



Evaluating Montana's ITEEM: Successes and Lessons for Eco-Logical

The Problem: Piecemeal Mitigation and Limited Coordination

In the late 1990s, Montana, like many other States, performed most of its environmental mitigation for transportation infrastructure in a piecemeal, project-by-project manner with limited interagency coordination. This method of mitigation and transportation planning did not take a long-term approach to preserving Montana's large, intact environmental resources. In order to take advantage of vanishing conservation opportunities, Montana needed a process for approaching transportation-project development and delivery on an ecosystem scale. Such a process would require increased and improved interagency coordination to ensure higher-quality mitigation and the conservation of Montana's unique environmental resources.

The Solution: Create a Process to Consider Mitigation on an Ecosystem Scale

The Integrated Transportation and Ecological Enhancements for Montana (ITEEM) program was started in 2002 in response to Executive Order 13274, which called for environmental stewardship and streamlining of high-priority transportation projects. After the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) selected Highway 93 in Northwest Montana as a "priority corridor," executives from several of Montana's resource and regulatory agencies formed the ITEEM Interagency Review Team (IRT). The IRT aimed to foster collaboration among member agencies in order to help them make more environmentally sensitive transportation decisions. *(continued inside)*



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The process developed by ITEEM provides a step-by-step approach to coordinating agency planning in advance of project development within a defined geographic area or corridor. Developed with input from the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) *Eco-Logical* document, which puts forth the conceptual framework for integrating plans and data across agency and disciplinary boundaries and endorses ecosystem-based mitigation, the ITEEM process allows agency representatives to consider and prioritize opportunities for environmental mitigation on an ecosystem scale.

Results: A Collaborative Process Brings Initial Success in Improving Mitigation

By 2007, when the ITEEM process had been fully developed, projects along Highway 93 had advanced significantly through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, making it difficult to use Highway 93 as a location to pilot ITEEM. Instead, the IRT selected Highway 83, a resource-rich corridor to the northeast of Missoula, to test both the new ITEEM and the *Eco-Logical* approaches.

In 2010, FHWA decided to conduct a study of the ITEEM process and pilot in an effort to understand the successes and challenges faced while attempting to implement the *Eco-Logical* approach. The research team traveled to Montana to participate in the final Highway 83 ITEEM pilot meeting and to learn more about the ITEEM process and pilot from the agency participants and early leaders who had helped to develop ITEEM. The team uncovered a series of successes and lessons that demonstrate progress in improving agency coordination and shifting to an ecosystem-scale approach to transportation-project development and mitigation. These successes and lessons can help other agencies seeking to implement ecosystem-based decisionmaking as endorsed in *Eco-Logical*.

ITEEM Successes

Through the creation, implementation and piloting of ITEEM, the ITEEM participants demonstrated success at increasing project predictability, building and improving relationships among agencies, and strengthening environmental stewardship throughout the State.

1. ITEEM improved the predictability of project permitting, enhanced coordination among agencies, and streamlined environmental review by including mitigation, conservation, and interagency considerations in the scoping and planning processes.
 - *“We previously scoped, budgeted, and permitted, with mitigation often being an afterthought. Now, mitigation is part of the scoping and planning processes. We can provide our input, and they can include that upfront in scope and budget. It’s an environmental cost but not evil. It’s just a cost of doing business.”* — U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)
 - *“MDT wanted a predictable way to permit and authorize projects relative to environmental issues. Conditions attached to permits near the end of the project–design process made schedule compliance difficult and [resulted in] mitigation features that appeared out of sync with the project and the surrounding ecosystem. The ITEEM process had the possibility of affording us the opportunity to collaborate with our resource–agency partners on larger, more meaningful mitigation opportunities on a landscape level. The advanced coordination has the potential to streamline the environmental review and permitting process for our projects, thereby increasing predictability. We’re not there yet, but hopefully the ITEEM process is helping us get there.”* — Montana Department of Transportation (MDT)
2. ITEEM improved communication among agencies by clarifying misconceptions and assumptions.
 - *“ITEEM helped build more trust and credibility; it erased misconceptions.”* — FHWA
 - *“Relationships are built between people, not between agencies. ITEEM opened our eyes as to what was*

possible and took away assumptions about agencies.”
— USACE

3. Agencies gained a better understanding of each other’s constraints, needs, and missions by working together to create and implement ITEEM.
 - *“We got agencies with fundamentally different missions to do a good job of sharing concerns and issues and also of sharing basic resource and planning information.”* — U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
4. The ITEEM site visit helped all participating agencies to identify and understand concrete, ecosystem-scale opportunities for mitigation.
 - *“The field visit forced everyone to look at the corridor and talk about opportunities while staring at them. [That] opened so many eyes,”* — USACE
 - *“[During the field visit], we came to the realization that we are all interconnected.”* — USFS
5. Transportation-agency staff gained a greater appreciation of environmental concerns in Western Montana and of the role that mitigation and conservation play in addressing them.
 - *“U.S. 93 elevated FHWA’s awareness of the interaction between transportation and the environment — the U.S. 93 project [executed] many strategies on the roadway that are finding their way into other projects.”* — FHWA
6. ITEEM participants learned to view infrastructure and mitigation projects in ecosystem contexts, resulting in agencies being more comfortable with taking a longer-term perspective on environmental mitigation.
 - *“ITEEM has helped train people to think beyond simply near-term project actions.”* — FHWA



Lessons Learned

The following lessons are drawn from the ITEEM process but are valuable to agencies undertaking similar collaborative efforts that employ *Eco-Logical* principles.

1. Establish a joint vision for appropriate events or benchmarks that would trigger the use of ITEEM or a similar, collaborative streamlining process.
2. Establish a system for compensation or funding for early mitigation. Paying for mitigation from a pooled conservation fund or establishing a mechanism for infrastructure agencies to receive credit for early mitigation is critical to supporting environmental sustainability.
3. Encourage management within each agency to commit staff time and resources to the ITEEM effort.
4. Clarify expectations and roles of agencies and individuals at the start of each new ITEEM pilot. Ensuring that each agency's staff understands their responsibilities will help to keep projects moving smoothly through the planning and project delivery processes.
5. Develop internal mechanisms within each agency to familiarize new and existing staff with ITEEM's mission and activities as well as to maintain consistent agency involvement and support.
6. Use targeted-data-collection and integration activities to identify objectives, opportunities, and larger goals for the project corridor.

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Links to ITEEM Documents

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