

Planning and Environment Linkages Program

Annual Report Fiscal Year 2015



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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 2015 (FY15). 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 FY15, 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 FY15 Annual Report provides information on:

- Background of PEL program
- FY15 PEL technical assistance and training activities
- FY15 PEL outreach and communication activities
- PEL vision for FY16

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, the second Strategic Highway Research Program (SHRP2), Eco-Logical, Context Sensitive Solutions, and Green Highways.

In FY15, 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 FY15, FHWA advanced the adoption of PEL initiatives nationwide through the following focused guidance materials, workshops, and trainings.

State PEL Workshops

In FY15, the FHWA Resource Center continued offering facilitated State-specific workshops on PEL. Workshops took place in Texas:

- Pharr (Near McAllen), Texas, October 2015
- Odessa, Texas, November 2015
- Houston, Texas, February 2015
- San Antonio, Texas, March 2015

The workshops 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.

Technical Assistance

In FY15, the FHWA Resource Center provided technical assistance to several transportation agencies on PEL. Technical assistance includes telephone calls, emails, sharing PEL reference documentation, and participation in PEL and corridor studies.

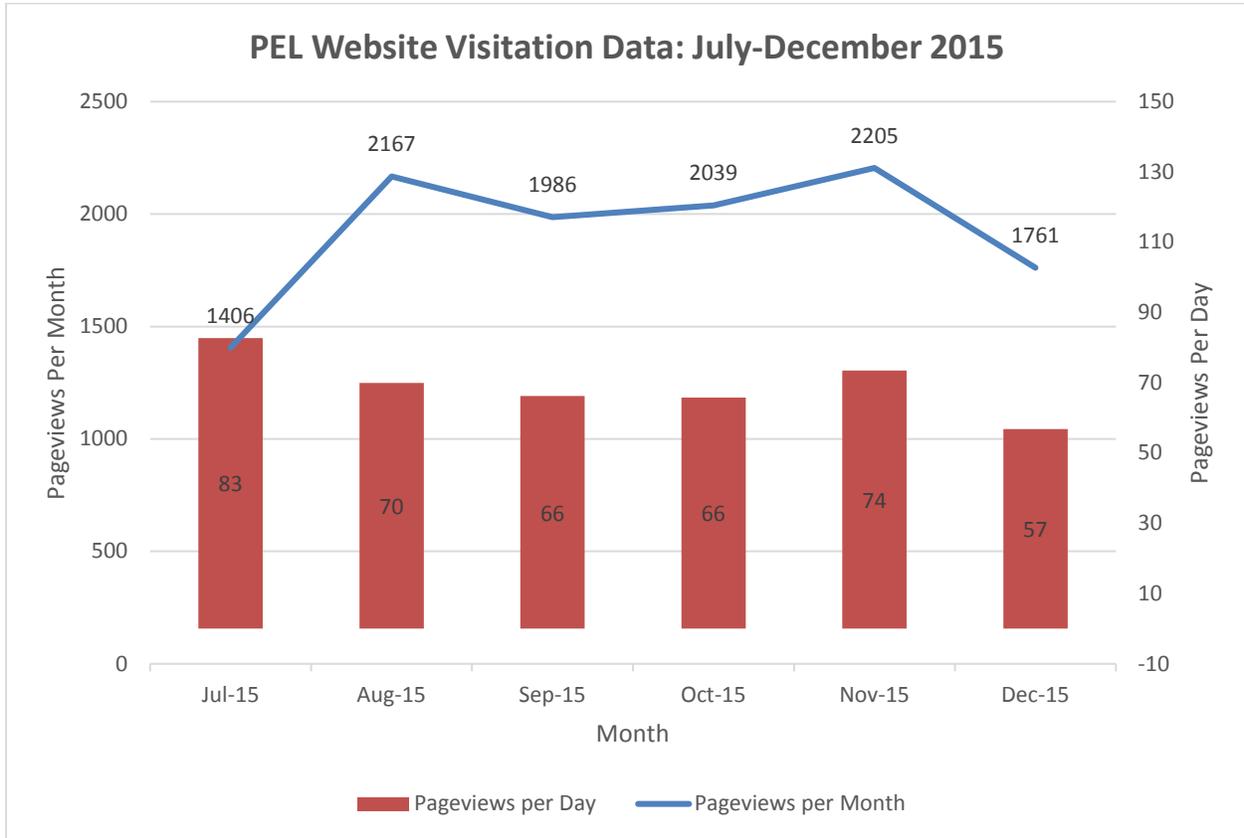
4. Outreach and Communication

In FY15, 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. In July 2015, the website was moved to a new server, which resulted in the loss of website visitation data between October 2014 and June 2015. While the data from July 2015 on is more accurate and robust, we are not able to compare it to prior-year data.

The chart below shows the total number of page views (the total number pages viewed on the PEL website) from July through December 2015. Note that the data tracking began on July 15th, which is why the page views in that month were lower.



Publications

In FY15, the PEL Team developed a report titled “[PEL Benefits: Measuring the Benefits of Planning and Environmental Linkages \(PEL\)](#).” The report explores and documents the benefits stemming from the incorporation of PEL strategies into State, regional, and local planning and project development processes. This report includes five case studies from across the country that detail five different implementations of PEL strategies and their attendant benefits. The case studies investigated two common PEL strategies: PEL studies and electronic screening tools. The most common benefits included facilitation of the environmental review process, cost and time savings, and a flexible evaluation of alternatives.

Training

PEL Team members who lead trainings on various planning and environment topics mention PEL and related issues as part of their curricula.

5. PEL Vision for Fiscal Year 2016

During FY16, FHWA’s PEL program will focus on the following activities:

1. Technical Assistance and Training
 - a. Conduct State-specific PEL workshops, as requested.

- b. Coordinate with the implementation activities for SHRP2 products C19 (*Expediting Project Delivery*), C06 (*Implementing Eco-Logical*), and C01 (*PlanWorks: Better Planning. Better Projects.*) 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. Conduct outreach on the upcoming PEL Rule, including updating the website with 23 USC 168 and 169.
 - c. Finalize PEL “overview guidance” and PL 23 USC 168 guidance.
 - d. Provide information about the FAST Act’s PEL provisions via webinar and/or the PEL website.
 - e. Coordinate with the Eco-Logical program on the new PEL provisions.
3. Research
- a. Coordinate with the FHWA Office of Natural Environment and the Health in Transportation Workgroup to guide a research project on PEL and health.
 - b. Coordinate with HEP Offices on the development of a greenhouse gas/PEL application for PlanWorks.