

Planning and Environment Linkages Program

Annual Report Fiscal Year 2014



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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 2014 (FY14). 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 review processes.

In FY14, 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 FY14 Annual Report provides information on:

- Background of PEL program
- FY14 PEL technical assistance and training activities
- FY14 PEL outreach and communication activities
- PEL vision for FY15

2. Background

In 2006, the FHWA Office of Planning, Environment, and Realty 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 the transportation decision-making process, from planning through project development, design, realty, and construction. Today, the PEL program supports related FHWA priorities, such as Every Day Counts, Strategic Highway Research Program 2 (SHRP2), Eco-Logical, Context Sensitive Solutions, and Green Highways.

In FY14, FHWA continued to offer existing PEL initiatives and delivered a number of new resources to support State and local agencies in implementing the PEL approach.

3. Technical Assistance and Training

In FY14, FHWA advanced the adoption of PEL initiatives nationwide through the following focused guidance materials, workshops, and trainings.

State PEL Workshops

In FY14, the FHWA Resource Center continued offering facilitated State-specific workshops on PEL. Workshops took place in New York and Texas:

- Syracuse and Albany, New York, October 2013
- Longview, Texas, November 2013
- Corpus Christie, Texas, February 2014

The trainings provided an overview of both the metropolitan planning process and NEPA process, and identified similar steps between the two decision-making processes. Participants discussed opportunities to integrate PEL into their existing planning and NEPA processes.

Second Strategic Highway Research Program (SHRP2) Expediting Project Delivery Assessment Workshops and Technical Assistance Process/Protocol

In FY14, the FHWA Resource Center developed and delivered Assessment Workshops for six State DOTs that received SHRP2 Implementation Assistance Program funding to deploy SHRP2 product C19 (*Expediting Project Delivery*):

- Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) District 4, May 2014
- Massachusetts Department of Transportation, June 2014
- South Dakota Department of Transportation, June 2014
- Arizona Department of Transportation, July 2014
- FDOT District 4 and Efficient Transportation Decision-Making Partner Agencies, July 2014
- Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department, July 2014
- Vermont Agency of Transportation, September 2014

These Assessment Workshops were customized to assist these States in identifying opportunities to strengthen and expedite their project development/delivery processes and developing a tailored Action Plan to address those identified opportunities for improvement.

Also in FY14, the FHWA Office of Project Development and Environmental Review and FHWA Resource Center developed a process/protocol for receiving, assessing, and responding to SHRP2 product C19 (*Expediting Project Delivery*) implementation-related technical assistance requests.

4. Outreach and Communication

In FY14, FHWA delivered PEL program information to stakeholders through its website as well as through conferences and publications.

Website

The PEL website (<http://environment.fhwa.dot.gov/integ/index.asp>) serves as a comprehensive resource for transportation agencies and stakeholders to learn about and apply PEL concepts. Figure 1

shows the monthly numbers of PEL website visitors for FY12 through FY14. Visitation increased by 35% from FY12 to FY13, and then increased by another 26% from FY13 to FY14.

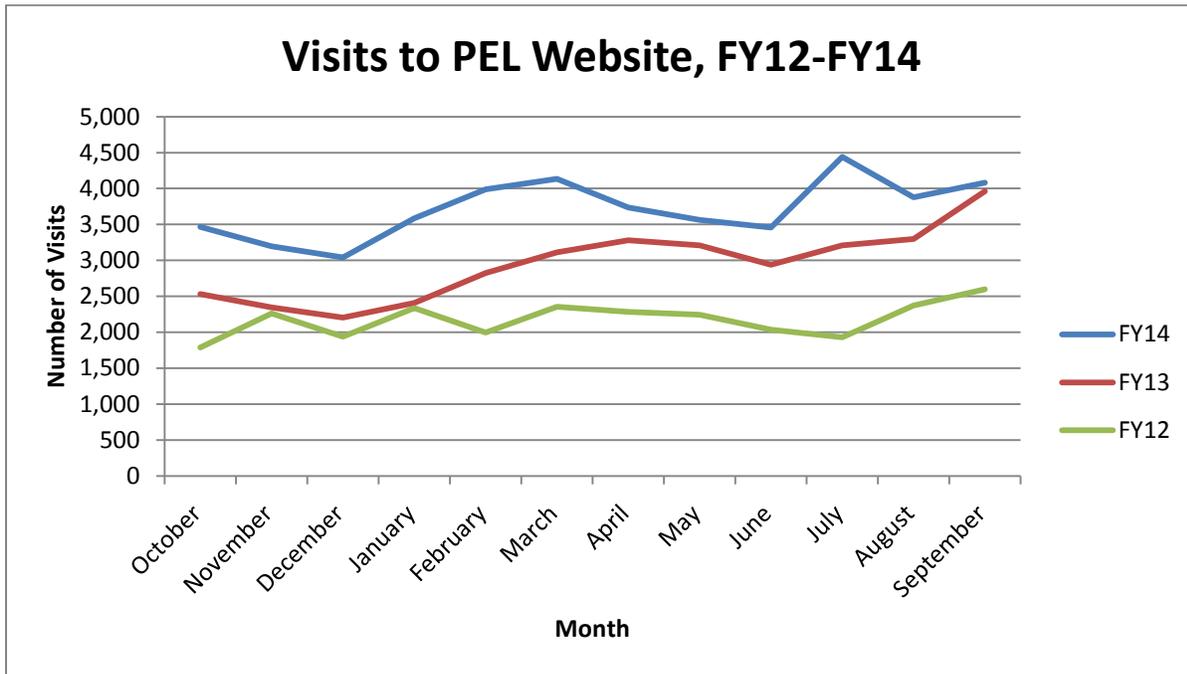


Figure 1: Monthly visitation to the PEL website for FY12 through FY14

Presentations

During FY14, FHWA presented at the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Standing Committee on the Environment Annual Meeting to increase awareness and understanding of PEL.

Publications

In FY14, FHWA published a report entitled *State of the Practice Review of Planning and Environment Linkages Implementation in Corridor Planning*. The report summarizes the results of a study to determine the extent to which transportation corridor plans have incorporated elements of FHWA's PEL approach. To determine the current state of practice of corridor planning, the study team reviewed 87 corridor plans in 15 states that were available on State department of transportation (DOT) or metropolitan planning organization (MPO) websites. The plans reviewed were published between 2008 and 2013.

The study team examined the plans for 27 different PEL elements that were based on the FHWA [Guidance on Using Corridor and Subarea Planning to Inform NEPA](#), published in 2011. The study demonstrated that States that have adopted the PEL questionnaire or an equivalent process are integrating the PEL approach into the planning process to inform decision-making.

Other key findings include the following:

- Fundamental transportation elements were highly prevalent.
- Many plans left in-depth assessment for future analysis.

- Emerging issues, such as climate change and health, were addressed in few plans.
- Collaboration and stakeholder involvement varied.

5. PEL Vision for Fiscal Year 2015

During FY2015, FHWA's PEL program will focus on the following activities:

1. Technical Assistance and Training
 - a. Conduct at least four sessions of the State-specific PEL workshops.
 - b. Coordinate with the implementation activities for SHRP2 products C19 (*Expediting Project Delivery*) and C06 (*Implementing Eco-Logical*) to track progress and showcase successes related to PEL.
2. Outreach and Communication
 - a. Continue to update the PEL website to reflect current information and resources.
 - b. Develop PEL guidance to describe opportunities and requirements once updates to 23 CFR 450 are complete. Potentially include information on greenhouse gas analyses, pending coordination with the FHWA Office of Natural Environment.
3. Research
 - a. Study the benefits of PEL by examining successful implementation of specific PEL strategies at various State and local agencies. Develop case studies and a summary report.
 - b. Coordinate with the FHWA Office of Natural Environment and the Health in Transportation Workgroup to guide a research project on PEL and health.