

Planning and Environment Linkages Program

**Annual Report
Fiscal Year
2007**



Developed By:

U.S. DOT/ Volpe National Transportation Systems Center

Developed For:

FHWA Office of Planning

FHWA Office of Project Development and Environmental Review

FHWA Office of Natural and Human Environment



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Planning and Environment Linkages Program

Annual Report, Fiscal Year 2007

Table of Contents

I. Introduction 1

II. Background..... 1

III. Technical Assistance 2

IV. Outreach and Communication 4

V. Other PEL Activities 6

VI. PEL Vision for Fiscal Year 2008 7

I. Introduction

This report highlights the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) program fiscal year 2007 (FY07) activities. The purpose of the PEL program is to provide guidance and resources to transportation agencies to help them streamline project delivery and improve planning and project level decisionmaking. When successfully implemented, the PEL approach makes the entire lifecycle of a project a more seamless process – from planning to NEPA, and onto design, construction, and maintenance.

Through the PEL initiative, FHWA provides state and local transportation and resource agencies with guidelines, decisionmaking strategies, analytical tools, and technical assistance to link transportation planning and environmental planning and review processes. In FY07, the FHWA's goals for the PEL program were to 1) deliver technical assistance to selected agencies in states identified for their strong interest in implementing action plans that they developed during their "Linking Planning and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)" workshops; 2) provide technical assistance to transportation agencies on implementation of Section 6001 of the 2005 Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act — A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU); and, 3) inform all states of existing PEL information and services through the website, publications, conferences, and workshops.

This FY07 annual report provides the following information:

- Background Information
- FY07 PEL Technical Assistance Activities
- FY07 PEL Outreach and Communication Activities
- Additional FHWA Activities
- PEL Vision for FY08

II. Background

In 2006, the FHWA's Office of Planning, Office of Project Development and Environmental Review, and Office of Natural and Human Environment developed the PEL program to serve as an umbrella approach to help agencies integrate transportation and environmental planning processes, and to streamline their project development and environmental review processes. Prior to the introduction of the PEL program, FHWA's efforts focused 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. The workshops were designed to help agencies develop an action plan to integrate their own processes and procedures. Between 2005 and 2006, FHWA and the U.S. DOT Volpe National Transportation Systems Center conducted follow-up interviews with Linking

PEL: By the Numbers

- 24 Linking Planning and NEPA Workshops from FY04 through FY06
- 3 Linking Conservation and Transportation Planning Workshops from FY06 through FY07
- 6 states receiving technical assistance in FY07

Planning and NEPA workshop participants to evaluate the impact of the workshops, track outcomes, and identify challenges to greater integration of systems-level planning and project-level decisionmaking.

PEL was designed to include the critical area of “Linking Planning and NEPA,” while also capturing other topics related to transportation planning, project development, and resource agency coordination. For example, the PEL approach encompasses related Federal activities including *Eco-Logical*, Context Sensitive Solutions, Corridor Planning, and Integrated Planning. In addition, the PEL approach assists transportation agencies in complying with the requirements and voluntary opportunities that Section 6001 of SAFETEA-LU and the FHWA and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) planning regulations offer to enhance environmental streamlining and stewardship.

III. Technical Assistance

In FY07, FHWA focused on providing technical assistance to transportation agencies to further implement PEL practices. FHWA offered technical assistance to state DOTs and metropolitan planning organizations (MPO), incorporated PEL practices into existing training courses provided through the National Highway Institute (NHI) and National Transit Institute (NTI), and developed a peer exchange focused on using geographic information systems (GIS) to implement PEL concepts.

State and Regional Assistance

FHWA identified six agencies interested in receiving technical support to implement specific PEL-related activities in their state or region. With FHWA financial and/or technical support, these agencies designed activities to further PEL implementation. The following table identifies the states, agencies, activities, outputs, and where possible, outcomes of FHWA’s PEL technical assistance in FY07.

State	Agency	Activity	Outcomes
California	Redding, California area MPO (Shasta County Regional Transportation Planning Agency Shasta RTPA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FHWA organized and facilitated the Shasta County Linking Planning and NEPA workshop. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shasta RTPA is meeting with planning agencies and environmental stakeholders to identify next steps. Shasta RTPA is developing a composite layer of environmental concerns for regional growth planning.
Colorado	Colorado DOT, Colorado Springs area MPO (Pike’s Peak Area Council of Governments, PPACG), and Pueblo Area MPO (PACOG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FHWA provided funding to assist agencies in identifying high-priority conservation areas through a geo-spatial environmental analysis of the Pueblo and El Paso counties, and determine the most appropriate data layers to use in the analysis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The contractor collected land use data and impacts on target elements for each county and imported data into NatureServe Vista. The contractor developed three population growth scenarios and overlaid results on maps of protected areas.

State	Agency	Activity	Outcomes
Hawaii	Hawaii FHWA Division Office (DO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FHWA helped facilitate and fund a workshop focused on PEL, CSS, and Community Impact Analysis (CIA). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants were informed of CSS, CIA, and PEL principles and implementation techniques.
Maryland	Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) and Department of Natural Resources (DNR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FHWA will provide funding to develop a GIS tool that will allow DNR to conduct environmental analysis of transportation projects. 	<i>In development</i>
Mississippi	Mississippi DOT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FHWA developed and conducted a PEL cross-training session for Mississippi DOT planners and environmental staff. 	Anticipated outcomes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MSDOT will train districts in PEL MSDOT will create a planning and environment liaison position MSDOT will develop a land use inventory
Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania FHWA DO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FHWA planned a statewide forum for PennDOT and environmental resource agencies focused on sharing GIS data. 	Planning occurred in FY07 for the forum to be held in early FY 2008.

Training

Linking Conservation and Transportation Planning Workshops, which began in fiscal year 2006, emphasize the use of information, tools and methods that can be shared between the transportation community and resource and regulatory agencies at the local, state, regional, and national levels. In FY07, the FHWA Office of Project Development and Environmental Review, FHWA Office of Planning, NatureServe, and Cambridge Systematics began planning for additional workshops. FHWA began working with the North Central Texas Council of Governments, the Dallas-area MPO, to host a workshop in FY08. The workshop will focus on regional activities with transportation and resource agencies to promote the sharing of conservation and transportation geospatial data, methodologies and tools to advance planning, environmental stewardship, and streamlining goals.

FHWA also worked with its own technical leads of NHI and NTI course to update relevant planning and environmental courses to include PEL concepts. In FY07, FHWA contacted over 10 technical leads of these courses to discuss how to integrate PEL concepts into their existing courses, and provided PEL materials to three courses.

Activity	Outputs	Outcomes
Updated planning and environmental courses to include PEL concepts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided PEL materials to 3 courses: Use of GIS within Environmental Streamlining and Stewardship (GIS4EST), Beyond Compliance: Historic Preservation in Transportation Project Development, and Introduction to Statewide Transportation Planning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants will gain knowledge of how to integrate systems level planning with project level decisionmaking.

Peer Exchange on Geospatial Technologies and Data Sharing

Through follow-up Linking Planning and NEPA Workshop interviews, states requested assistance in applying geospatial technologies to planning and project development processes. In response, the FHWA Office of Interstate and Border Planning, Office of Planning, and Office of Project Development and Environmental Review developed a peer exchange focused on applying GIS to implement PEL that will be held early in FY08.

Activity	Outputs	Outcomes
Organized a peer exchange on using GIS to implement PEL (October 2007 in Portland, Oregon).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer exchange planned for 13 participants from 6 State DOTs to learn about data access, management, and sharing issues; resource agency coordination; and GIS applications. • Peer Exchange Report will be developed in FY08. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • States will learn about new implementation approaches to integrate planning and environmental processes using GIS.

IV. Outreach and Communication

In FY07, FHWA delivered PEL program information to stakeholders through websites, conferences, and publications.

Website

FHWA developed the PEL website to serve as a comprehensive resource for transportation agencies and stakeholders to learn more about PEL and how to apply PEL concepts and tools locally, regionally, and statewide. The PEL website is found at: <http://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/integ/index.asp>. In FY07, FHWA continued to enhance the website with more content and better organization of information. FHWA developed and posted a new case study on the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, an MPO that incorporated environmental analyses and mitigation

FY07	
Monthly PEL Website Visits	
October	810
November	759
December	724
January	1066
February	849
March	964
April	709
May	576
June	628
July	609
August	572
September	581

strategies in long-range regional transportation planning. Currently, 24 case studies are posted on the PEL website, with more to be added in the future. FHWA will continue to develop case studies as new effective practices are identified.

The table above shows PEL website visits for FY07. These data track visits to the PEL Overview webpage only. It is important to track visits as new materials are added to the website to better understand the value of the website as an information resource. Early in FY07, the PEL program marketed the PEL website extensively after it was unveiled in August 2006. During this time and leading up to the 2007 TRB Annual Meeting, there was a high level of activity on the site. Since January, website visits have stabilized over time.

Re:NEPA: Transportation Planning and NEPA Linkages

Re:NEPA is FHWA's online "community of practice" that supports and encourages the open exchange of knowledge, information, experience, and ideas about transportation decisionmaking, related environmental issues, and NEPA. In FY07, FHWA created a new topic area called Transportation and NEPA Linkages to promote discussion and information sharing on PEL. FHWA added references and participated in discussion threads to promote the topic area and make it useful to practitioners.

Conference Presentations

In FY07, FHWA gave presentations and received input and suggestions at two venues to promote the PEL approach and the tools and resources available to achieve integration of planning and environmental activities:

- TRB 2007 Annual Meeting - Early Lessons Learned in Implementing SAFETEA-LU Environmental Provisions, January 21, 2007
- TRB 2007 Summer Meeting - Planning and Environment Linkages: Partnerships for Better Decision-making, July 7, 2007

FHWA also prepared for conferences to be held in FY08, including the 2007 AMPO Annual Conference and 2008 TRB Annual Meeting.

Publications

FHWA and the U.S. DOT Volpe National Transportation Systems Center (Volpe Center) authored three newsletter articles that featured Linking Planning and NEPA, PEL approaches, and related activities. The newsletters listed below reach over 2,000 subscribers that include Federal, state, and local agencies; resource agencies; consultants; academia; and others.

- January 2007, FHWA Successes in Stewardship Newsletter "Linking Conservation and Transportation Planning Workshops"
- April 2007, FHWA Successes in Stewardship Newsletter "Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL): Streamlining Transportation Decisionmaking"
- July 2007, FHWA Resource Center Environmental Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 3, "FHWA Launches New Planning and Environment Linkages Website"

In FY07, FHWA and the Volpe Center also developed materials for publication in FY08, including:

- 2008 TRB Annual Meeting paper submission
- FHWA Public Roads Magazine article

V. Other PEL Activities

In FY07, FHWA began to align PEL with other FHWA activities also designed to support the streamlined and cost-effective delivery of transportation projects. Coordination among these activities and PEL helps FHWA maximize their efforts by the sharing of tools, best practices, and other resources. A sample of these activities and their FY07 work are described below.

Eco-Logical

The Integrating Transportation and Resource Planning to Develop Ecosystem Based Infrastructure Projects Grant (Eco-Logical Grant) is a new discretionary program introduced in FY07 and administered by the FHWA. The grant program is based on the multi-agency publication *Eco-Logical: An Ecosystem Approach to Developing Infrastructure Projects*. The PEL program has been involved in promoting the widespread adoption of the Eco-Logical publication by transportation and resource agencies. The Eco-Logical program funds the implementation of an ecosystem-based approach to planning and constructing infrastructure. Funding under the grant will be awarded for the first time in early fiscal year 2008 and is available to state and local governments, Federal partner agencies, tribal governments, universities, nonprofit organizations, and private entities. Approximately 10 awards will be made. The PEL program will have stronger programmatic ties to Eco-Logical by monitoring and helping administer the Eco-Logical grants in FY08.

Integrated Planning Work Group

On September 18, 2002, President George W. Bush signed Executive Order (EO) 13274, *Environmental Stewardship and Transportation Infrastructure Project Reviews*. This EO established an Interagency Task Force to advance current DOT and interagency environmental stewardship and streamlining efforts, to coordinate expedited decision-making related to transportation projects across federal agencies, and to bring high-level officials to the table to address priority projects. In FY07, the IPWG drafted six case studies that showcase successful coordination of transportation and resource agencies early in the planning process. The case studies will be included in an Information Resource to be developed in FY08, which the PEL program will help to promote and disseminate. In addition, the IPWG developed a two-year work plan and created project work groups for high-priority action items, including:

- New Transportation Planning Regulations: Outreach and Training;
- *Eco-Logical* Concepts: Outreach and Training; and
- Tiering, Corridor, and Sub-area Studies: Synthesize the State of the Practice in Connecting Planning and NEPA.

Activities in the two-year work plan are consistent with the PEL program and will be worked on jointly with the PEL program in FY08.

VI. PEL Vision for Fiscal Year 2008

In FY08, FHWA will continue to develop existing PEL initiatives as well as launch a number of new activities to encourage state and local agencies to implement the PEL approach. FHWA's vision for PEL in FY08 includes the following:

I. Technical Assistance:

- Continue to work closely with selected states to implement specific activities identified during Linking Planning and NEPA workshops, and share outcomes and lessons learned with stakeholders.
- Conduct three to five regional and state workshops focused on Linking Conservation and Transportation Planning.
- Conduct a peer exchange on applying GIS analyses to implement PEL in transportation decisionmaking.
- Support and help implement projects funded through the Eco-Logical Grant Program.
- Further strengthen the links between IPWG activities and the PEL program.

II. Outreach/Communication

- Identify ways to make the website more user-friendly to encourage more viewers and share effective practices.
- Add more information to the website as PEL resources are developed.
- Develop new publications to increase awareness and understanding of the FHWA PEL program and PEL approach.
- Promote the PEL approach, resources and tools at the AMPO Annual Meeting, TRB Annual Meeting, and other conferences as they are identified.
- Increase the utility and use of Re:NEPA by encouraging discussion and posting relevant references.
- Promote and disseminate the IPWG Information Resource.

III. Research and Targeted Expansion

- Identify various internal State DOT organizational structures and evaluate their implications on integrating planning and environment.
- Identify performance metrics used by State DOTs to measure project outcomes and programmatic successes.
- Broaden the focus of PEL to include new areas such as climate change/energy, freight and non-motorized transportation.

The PEL approach holds great promise for helping transportation agencies to balance safety, mobility, environmental, community, and economic goals. FHWA will continue to work closely with states and MPOs to provide technical assistance and disseminate effective practices.