

Planning and Environment Linkages Program

**Annual Report
Fiscal Year
2009**



Prepared for:
Offices of Planning and Project Development and Environmental Review
Federal Highway Administration
U.S. Department of Transportation



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Acknowledgments

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center (Volpe Center), in Cambridge, Massachusetts, prepared this report for the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Office of Planning, Environment, and Realty. Gina Barberio leads the Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) team at the Volpe Center, which consists of Rachael Barolsky, Anna Biton, and Gina Filosa.

This research has been funded by the Federal Highway Administration's Office of Planning, Environment and Realty's Surface Transportation Environment and Planning Cooperative Research Program (STEP).

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I. Introduction

This report highlights the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) program activities for Fiscal Year 2009 (FY09). The PEL program's purpose is to provide transportation agencies with tools and resources that introduce environmental considerations early in planning, with the goal of developing a more seamless decision-making process that minimizes duplication of effort, promotes environmental stewardship, and reduces delays in project implementation.

Through the PEL initiative, FHWA provides state and local transportation and resource agencies with guidelines, decision-making strategies, analytical tools, and technical assistance to link transportation planning and environmental planning and review processes.

In FY09, FHWA set three implementation objectives for PEL:

1. *Technical assistance and training:* Advancing the adoption of PEL initiatives nationwide through focused state or regional technical assistance.
2. *Outreach and communication:* Increasing the development and dissemination of resources for stakeholders to use in understanding and implementing PEL activities.
3. *Research:* Expanding the focus of PEL to include other considerations in planning and environment.

This FY09 Annual Report provides information on:

- Background of PEL program
- FY09 PEL technical assistance and training activities
- FY09 PEL outreach and communication activities
- FY09 PEL research activities
- PEL vision for FY10 and FY11

II. Background

In 2006, the FHWA Office of Planning and Office of Project Development and Environmental Review developed the PEL program as an umbrella approach to help agencies integrate transportation and environmental planning processes and to streamline their project-development and environmental review processes. The early focus of the PEL program was on helping state and local agencies link the planning and environmental review processes through technical assistance, guidance, and participation in Linking Planning and NEPA workshops. In recent years, the PEL program has expanded beyond the area of Linking Planning and NEPA, to promote a more integrated and collaborative approach to transportation decision-making process, from planning through project development, design and construction. Today the PEL program supports related U.S. DOT priorities, such as Eco-Logical, Context Sensitive Solutions, and Green Highways.

In FY09, FHWA continued to develop existing PEL initiatives and launched a number of new activities to encourage and assist state and local agencies in implementing the PEL approach.

*“This was one of the best informational web conferences I have participated in. Thanks!”
– Participant of PEL 101 Webcast*

III. Technical Assistance and Training

In FY09, FHWA advanced the adoption of PEL initiatives nationwide through the following focused workshops, trainings and peer exchanges.

Linking Conservation and Transportation Planning Workshops

In FY09, FHWA hosted the following four LCTP workshops:

1. Oregon DOT hosted a LCTP workshop on October 23, 2008 with area MPOs, Natural Resource Agencies, the Governor's Office, and FHWA. This one-day workshop focused on data coordination including identifying available data and data gaps.
2. The Pennsylvania Division Office of FHWA hosted a workshop on January 28 – 29, 2009 with PennDOT, MPOs/RPOs, resource agencies, and conservation groups. This 1.5 day event focused on how an integrated, ecological approach could be accomplished using existing conservation planning tools, as well as explored new or improved opportunities for data sharing and collaborative decision making.
3. The FHWA Nevada Division Office hosted a workshop in Reno, Nevada on May 18-20, 2009. The workshop focused on one corridor and had a diverse group of participants, including the Nevada DOT, non-governmental organizations, resource agencies and bicycle advocates.
4. The FHWA NY Division Office, in conjunction with the Binghamton Metropolitan Transportation Study and the New York State DOT, hosted a workshop on September 29-30, 2009. In addition to the hosts, the workshop was attended by MPOs, Federal and state resource agencies, and conservation groups.

Interagency PEL and Eco-Logical Working Group

The Interagency PEL and Eco-Logical Working Group supports outreach and training for transportation and resource agencies through three groups that support integrated planning, linking planning and NEPA, and Eco-Logical. During FY09, the working group completed the following activities:

Environmental Consultation Peer Exchange

On January 27, 2009, the Interagency Working Group on Planning Regulations Training for Resource Agencies hosted a peer exchange to discuss successful coordination among environmental resource agencies, State Departments of Transportation (DOTs), and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) during the transportation planning and project development processes. The purpose of the peer exchange was to: 1) showcase examples of how State DOTs and MPOs conduct consultations with resource agencies; and 2) identify approaches and notable practices that can best facilitate integration of transportation planning and the environmental review process, while fully meeting the consultation requirements of Section 6001 of SAFETEA-LU. Participants at the peer exchange included representatives from State DOTs, MPOs, environmental resource agencies, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; and related stakeholders. A report summarizing the results of the event, including lessons learned and recommendations for future activities was developed and is available at: http://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/integ/ipwg_peer.asp.

Research on Corridor and Subarea Studies

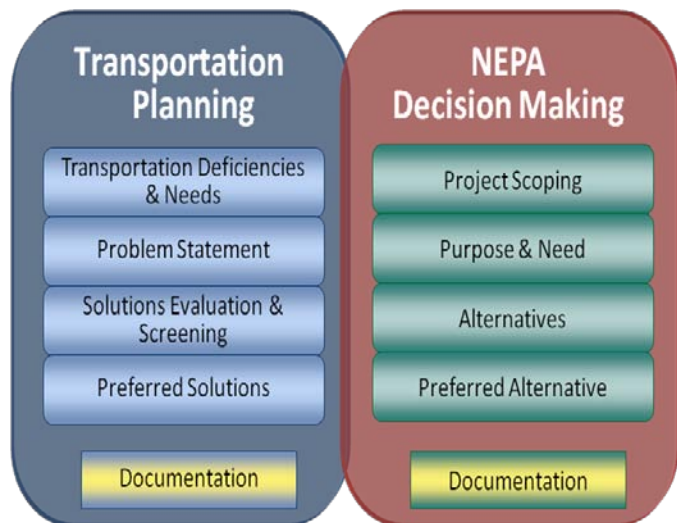
The Interagency Tiering, Corridor, and Subarea Studies Group identified effective corridor planning practices to highlight during a peer exchange that will be held in FY2010. This research is part of an ongoing effort to synthesize the current state of the practice and develop updated guidance on using planning studies to inform the NEPA process.

Presentation and paper on Eco-Logical at ICOET

FHWA and the USDOT Volpe Center co-authored a paper entitled *Eco-Logical: An Ecosystem Approach to Developing Transportation Infrastructure Projects in a Changing Environment*. The paper was developed as an output of the *Eco-Logical* grant program and of the Interagency Working Group. The paper was presented at the International Conference on Ecology and Transportation (ICOET) in Duluth, MN on September 17, 2009. The paper and presentation drew upon three specific case studies to understand how the *Eco-Logical* approach is working in practice. The presentation promoted *Eco-Logical* concepts, and presented early findings from the FHWA *Eco-Logical* grant program.

PEL 101 Webcast: The Tools for Adopting and Implementing a PEL Approach

In FY09, FHWA conducted three sessions of a webcast titled “PEL 101 Webcast: The Tools for Adopting and Implementing a PEL Approach” on June 23, July 27, and August 20, 2009. The purpose of the training was to help transportation professionals and resource agency practitioners to better understand, coordinate, and integrate planning and environmental linkages. The course included an overview of PEL, the associated benefits, and information and examples of a variety of tools and methods for implementing the PEL approach. The webcasts were attended by over 300 participants from 160 different agencies, including State DOTs, MPOs, FHWA Division Offices, Federal, state and local environmental agencies and organizations, and private consultant firms.



Innovative Uses of Remote Sensing and Spatial Information to Inform Corridor Planning and NEPA

The U.S. Department of Transportation, Research and Innovative Technology Administration (RITA) is concluding its sponsor of a study entitled Streamlining Transportation Corridors Planning Processes and Validating the Application of Commercial Remote Sensing and Spatial Information (CRS&SI) Technologies for Environmental Impact Assessments. The study includes conducting research in transportation corridor planning and related EIS processes aimed at validating new and innovative uses of CRS&SI technologies for delivering streamlining benefits to on-the-ground transportation projects. Validation was accomplished by comparing the results of new methods to results that have been achieved by traditional EIS approaches. To provide a test bed, a major interstate transportation project of national significance (I-69) was selected. When completed, the I-69 corridor will provide a vital transportation linkage between Canada and Mexico. The segment of independent utility (SIU) selected for this research effort was SIU 9 which includes I-69 and the new I-269 corridor around Memphis, TN, and northwest Mississippi. Partner research institutions were led by Mississippi State University and included the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Michigan Technical University. In addition, an advisory panel composed of national and state transportation and resource agencies, partnered and routinely convened to support this research effort. A final report is anticipated in the Spring 2010. For additional information, please visit (<http://www.ncrste.msstate.edu/>).

IV. Outreach and Communication

In FY09, FHWA delivered PEL program information to stakeholders through websites, conferences, and publications.

Website

FHWA developed the PEL website, <http://environment.fhwa.dot.gov/integ/index.asp>, as a comprehensive resource for transportation agencies and stakeholders to help them learn more about PEL and how to apply its concepts and tools locally, regionally, and statewide.

FHWA revised and reorganized several sections of the PEL website, in order to provide clearer and more coherent information and resources to transportation and environmental practitioners. One change was a revision of the Publications page, which included developing its own link on the left-side navigation bar, categorizing the publications, providing graphics of their title pages, and organizing them in reverse chronological order (most recent first). Another change was to the Effective Practices page, which involved categorizing the case studies into those related to long range planning, corridor planning, and linking planning and NEPA. Finally, the Implementation page was reorganized to provide more direct examples of how to implement PEL activities. There are four high-level categories of implementation activities, with sample actions for each and direct links to case studies in the Effective Practices section of the website. The Overview page was also updated to reflect these changes.

Number of Monthly Visits to the PEL Website in FY09

October	627
November	441
December	421
January	439
February	498
March	566
April	621
May	488
June	532
July	501
August	477
September	498

The chart above shows the monthly numbers of PEL website visits for FY09. These data track visits to the PEL Overview webpage only. As new content is added, it is important to track visits in order to better understand the website's value as an information resource.

PEL materials, news, and discussions were also posted to the Re:NEPA topic area "Transportation Planning and NEPA Linkages" to inform a wide audience of practitioners.

Conference Presentations

In FY09, FHWA promoted the PEL approach, and the tools and resources available to achieve integration of planning and environmental activities, through sessions and presentations at the following conferences:

- TRB 2009 summer meeting of the Committee on Environmental Analysis, Shepherdstown, WV, July 13-16, 2009.
- TRB Joint Summer Meeting: Forging Ahead in Uncertain Times, Seattle, Washington, July 19-22, 2009
- FHWA Planning, Environment, Air Quality, and Realty (PEAR) Conference, Phoenix, Arizona, August 31-Sept 3, 2009
 - "Integrating Planning Decisions in the NEPA Process"
 - "Environmental Mitigation for Plans and Projects"



Publications

In FY09, FHWA and the Volpe Center authored several articles that featured the PEL approach and related activities. The publications listed below reach thousands of subscribers, including Federal, state, local, and resource agencies; consultants; and academicians.

- FHWA *Successes in Stewardship* Newsletter, “FHWA Hosts Environmental Consultation Peer Exchange on Successful Coordination Practices”, April 2009
- FHWA *Successes in Stewardship* Newsletter, “FHWA/FTA Final Rule Update to Environmental Impact and Related Procedures”, May 2009

V. Research

The PEL program currently addresses a variety of considerations in integrating planning and environment, including aspects integral to the process, as well as specific tools often used in implementing PEL. In FY09, FHWA conducted research to expand upon the areas previously targeted by the program.

A Guide to Measuring Progress in Linking Transportation Planning and Environmental Analysis

FHWA and the Volpe Center developed a guide to assist State DOTs and MPOs in developing programs to measure progress toward linking transportation planning and environmental analysis. The guide outlines a framework for establishing measures that transportation agencies can utilize to develop their own measurement programs. To illustrate implementation of the framework, it provides an overall goal of linking transportation planning and environmental analysis and four sample objectives. For each objective, the guide highlights tips for developing strategies and setting targets, and suggested metrics for both output and outcome measures, as well as a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures.

VI. PEL Vision for Fiscal Year 2010-2011

During FY2010 and FY2011, FHWA’s efforts will focus on the following activities:

1. Technical Assistance and Training
 - a. Deliver at least eight LCTP workshops over a two year period.
 - b. Conduct three additional PEL 101 webcasts
 - c. Develop content for a web-based executive level version of the PEL 101 webcasts geared to FHWA Division Administrators and State DOT and MPO executives.
 - d. Develop content for a 201 training series that provides more in-depth and specific guidance on how to implement the PEL approach.
 - e. Develop training for resource agencies on the transportation planning regulations that highlight models of successful coordination among resource agencies and state DOTs and/or MPOs during the transportation planning process and through project development.
 - f. Conduct a peer exchange on using corridor planning to inform the NEPA process
 - g. Develop updated guidelines on how to use planning studies to better link the transportation planning and project development processes.
2. Outreach and Communication
 - a. Continue to provide up-to-date information on the PEL program and relevant materials through the PEL website
 - b. Present PEL products and deliverables at various professional conferences and meetings.
 - c. Develop quarterly “PEL updates” for existing newsletters and publications

3. Research

Activities may include:

- a. Defining the relationship between fiscal stewardship and PEL through guidelines and effective practices.
- b. Researching data and analysis tools that can support integrated planning and linking planning and NEPA activities
- c. Tracking long-term progress at select State DOTs and MPOs to link planning and NEPA through case studies at specific milestones
- d. Coordinating with related research programs, and conducting a research synthesis and gap analysis of past, current, and planned research