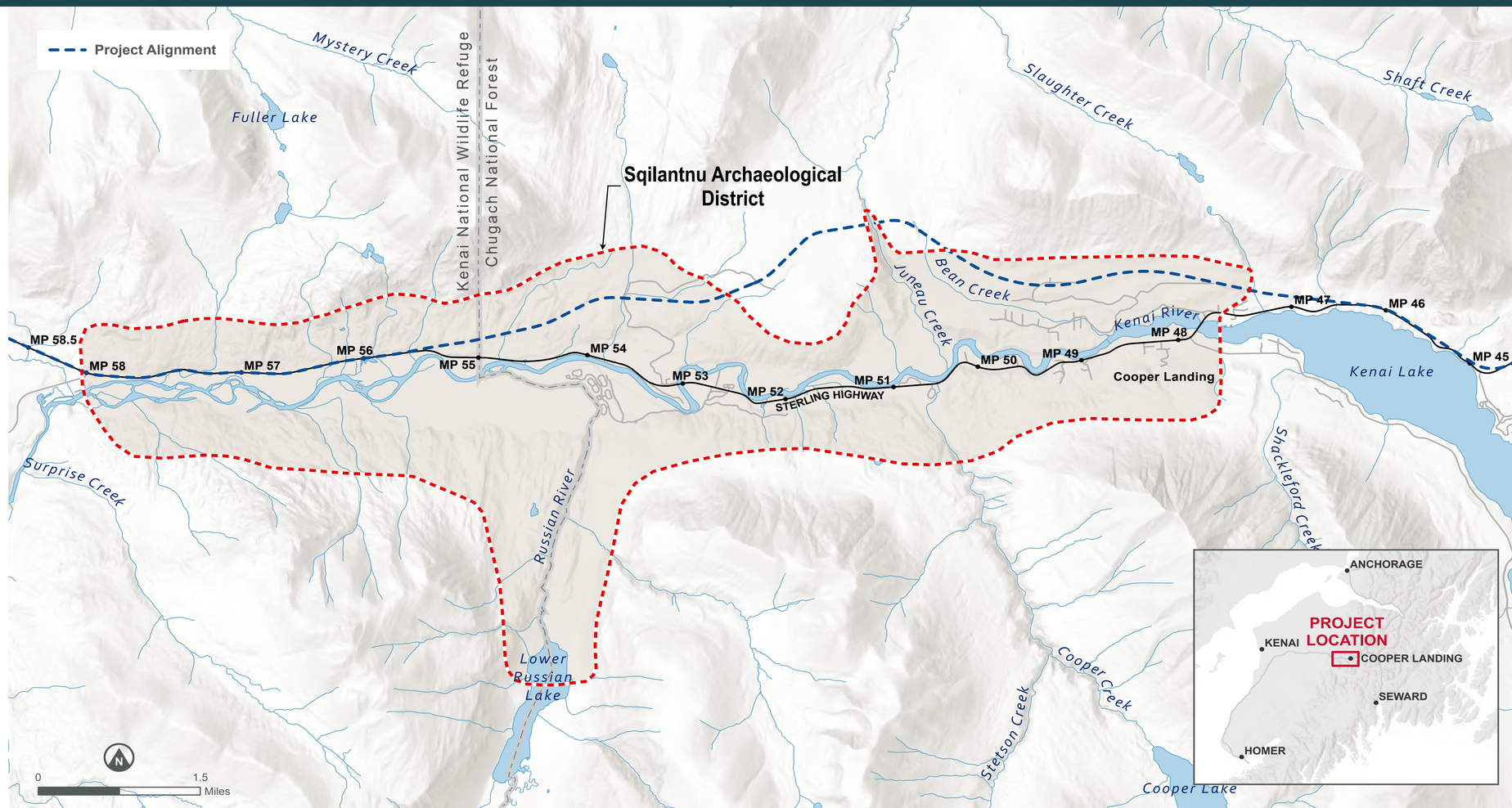
Consulting Parties

As part of the Project's development during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act process, DOT&PF entered into a Programmatic Agreement with the Alaska State Historic Preservation Officer, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Cook Inlet Region, Inc. (CIRI), the Kenaitze Indian Tribe, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to mitigate adverse effects on historic properties due to the Project's construction.

Archaeological District

Archaeologists and Tribal observers have been working since 2019 to inventory the Sqilantnu Archaeological District and define site boundaries in order to recover, document, and preserve pre-historic and historic sites and features important to the region's history.

Ten of the 14.6 miles of the new Sterling Highway (the Juneau Creek Alignment) are new road construction. The alignment runs north of Cooper Landing and the Kenai River, climbing the hillside and crossing Juneau Creek Canyon with a new bridge south of Juneau Creek Falls. It crosses Mystery Creek Wilderness in the Kenai National Wilderness Refuge and rejoins the existing highway at about MP 56. The new corridor includes one large bridge spanning the Juneau Creek Canyon. The Project also reconstructs 4 miles of the existing highway.



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STATE OF ALASKA

Project Mitigation Efforts

Environmental laws require that federally funded or permitted projects identify adverse effects and find ways to avoid or minimize those impacts to historic properties. Historic properties are a specific subset of cultural resources (objects, structures, buildings, sites, and districts) that are determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (National Register). Adverse effects are those that diminish characteristics qualifying a property for inclusion in the National Register. Historic properties are non-renewable resources and disturbing or destroying these resources removes important context that helps tell the story of human habitation.

Mitigation for adverse effects to historic properties is developed through consultation among the lead federal agency, Tribes, the State Historic Preservation Office, and other consulting parties. For this project, mitigation was outlined in a Programmatic Agreement.

The Project's PA specifically spells out the following mitigation activities:

- Archaeological survey and identification of historic properties
- Avoidance of historic properties, if feasible
- Construction monitoring by a qualified archaeologist and Tribal observer
- Recovering and testing data
- Reporting and data analysis
- Digitizing Kenaitze Indian Tribe Oral Histories
- Publicizing findings in a scientific journal and educational booklet
- Nomination of the Sqilantnu Archaeological District to the National Register
- Installing interpretive signage

Starting in 2019 and in compliance with federal requirements, Project archaeologists have been on site to document archaeological and physical materials in the Project area dating from pre-history through today, including archaeological finds and historic structures.



Archaeologists and Tribal Observers working along the Sterling Highway.



Archaeologists comparing notes while documenting a soil profile.

2,154 Acres surveyed

130 Professional archaeologists since 2019 *(approximately 65 Alaska-based)*

12 Tribal observers

132,000 Hours worked

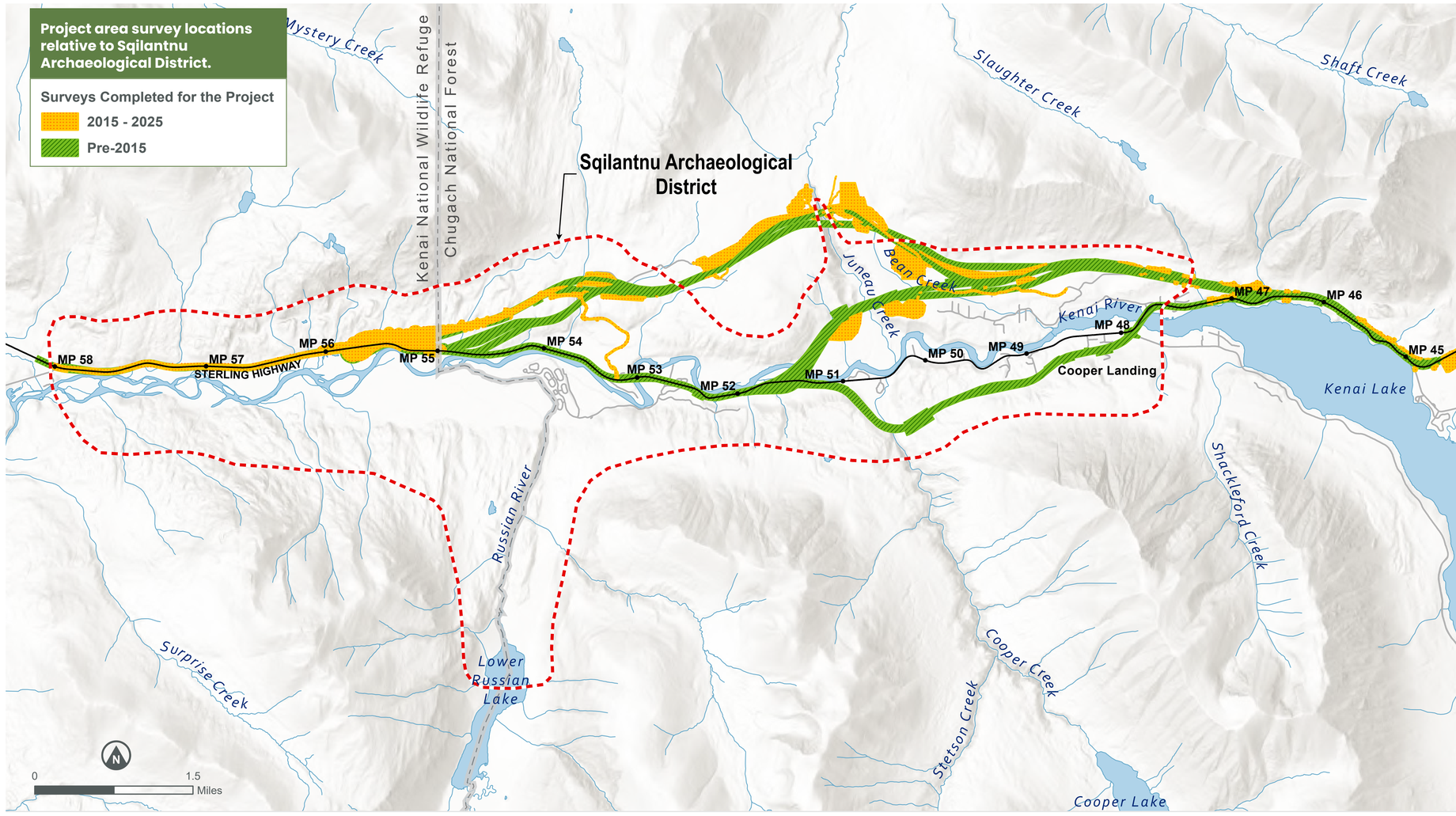
Field Surveys

On-the-ground field surveys identify previously undocumented historic properties and support mitigation of effects by Project activities.

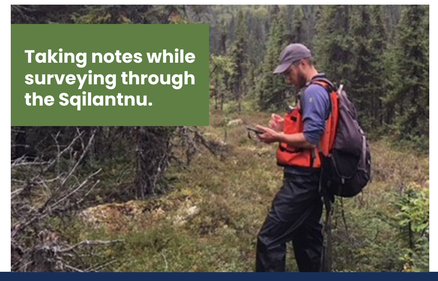
Since the Project's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was published in 2018, field surveys have identified new historic properties and the Project footprint has been refined, in part, to further avoid or minimize impacts to these cultural resources. **The current footprint directly impacts approximately 4 acres of 21 historic properties.**

Historic Properties identified include:

- Prehistoric archaeological sites
- Prospect pits
- Homestead sites like the Rhode Cabin
- Historic trails




Documenting a trail.


Taking notes while surveying through the Sqilantnu.



Maxwell coffee can from the 1960s.


Shovel test while conducting a pedestrian survey.

Tribal Involvement

The Project is located on the traditional lands of the Kenaitze Indian Tribe (KIT). KIT has been part of the Project since the planning stages, through alignment decisions and design. We are invested in protecting cultural resources within the Sqilantnu Archaeological District.

KIT was actively engaged in the development of—and is a signatory on—the Project's Programmatic Agreement. Representatives helped identify mitigation measures, shaped requirements for Tribal observers, and are active participants in cultural resources efforts today.

Since 2021, KIT Tribal observers have worked directly with Project archaeologists during construction monitoring, data recovery and excavation, field surveys and reporting to supplement technical expertise with local Tribal and cultural knowledge. KIT continues to play a pivotal role in the ongoing consultation and implementation of mitigation measures for the Project's PA.



Ruby Wiloya-Williams (far right), Dena'ina Cultural Center Manger, working alongside archaeologists during data recovery.



Observer, Mary Bethany Coghill, conferring with HDR Assistant Field Director, Elliot Hubbard.



Participants in KIT's Susten Archaeology Camp visit the project site.

Construction Monitoring

Professional Archaeologists and Tribal Observers

While many of the sites and sensitive areas have been identified, we are always learning more.

During construction in culturally sensitive areas, professional archaeologists working with Tribal observers, monitor the earthmoving activities to make sure equipment does not inadvertently damage something that has not already been identified and mitigated through documentation, recovery, or other action.

Construction monitors also work directly with construction workers and other Project team members, through training and education, to emphasize the importance of the area both culturally and historically. **Everyone on the team is encouraged to reach out to archaeologists with questions or concerns about identification and preservation of potentially important findings.**



Archaeological monitors and Tribal observers work directly with construction works and other.

Dena’ina Oral Histories Digitization Project

Cultural artifacts only tell part of the story; they need the voices of the people to fill in details and provide deeper understanding.

Kenaitze Indian Tribe (KIT) is working to collect, translate, and preserve Kenaitze oral histories in a digital format and is currently transcribing and digitizing existing interviews.

KIT plans to develop a public website with the full catalog of published documentation and selected samples of digitized materials*.

**Some information may be redacted from public documents due to its sensitive nature.*

“As Dena’ina people, we have been part of this land for time immemorial. Our oral history says that we are the original stewards of this land.”

“We advocate for the appropriate removal and mitigation of the sites that have been documented in this area that will be impacted by the projects’ footprint. Through working with CIRI, the Kenaitze Indian Tribe has taken the role and responsibility of monitoring and documenting the work being done through the project.”

“Dena’ina people live, gather, and travel through this area and have for thousands of years, to support the Kenaitze Tribe’s mission to assure that the Kahtnuht’ana Dena’ina thrive forever.”

Data Recovery

Discovery & Documentation

Data—including pre-historic and historic artifacts, fire-cracked rocks and soil samples, surface features, cache pits, and structures—tell a story about the people who lived in the Project area, when they lived there, and what the landscape looked like at that time. The Project's cultural resource team documents and records those findings in detail for present and future generations.

Data excavation and recovery have been ongoing since 2021, and each year Project archaeologists prepare an annual report on the progress and implementation of the cultural resources program.

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Data recovery involves the close inspection and careful documentation of buried resources.



Archaeologists must carefully map the excavation plan for each site.

450 **Excavation units dug** *(1 meter by 1 meter units)*

1,698 **Shovel tests dug** *(50 cm by 50 cm units)*

6 **Professional posters/ presentations**

14 **Interim and annual data recovery reports**

Preservation

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Sharing What's Learned

Field notes, photographs, and artifacts will be cataloged and transferred to the University of Alaska Museum of the North in Fairbanks for preservation, potential display, and educational purposes following completion of all data recovery.



Taking soil samples from an excavation unit.



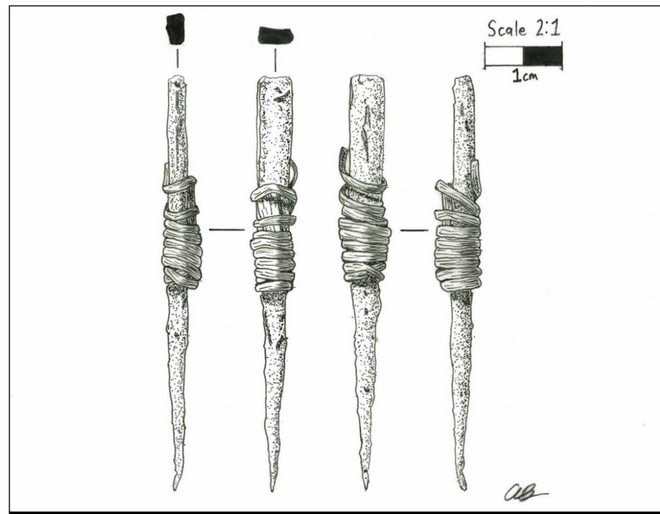
Data recovery excavation plan for a site in Sqilantnu.

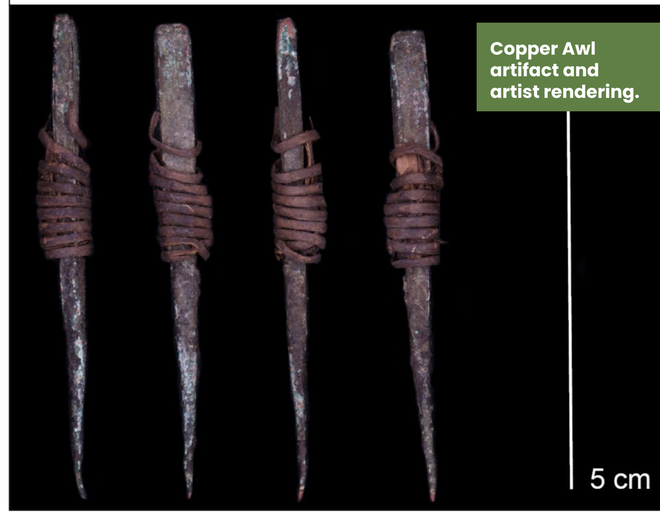


Archaeologists uncovering a birch bark lining in an excavation unit.



Subsample of microblade assemblage showing nearly complete, proximal, medial, and distal micro-blade fragments of various materials.

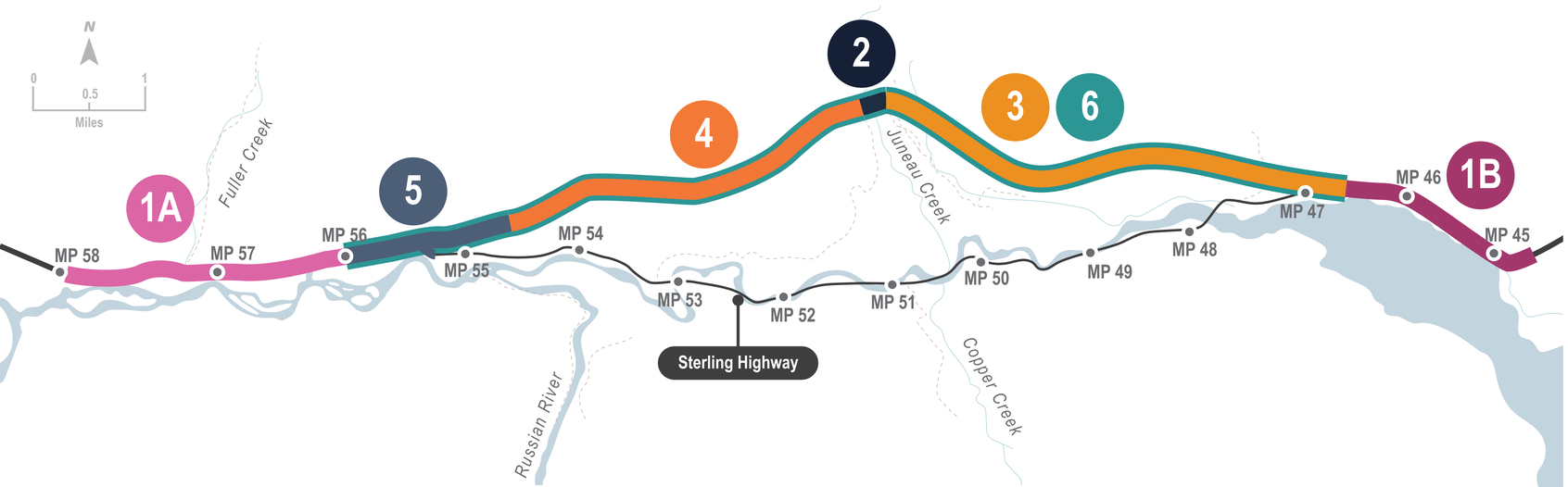


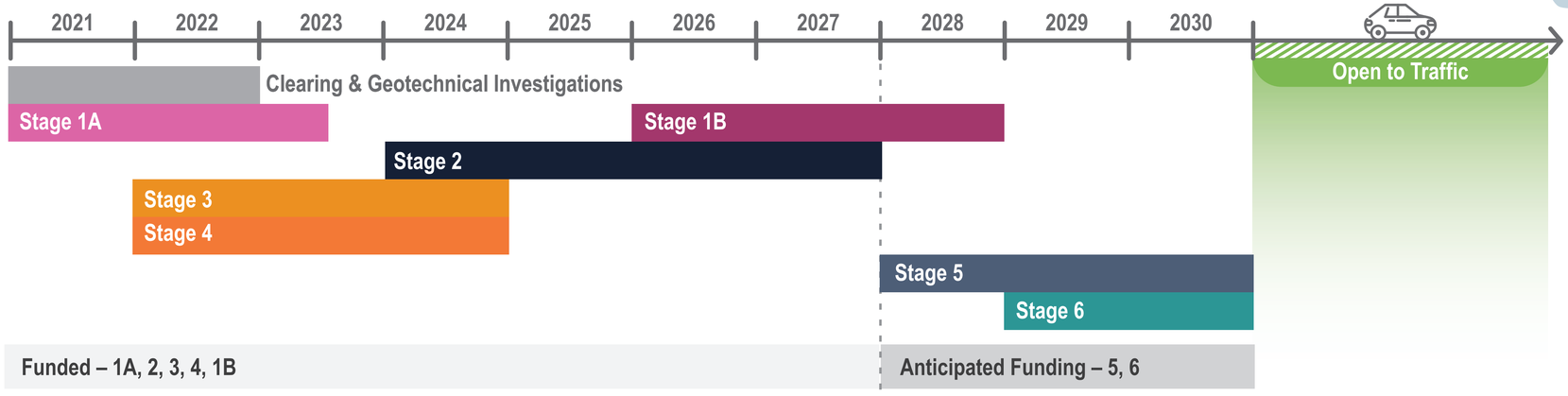


Copper Awl artifact and artist rendering.

Planned Activities for 2027 and Beyond

Phasing Schedule





Cultural resources monitoring, research, documentation, and data recovery will occur throughout the Project's construction. Other planned activities outlined in the Programmatic Agreement include:

- **Additional field surveys** if project footprint changes
- **A professional publication** compiling past and current research on the Sqilantnu District, to be published in a scientific journal
- **An educational booklet** on the Sqilantnu Archaeological District
- **A nomination** for the Sqilantnu Archaeological District to the National Register for Historic Places
- **Interpretive signs** in multiple locations along the project corridor.

Collection and identification of artifacts are only part of the story. Research may be able to answer deeper questions about the lives of the people who lived on the upper Kenai Peninsula since time immemorial. **What questions would you like to see answered based on the collected data?**

What Are YOUR Questions?

Archaeological data helps fill in gaps about what we know about those who came before us. It can also lead to more questions that need more research to answer.

What questions do YOU have that archaeological data and research might answer?

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Place a sticky note with your question here:

