

Section 6

National Heritage Area

This section outlines why Palmer should seek to achieve National Heritage Area designation. It explains why Palmer is a strong candidate, the benefits that such status can bring to the area, and identifies the critical steps the community needs to take in order to become a national heritage area.

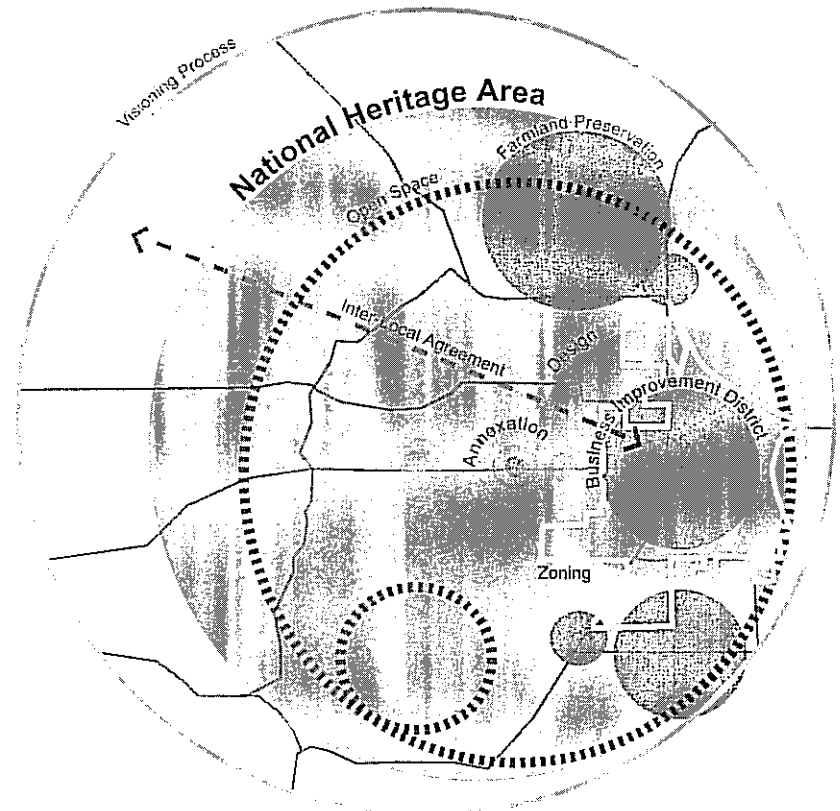
The community of Palmer is passionate about its historic, cultural, natural, and scenic resources. Organizations such as the Colony Farm Project, the Historic Society, and the Friends of Mat-Su have successfully taken steps to interpret and preserve many features of Palmer's unique landscape. These individual efforts have made a meaningful impact; yet, if these organizations focused their energies towards a common vision, the result could provide a more coherent and efficient approach towards the development and treatment of the landscape. A possible tactic to achieve this focus is by creating a Heritage Area.

Related Working Goals

Shape the character and channel the direction of growth into city limits in order to maintain and enhance Palmer's working rural landscape and small-town identity.

Enhance Palmer's social and economic vitality by promoting downtown commercial growth and community development.

Identify and prioritize farmland facing development pressure and establish mechanisms to preserve identified farmland.



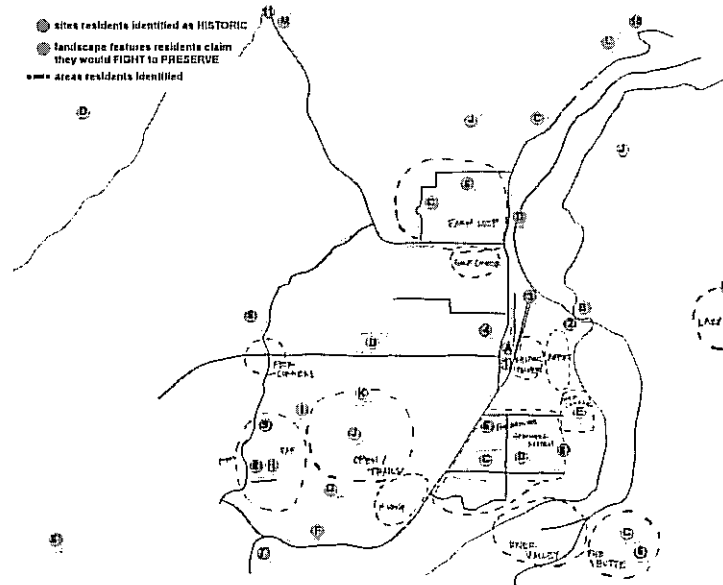
Recommendation

Encourage and facilitate community groups to promote Palmer as a National Heritage Area to preserve the area's historic and rural character.

A National Heritage Area (NHA) is a place that is designated by the United States Congress as being nationally distinctive. It is an area where the natural, historical, scenic and cultural resources remain cohesive and tell a story of national significance. In order to preserve the defining landscape NHAs adopt a strategy that encourages residents, government agencies, non-profit groups and private partners to collaboratively plan and implement programs that recognize the value of their surroundings. Heritage areas seek short and long-term solutions to conservation and development challenges by fostering local partnerships among regional stakeholders. In essence, the NHA process recognizes that the people who live on the land are uniquely qualified to protect and interpret it. It is a process that encourages "citizens, local businesses, organizations, and governments to foster a greater sense of community, to reward community pride, and to care for their land and culture." Source: Judy Hart, former director of NHA program

Ten criteria: Why Palmer is a strong candidate for Heritage Area designation

Although no legislative criteria exist, the NHA website lists ten guidelines for determining whether an area contains the resources that make a region worthy of national recognition. These guidelines are listed below in italics and are accompanied with brief explanations as to why and how Palmer is such a strong candidate.



Green dots represent sites Palmer residents identify as historic, while pink dots represent site Palmer residents said they would fight to preserve. Dashed circles encircle areas Palmer residents identified in the landscape.

"A National Heritage Area is a place designated by Congress where natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage Areas representative of the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in them. Continued use of National Heritage Areas by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscapes enhances their Significance."

Source: National Park Service website



1. *An area has an assemblage of natural, historic, or cultural resources that together represent distinctive aspects of American heritage worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use, and are best managed as an assemblage through partnerships among public and private entities, and by combining diverse and often noncontiguous resources and active communities.*

- Created as the Matanuska Colony Project in 1935 under FDR's New Deal Administration, Palmer stands testament to America's post-depression farming community that fought to survive the 1930's drought that swept across the mid-west plains. The original town center is the most wholly intact American colony project remaining.
- The homesteaders that farmed the valley prior to and through the arrival of the colony project add another layer not only to the valley's agricultural tradition, but demonstrate as well the process of populating Alaska. As an organized effort, the colony project was the boost in population that proved that Alaska was a livable frontier and would continue to be settled.
- Palmer's entire community is passionate about aspects of the landscape integral to its unique identity - farmland, recreation, preservation, interpretation of the town and its people's history.
- Interests and concerns expressed by diverse groups can be better focused and organized by this strategy to achieve common goals.
- Palmer's location in the glacial, fertile Matanuska Valley affords the town commanding views of the surrounding mountain ranges and a rich agricultural tradition still upheld by original homestead and colony farms.

What an NHA is and what it is not

A Heritage Area is committed to preserving local culture, tradition, and way of life.

A Heritage Area strives to make the landscape more accessible to both residents and visitors.

A Heritage Area does NOT own any land – land stays in private ownership.

A Heritage Area fosters local economic development.

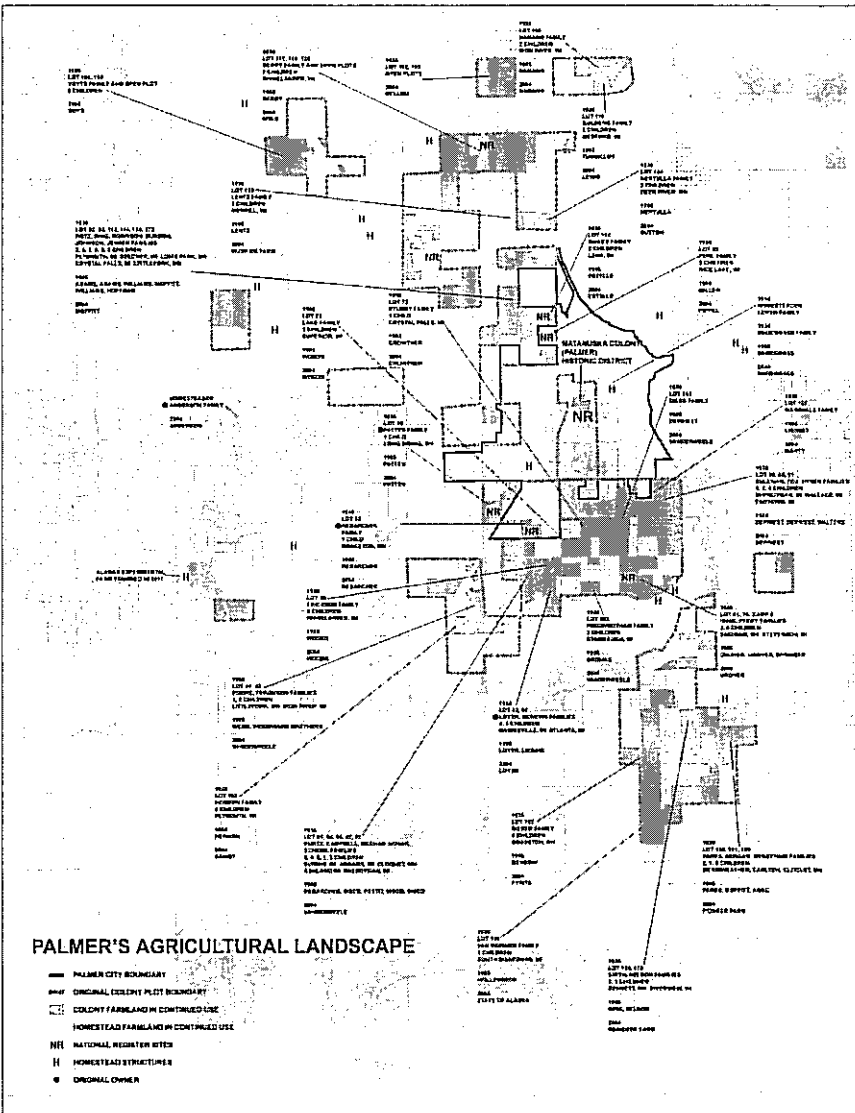
A Heritage Area is an organizing and focusing strategy for a community.

A Heritage Area is managed by private local non-profit group, NOT the National Park Service.

A Heritage Area has a theme that is intertwined with geography, the landscape, and how it has been developed and tells that story.

2. *The area reflects traditions, customs, beliefs, and folk life that are a valuable part of the national story.*

- America's pioneer spirit of the west is well told by the homesteaders and the 200 families that moved west from Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin to farm in Alaska – still considered the last frontier. Palmer's agricultural roots have continued to shape the region's economy, land development,



This map shows homestead-era farmlands (green) and Colony farms (in blue) still in agricultural use. Text indicates original and contemporary owners' names.

and have made a name for the town with giant vegetables.

3. The area provides outstanding opportunities to conserve natural, cultural, historic, and/or scenic features.

- The current farmland still reflects the patterns of the original homestead and colony farms. Furthermore, generations of homesteaders and colonists continue to tell the story.
- The original town center is a national register historic district, soon to be receive National Monument status, and serves as a core area to the valley's history.
- The Crevasse Moraine tells a geologic tale and it the only remaining esker kettle formation in the valley. The braided Matanuska River is a strikingly dominant feature in Palmer's landscape and could be utilized as an amenity. The surrounding mountain ranges provide amazing views and recreational opportunities.
- The Glenn Highway is already a National Scenic Byway, cited for its historic, cultural, and scenic character. The byway is a great signifier to the value of the landscape; it is a strong asset towards heritage area nomination.

4. The area provides outstanding recreational and educational opportunities.

- Opportunities for educational enrichment abound from the colony history in the original homesteaders' stories, the "New Deal colonists'" stories, the agricultural tradition, and how this history is reflected in the mentality of the Fiftieth state.
- The region offers nearby recreational opportunities including Bodenbergs Butte, Hatcher's Pass, Lazy Mountain, and the



glacial geography of the Crevasse Moraine.

5. Resources important to the identified theme or themes of the area retain a degree of integrity capable of supporting interpretation.

- As the most intact New Deal colony project, the town has many people and resources that already interpret its history and lend true integrity to the narrative, as many of these residents experienced it.
- The past and the present intermingle in Palmer's agricultural landscape, creating a tangible and potent story.

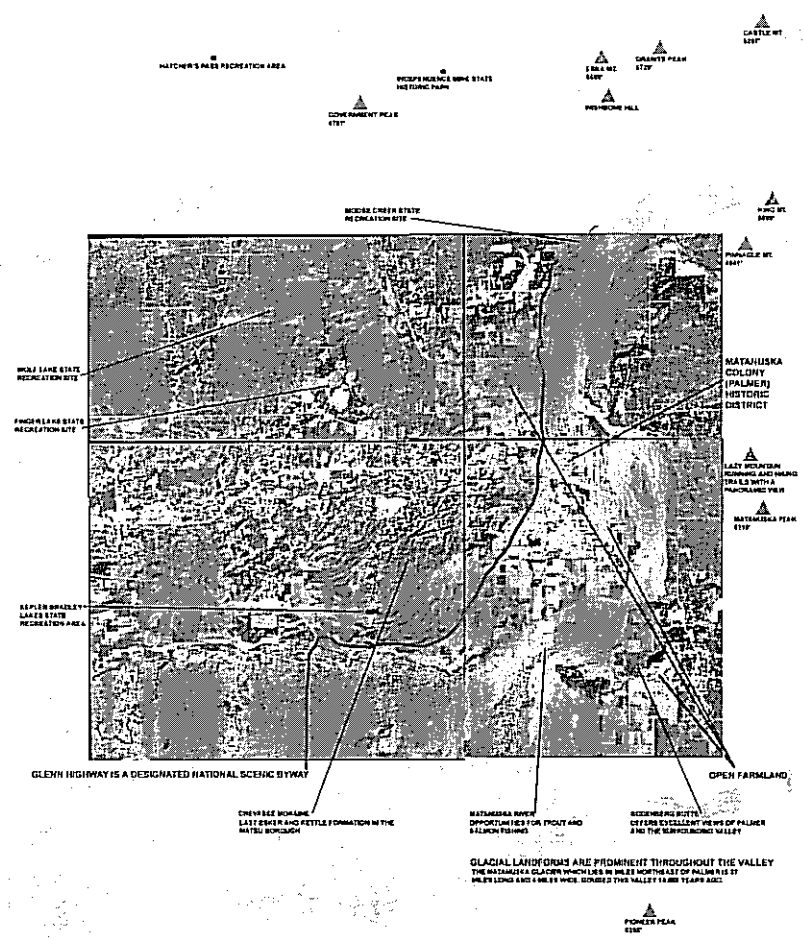
6. Residents, business interests, non-profit organizations, and governments within the proposed area are involved in the planning, have developed a conceptual financial plan that outlines the roles for all participants including the federal government, and have demonstrated support for designation of the area.

- Interest groups to link: Mat-Su Borough cultural resources; Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center; Colony Farm Project at Rebarchek Farm; Colony House Museum; Historical Society; The Grange; Musk Ox Farm, and others.

7. The proposed management entity and units of government supporting the designation are willing to commit to working in partnership to develop the heritage area.

- The collaborative nature of this approach is key and would have to be embraced if the proposed idea garners interest.

8. The proposal is consistent with continued economic activity in



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the area.

- The town of Palmer is in the midst of a great effort to enhance its economic core by minimizing decentralized commercial growth; this consideration is in tandem with efforts to preserve the rural character of Palmer.
- Heritage Area status can be a symbiotic relationship between pride in community and the cultural and agricultural tourism that can result from the nomination.

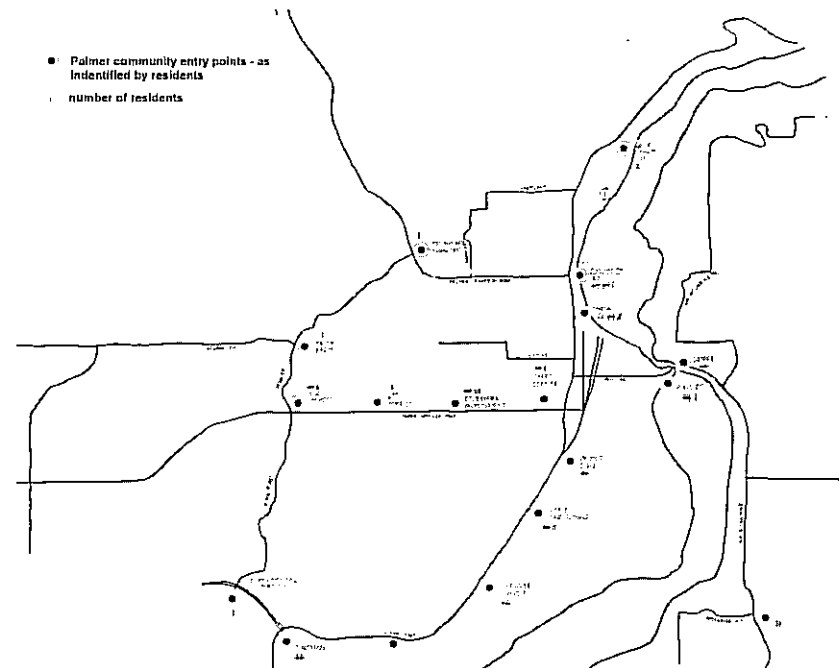
9. A conceptual boundary map is supported by the public.

- Residents created a conceptual boundary map in a community meeting with University of Washington students, which illustrated that Palmer is considered home by many more than solely city residents.
- This boundary covers an area that is much larger than the actual city limits and shows that a larger community has a vested interest in the future of Palmer.
- The boundary reflects the geography of the original homestead and colony farms.

10. The management entity proposed to plan and implement the project is described.

- The idea is yet to be proposed to interested community members.

Map, upper right: Palmer community entry points, as identified by residents



National Register sites in the Palmer area

- Bailey Colony Farm also known as Estelle Farm
- Berry House also known as NOLS
- Cunningham Hall
- Herried House also known as Grow House
- Puhl House also known as Bacon House
- Rebarchek Colony Farm
- Matanuska Colony Community Center also known as Palmer Historic District
- Palmer Depot
- Patten Colony Farm
- Everglenn Hotel
- Independence Mines also known as Wasilla Mining Co.
- United Protestant Church also known as The Church of a Thousand Trees



Benefits of a NHA

While many of the benefits of designation are intangible, listed below are some of the more concrete advantages to NHA designation along with examples of areas with NHA status. Further information regarding these examples can be found through the individual NHA websites, which are listed in the contacts and reference box at the end of this section.

Telling the story

NHA designation provides a focus where the story of people and the land can live in the past, present, and future. The people of Palmer express their passion for the heritage of the land – the NHA strategy gives organization to ensure this story is told and remains intact for future generations. The status is grounded in community pride. For example, the Rivers of Steel NHA in Pittsburgh tells the story of how the mud flats at the meeting of three navigable rivers provided a convenient place to build early steel mills, yet also served as the demise of the industry in the area, as there was no room for expansion.

A unifying strategy

Many Palmer residents show that they have shared values though they often come to them from different perspectives. As a third party, the organization holds the ability to bridge divides through common interests. For example, Ohio and Erie Canal National Heritage corridor tells the story of the canal that opened the frontier to settle Ohio and provided settlers with a reliable form of transport. The community itself is rediscovering its history that in turn has stimulated a sense of pride and economic development.

Private land ownership

A NHA does not involve new construction or appropriations, but rather a way of looking at the landscape in a different way. The status does not change land ownership or use. For example, Silos and Smokestacks NHA includes 37 counties, 40% of Iowa, yet does not own any of this land, not even the building they work from. Counties, businesses, and individuals are voluntary participants, the integrity of the land is not compromised.

Local management

NHA are not run by the National Park Service. The area is initiated and managed by local entities that work in tandem with the Park Service to achieve their goals. For example, Silos and Smokestacks has set up partner programs that include businesses such as agribusiness, private farms, parks, inn's, and museums. The organization provides interpretive expertise and sets up incentive matching funds programs for their partners. Many Western heritage areas, such as Utah's Bear River Heritage Area, have begun or stayed at a state level designation, an approach that could nurture more community buy-in as the entire management structure is held within the state.

Leverage for funding

Though the National Park Service does not provide funding, the status itself can be used to obtain funding appropriated by Congress up to \$10 million. NHA's can also look to Congress for federal money, which often comes in the form of matching funds. The funding may often be earmarked for economic improvement through the NHA, in turn boosting Palmer's economy. For example,

Quinnebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor has initiated a research project to brand local food products. The Corridor awarded 17 grants (\$100,000) to preserve cultural and natural resources that were matched by over \$500,000. Augusta Canal NHA secured \$1.8 million dollars to complete the construction of an interpretive exhibit center, and Hudson Valley NHA received a \$1 million dollar grant for the development of Hudson River greenway water trail. Source: The NPS 2004 Budget Justifications

Local economic development

The NHA is only as strong as its support from the community. The designation can serve as a vehicle for keeping money local – a powerful, sustainable system. Furthermore, tourism can be a catalyst to or a positive offshoot of heritage area status. The cultural and agricultural tourism is only generated as a direct reflection of the care and pride of the community in itself. The local community is the first to benefit from the incoming tourism. For example, Silos and Smokestacks was started by business owners who knew their local economy need augmentation. This motivation took form in a cultural and agricultural narrative that boosted morale and the economy through tourism. A farm stay helps a small farmer with extra income, allowing them to continue to live on the farm, while giving visitors a taste of Palmer's agricultural heritage.

National Park Service expertise

NPS offers heritage areas technical assistance and interpretive expertise to help the area tell its story. Education is a park service primary objective and guides their role in distinct heritage areas.

Nationwide recognition

National Heritage Area status would give the Palmer community

well-deserved recognition on a national level – with that comes many possibilities.

Critical steps for becoming a NHA

1. A person or organization makes a conscious effort to start a table discussion regarding the vision for the cultural, historical, and natural landscape of Palmer.
 - It is recommended that this process includes a round table of experts, knowledgeable in the resources and stories of Palmer.
 - The process is different from other planning efforts as it fuses residents' ideas of the future of the region with the process of how to get to that point.
2. A suitability/feasibility study is completed.
 - In many cases the feasibility study is a part of the organizing influence that begins the process.
 - The NHA website recommends that the study involves eight steps. It also provides an outline of a sample report.
3. Funding for this study can be sought from the state.
 - Funding can be sought for the initial feasibility study that describes the theme, assets, management, and interpretive plan. This funding may come at a state or federal level, or from within the community since the project will be generated and supported locally.
- 4a. Public involvement must be exhibited in the suitability/ feasibility



study.

- While the activities involved can be arduous and time consuming, the report creates strong local commitment to the conservation of the community's heritage and unique resources, resulting in a vital thriving community
- The level of public engagement must be stronger than that involved in the designation process of an SRS or a NPS unit.
- An example of public involvement includes giving disposable cameras to 50 residents and asking them to record what they like about their community, wish to preserve and what they wish to reduce, eliminate or restrict.

4b. Widespread public support is demonstrated among heritage area residents.

- Workshops, charrettes, handouts and websites are opportunities for public assistance in identification of regional resources, potential heritage themes, and creating a vision for the area.

4c. Commitment to the proposal from the appropriate players – local government, industry, private business, and non-profit organizations, in addition to the local citizenry – must be evident.

- The formation of a local organization that promotes NHA designation, which has the support of local government, businesses and organizations, is able to increase public involvement and acceptance.

References and Information

www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas

Brenda Barrett 202.354.2222 national coordinator of Heritage Areas

Suzanne Copping 202.354.2221 program assistant

www.silosandsmokestacks.org

Don Short 319.234.4567 executive director

www.riversofsteel.com

412.464.4020

www.bearriverheritage.com

www.ohioeriecanal.org

303.657.2982

www.augustacanal.com

706.823.0440

www.thelastgreenvalley.org

860.963.7226

www.hudsonrivervalley.com

518.473.3835

www.dnr.state.ak.us/parks/oha/shpo/shpo.htm

Judith Bittner 907.269.8721 state historic preservation officer

5. The Department of Interior presents findings and makes recommendations to Congress. Congress authorizes National Heritage Area designation. A management entity is established with a primary focus on producing a Management Plan for the newly designated NHA.

- The plan is a blueprint for action
- The plan must be completed within a five-year time frame, thus maintaining the interest and momentum generated by the feasibility study.
- The NPS supports NHA's with funding, training, technical assistance, and recognition
- NHA status preserves natural, historic, scenic and cultural resources.
- NHA status brings local, personal, and economically sustainable benefits.

