

# Successes **in** Stewardship

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## The Columbia River Crossing Project: A Model for Collaboration and Environmental Stewardship

In 2001, the governors of Oregon and Washington formed a bi-state partnership to study transportation problems and possible solutions for the Interstate 5 (I-5) corridor. Three recommendations, identified in the partnership's 2002 strategic plan, emerged. These recommendations focused on fixing various bottlenecks on I-5. One of the bottlenecks, the Columbia River Crossing (CRC) at I-5, was facing congestion, dangerous travel conditions, and travel demand that exceeded capacity. CRC is a bridge, transit, and highway improvement project covering five miles of I-5 and carrying it over the Columbia River. The project involves the replacement of an aging bridge that connects Portland, Oregon, with Vancouver, Washington.

Since the initiation of the project in the spring of 2005, project leaders have demonstrated environmental stewardship through strong collaboration and innovative thinking. The lead agencies for the project include the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), and the Oregon State DOT (ODOT). The new bridge will be multimodal, providing for the passage of cars, freight trucks, light rail, bicycles, and pedestrians. The project was initiated to ease traffic congestion by providing public transit, thereby improving safety through reducing the number of vehicles on the bridge, and by adding safe facilities for bicycles and pedestrians. The new bridge will also have significantly less seismic vulnerability.

Integral to the project is the integration of a greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions analysis into the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). While this element was not required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), it demonstrates the environmental leadership of the project team to local decisionmakers. Because of the team's environmental stewardship and early-collaboration efforts, the CRC project remains on a timely 50-month EIS schedule, with the Final EIS scheduled to be filed in 2010.



Project logo (courtesy of the Columbia River Crossing Project).

### Success in Collaboration

Like other States, Oregon and Washington have distinct processes for completing large surface transportation projects. In addition, FHWA and FTA have well-defined but different processes for NEPA review. In order for the project to succeed, it was essential to develop a coordinated effort for NEPA review that not only linked FHWA's and FTA's NEPA processes but involved a broad range of stakeholders. The outcome of this coordinated effort was an interagency collaboration partnership, the Interstate Collaborative Environmental Process (InterCEP) Group, among 12 State and Federal agencies.

Although there are other partnerships in both States, the InterCEP Group is unique in that it comprises both State and Federal agencies. The InterCEP Group was formally established early in the CRC project through a charter and work plan signed by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development, the Oregon Department of State Lands, the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, the Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, the Washington State Department of Ecology, and the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The InterCEP Group serves as an advisory group to the CRC project team. All of the signatory agencies agreed to provide advisory comments in the environmental process at the following points: Purpose and Need, Methods and Data Reports, Preliminary Draft EIS, and the Preliminary Final EIS. In so doing, the resource agencies will be able to convey if the project is consistent with their agency's ability to approve or permit it and if the information provided at each point will support the best possible project and environmental outcome.

An early example of the value of the InterCEP Group is the upcoming filing of the Biological Assessment (BA) required by Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, projected to be submitted to the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's (NMFS) in October 2009. The species considerations are critical for this project as there are at least seven endangered water-based species in the Columbia River. Through meetings of the InterCEP Group and its review process, the CRC project team will be able to tailor the BA to the needs of the species and to ensure that the document will be accepted as complete by NMFS.

Two other important collaborative components of the CRC project are the extensive public involvement process and Tribal consultation. Federal and State lead agencies conducted separate and extensive coordination with five Federally recognized Tribes and one non-Federally recognized Tribe. In addition, a project task force made up of 39 members of municipal and regional agencies, neighborhood and community groups, environmental and economic organizations, and trade interest groups was assembled. This group met 23 times between February 2005 and June 2008 to advise the project team on local issues and concerns. The task force ultimately made a recommendation for the locally preferred project alternative.

## Project Milestones

Date	Milestone
January 25, 2006	InterCEP Agreement approved.
February 15, 2007	Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for CRC.
May 2, 2008	Draft EIS released.
June 28, 2008	Task force issues locally preferred alternative.
Spring 2010	Final EIS expected.
2012	Anticipated start of construction.

Outline of major project milestones.

## Innovative Analysis

The CRC project included a unique GHG emissions analysis as part of the Draft EIS (DEIS) issued in May 2008. This analysis helped the project team to demonstrate to local decisionmakers and the public the congestion and emissions-reducing value of replacing the present bridge with a multimodal facility. The GHG emissions analysis was designed to compare each build alternative with the no build alternative by showing how bus rapid transit, light rail, and tolls would affect traffic and emissions. The project team determined how each of the tested alternatives would reduce emissions more than would the no-build alternative. The light-rail scenario with bicycle and pedestrian facilities, funded by tolling, was recommended as the locally preferred alternative.

At the onset of the project, stakeholders in Washington and Oregon held differing views about including the GHG emissions analysis in the DEIS but agreed that an independent review of the process was necessary to ensure its validity. The CRC project team then convened an independent panel of experts to determine if the GHG analysis approach and its findings were reasonable. The independent review found the analysis to be helpful but labor-intensive, recognizing that emerging tools, such as the EPA Motor Vehicle Emission Simulator (MOVES) model, may simplify the estimation process in the future. While a GHG emissions analysis at the project level can be challenging, it enabled the team to provide information about regional impacts of the project to decisionmakers as requested.

## Model for Future Projects

Because of its strong stewardship of the environment, the DEIS for the CRC project was awarded [the National Association of Environmental Professionals' Environmental Excellence Award](#) in the category of NEPA excellence. On the basis of its successful interagency collaboration and innovative GHG analysis, the project may serve as a model for future transportation projects. Completion of the project will help to provide an understanding of what efficiencies were gained and what improvements could be made in future projects.

The Final EIS for the project is expected in May 2010, with a Record of Decision (ROD) in July 2010 and construction projected to start in 2012. It is estimated that the project will range in cost from \$3.1 to \$4.2 billion, partially supported by tolls.

## Additional Resources

For additional information about the CRC project or the NEPA streamlining process, please visit the following resources:

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## Look What's New!

- The 2009 International Conference on Ecology and Transportation (ICOET) will be held in Duluth, MN from September 13 – 17, 2009. The conference hosted by the Minnesota Department of Transportation will focus on the topic "Adapting to Change." To learn more or to register, please visit the [ICOET Website](#).
- The [State Environmental Streamlining and Stewardship Practices Database](#) contains fresh examples of streamlining and stewardship best practices used by the States. Visit the site to learn more or to search for a best practice.
- The Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) Program, a joint effort of FHWA's Office of Planning and Office of Project Development and Environmental Review, is offering a training webcast titled "PEL 101: The Tools for Adopting and Implementing a PEL Approach". The purpose of the training is to help transportation professionals and resource agency practitioners to better understand, coordinate and integrate planning and environmental linkages. Previous webcasts were held on June 23 and July 27. The final webcast is being offered on the following date:
  - Thursday, August 20 — 1pm to 3pm EDT ([Register Here](#))

Registration for each session is limited.

*Successes in Stewardship* is a Federal Highway Administration newsletter highlighting current environmental streamlining and stewardship practices from around the country. To subscribe, visit [http://environment.fhwa.dot.gov/sis\\_registration/Register.aspx](http://environment.fhwa.dot.gov/sis_registration/Register.aspx) or call 617-494-3259.