

Planning and Environment Linkages Program

**Annual Report
Fiscal Year
2010**



Prepared for:
Offices of Planning and Project Development and Environmental Review
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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 2010 (FY10). The PEL program's purpose is to provide transportation agencies with tools and resources to introduce environmental considerations early in planning and to use documented planning information to inform the environmental review process. The goal of PEL is to develop 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 decision-making strategies, analytical tools, and technical assistance to link the transportation planning and environmental planning and review processes.

In FY10, FHWA focused on two primary avenues to promote 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.

This FY10 Annual Report provides information on:

- Background of PEL program
- FY10 PEL technical assistance and training activities
- FY10 PEL outreach and communication activities
- PEL vision for FY11 and FY12

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 the National Environmental Policy Act (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 FHWA priorities, such as Every Day Counts, Eco-Logical, Context Sensitive Solutions, and Green Highways.

In FY10, FHWA continued to develop existing PEL initiatives and launched a number of new activities to support state and local agencies in implementing the PEL approach.

III. Technical Assistance and Training

In FY10, FHWA advanced the adoption of PEL initiatives nationwide through the following focused workshops, trainings and peer exchanges.

Structured, Transparent, Accountable, Reproducible, Sustainable (STARS) Workshops

The STARS Workshops, which have replaced the former Linking Conservation and Transportation Planning workshops, are designed to promote the exchange of ideas, data, tools, concepts and methods for

better collaboration and information exchange between transportation planners and environmental practitioners in support of earlier consideration of environmental data and information in the transportation planning process. In FY10, FHWA conducted two STARS workshops:

1. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) hosted the first STARS workshop on August 24-25, 2010. Staff participated from FHWA, Caltrans, Orange County, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Geological Service, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).
2. A STARS workshop was held in Mississippi from September 21- 23, 2010. Participants included staff from FHWA, Mississippi Department of Transportation (DOT), Mississippi Office of State Aid, Gulf Regional Planning Commission, Hattiesburg-Petal-Forrest-Lamar Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), Memphis MPO, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, Department of Environmental Quality, Department of Marine Resources, EPA, USFWS, USFS, and USACE.



Integrated Planning Work Group

The Integrated Planning Work Group develops outreach, training, and tools in three key areas: transportation planning, Eco-Logical, and tiering, corridor, and sub-area studies. During FY10, the working group completed the following activities:

The Role of Resource Agencies in Transportation Planning Webinar

On August 23, 2010, the Interagency Work Group on Planning Regulations Training for Resource Agencies hosted a training session for Federal, state, and local resource agencies to learn about the transportation planning process. The webinar provided an overview of the role of resource agencies in transportation planning, the benefits of early involvement, and useful tips and tools. Over 130 individuals from 30 different agencies/offices attended the training.

Peer Exchange on Using Corridor Planning to Inform NEPA

The Interagency Work Group on Tiering, Corridor, and Subarea Studies hosted a peer exchange on December 2-3, 2009 in Denver, Colorado for State DOTs, MPOs, and resource agencies to discuss successful practices and lessons learned. The purpose of the peer exchange was to examine how agencies are using corridor planning studies to inform project development, as provided under the authority of the FHWA and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) transportation planning regulations. The peer exchange included presentations from Colorado, Texas, Idaho, Montana, and Pennsylvania, each followed by a facilitated discussion. Following the event, a full report about the peer exchange was developed, and is available at <http://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/integ/practices.asp#corr>.

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

Due to the overwhelming interest in the PEL 101 webcasts that were offered in FY09, FHWA offered three additional sessions of this training in FY10. The purpose of the PEL 101 training was to help transportation professionals and resource agency practitioners better understand, coordinate, and integrate PEL. The webcasts, which were held in March, May and July 2010, were attended by over 300 participants from a variety of agencies, including State DOTs, MPOs, Tribal governments, FHWA Division Offices, Federal, state, and local environmental agencies and organizations, and private consultant firms.

Every Day Counts

PEL was chosen by the FHWA’s Deputy Administrator as one of ten emphasis areas in Every Day Counts (EDC), an initiative intended to shorten the typical project delivery timeframe. In FY10, the PEL/EDC initiative focused on two activities: 1) development of a national PEL Questionnaire, and 2) the provision of training and technical assistance on the use and implementation of the PEL Questionnaire and other equivalent approaches.

FHWA PEL Questionnaire

The FHWA PEL Questionnaire is an adaptation of a questionnaire jointly developed by the Colorado DOT and FHWA Colorado Division Office to ease the transition between the planning and environmental review processes. The questionnaire is designed to ensure that planning information and decisions are properly documented to be utilized in NEPA. The EDC initiative has established a performance goal that 50 percent of states will use the questionnaire, or an equivalent, in their planning projects by December 31, 2011. The FHWA PEL Questionnaire is available at http://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/integ/pel_quest.asp.

FHWA Division Office Trainings on PEL

During FY10, the PEL program provided training to FHWA Division Offices on the PEL/EDC initiative, including implementation of the FHWA PEL Questionnaire. Three webinars were held on August 24, September 9, and September 16.

State Specific Technical Assistance

As part of the EDC initiative, the PEL program is providing individualized training for states that request additional support in implementing elements of the PEL/EDC Initiative. On September 22, 2010, FHWA conducted a half-day workshop with the Texas Division Office on the PEL/EDC Initiative. The main purpose of the workshop was to facilitate the development of an action plan for the Texas Division to support its State DOT and MPO partners in implementing PEL. FHWA will provide technical assistance to additional states in FY11 upon request.

IV. Outreach and Communication

In FY10, 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.

A number of additions and changes were made to the PEL website during FY10. A new Every Day Counts page was added to provide an overview of how PEL supports the overall EDC initiative, as well as specific tools that agencies can use to meet the goals of EDC. In addition, the PEL website was updated throughout the year to reflect new information. Such updates included information on the availability of PEL-related trainings and the addition of new resources to the Publications page.

The sidebar shows the monthly numbers of PEL website visits for FY10. These data track visits to the PEL Overview webpage only. As new content

| <i>Number of Monthly Visits to the PEL Website in FY10</i> | |
|--|------------|
| October | 478 |
| November | 422 |
| December | 409 |
| January | 441 |
| February | 435 |
| March | 556 |
| April | 480 |
| May | 466 |
| June | 524 |
| July | 478 |
| August | 546 |
| September | 652 |

is added, it is important to track visits in order to better understand the website's value as an information resource.

Conference Presentations

FHWA made presentations on the PEL program and approach at a number of conferences:

- National Environmental Practitioners Meeting, Washington, DC, November 18, 2009. Presentation on the PEL program's *Guide to Measuring Progress in Linking Transportation Planning and Environmental Analysis*.
- National Association of Environmental Professionals Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, April 29, 2010. The PEL Team moderated a session on linking transportation planning and environmental analysis. Presentations included an overview of PEL, the PEL *Guide to Measuring Progress in Linking Transportation Planning and Environmental Analysis*, the resource agency perspective on the PEL approach, and an Eco-Logical grant case study example to develop and implement conservation and mitigation priorities for Oregon.
- FHWA/FTA Planners' Seminar, August 19, 2010, Arlington, Virginia. The PEL conference session explored the integration of the planning and NEPA processes through discussions of FHWA and FTA programs, as well as state-specific examples. Presentations covered the following topics:
 - The PEL program's *Guide to Measuring Progress in Linking Transportation Planning and Environmental Analysis*.
 - The Colorado DOT and FHWA Colorado Division's use of its PEL questionnaire and the Colorado Environmental Forum.
 - Reorganization of the FHWA Pennsylvania Division Office to integrate the planning and environment teams.
 - Applying the PEL approach to FTA's New Starts Alternatives Analysis process and the NEPA Alternatives Analysis process.

Publications

In FY10, FHWA published 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, "Interagency Relationships Help Bring About Planning and Environmental Linkages Agreement in Colorado," December 2009.
- FHWA Successes in Stewardship Newsletter, "Measuring Progress in Linking Transportation Planning and Environmental Analysis," February 2010.
- FHWA Successes in Stewardship Newsletter, "FHWA Peer Exchange on Using Corridor Planning to Inform NEPA," March 2010.

V. PEL Vision for Fiscal Years 2011-2012

During FY11 and FY12, FHWA's efforts will focus on the following activities:

1. Technical Assistance and Training
 - a. Deliver four STARS workshops in FY11.
 - b. Conduct regional training sessions for stakeholders on EDC/PEL Initiative and FHWA PEL Questionnaire implementation.
 - c. Provide state specific trainings on implementing PEL to states on an as requested basis.
 - 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 guidance on how to use corridor planning studies to better link the transportation planning and project development processes, as part of the EDC/PEL initiative technical assistance and tools.
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. Tracking progress at State DOTs and MPOs to link planning and NEPA through implementation of the EDC/PEL Questionnaire or equivalents.
 - b. Addressing challenges to fiscal stewardship in planning and project development through development of guidelines, identification of effective practices, and coordination across disciplines.
 - c. Researching data and analysis tools that can support integrated planning and linking planning and NEPA activities.