

Planning and Environment Linkages Program

**Annual Report
Fiscal Year
2011**



Prepared for:
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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 2011 (FY11). 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 FY11, 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 FY11 Annual Report provides information on:

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

II. 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 and construction. Today, the PEL program supports related FHWA priorities, such as Every Day Counts, Eco-Logical, Context Sensitive Solutions, and Green Highways.

In FY11, FHWA continued to support existing PEL initiatives and delivered a number of new resources to support state and local agencies in implementing the PEL approach.

III. Technical Assistance and Training

In FY11, 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 FY11, FHWA conducted three STARS workshops:

1. The Wichita Area Metropolitan Planning Organization and FHWA co-sponsored a STARS workshop on March 22-23, 2011. Staff participated from the Kansas DOT, Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Sedgwick County, Federal Transit Administration, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).
2. The West Virginia DOT hosted a STARS workshop on April 26-27, 2011. Participants included staff from FHWA, West Virginia DOT, West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office, West Virginia Public Port Authority, West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, Belomar Regional Council, Regional Intergovernmental Council, U.S. EPA, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).
3. The Montana DOT hosted a STARS workshop on June 8-9, 2011. Participants included Montana DOT, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, FHWA, U.S. EPA, USFWS, USACE, and the U.S. Forest Service.



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 and FY10, FHWA offered an additional session of this training in FY11. The training is designed to help transportation professionals and resource agency practitioners to better understand, coordinate and integrate transportation planning and the environmental review process. Over 250 participants from 107 different agencies, including local and state transportation and resource agencies, regional planning organizations, and private consultant firms participated in the training.

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. The EDC initiative established a goal that 50 percent of states that committed to implementing PEL will either use the PEL Questionnaire or an equivalent approach by December 31, 2011. In FY11, the PEL team provided training and technical assistance to assist states with the implementation of the PEL Questionnaire and other equivalent approaches.

During each of the ten regional EDC summits, which were held between October and December 2011, the PEL team led two sessions on PEL. Through the EDC summits, all 50 states received training on the PEL approach. At the end of FY11, nine states had either adopted the PEL Questionnaire or had been found to utilize an equivalent approach. The states include Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Montana, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee and Utah.

Guidance on Using Corridor and Subarea Planning to Inform NEPA

In April 2011, FHWA published “Guidance on Using Corridor and Subarea Planning to Inform NEPA” to assist transportation planners and environmental practitioners in the use of corridor and subarea planning to inform the NEPA review process. This document responds to the need for additional guidance on how best to use corridor and subarea planning to bridge the transportation planning and NEPA processes as described in 23 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 450 – Linking the Transportation Planning and NEPA Processes.

IV. Outreach and Communication

In FY11, 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. The PEL website was updated throughout the year to reflect new information. Such updates included information on the availability of PEL-related trainings, the addition of new resources to the Publications page, and information on State DOTs’ PEL processes.

Number of Monthly Visits to the PEL Website in FY11	
October	1,798
November	1,773
December	1,325
January	1,500
February	1,753
March	1,966
April	1,807
May	1,800
June	2,273
July	2,274
August	1,872
September	1,984

The sidebar shows the monthly numbers of PEL website visits for FY11. These data track visits to the PEL Overview webpage only. As new content is added, it is important to track visits in order to better understand the website’s value as an information resource.

Presentations

During FY11, the FHWA made the following presentations to increase awareness and understanding of PEL.

- FHWA Eco-Logical Program Webinar Series, April 6, 2011. Presentation on the Intersections between Eco-Logical and PEL: FHWA Programs to Improve Environmental Outcomes.
- American Planning Association, Boston, Massachusetts, April 11, 2011. Presentation on Linking Transportation and Environment through Planning: Lessons from Two FHWA Programs. Co-presented with the Eco-Logical team.

Publications

In April 2011, FHWA’s Successes in Stewardship newsletter featured a PEL success story. The article, entitled “Montana Links Planning and NEPA through Corridor Planning Studies”, highlights Montana DOT’s corridor planning approach and the associated benefits realized in project development. The Successes in Stewardship newsletter reaches thousands of subscribers, including Federal, state, and local agencies; consultants; and academics.

V. PEL Vision for Fiscal Year 2012

During FY2012, FHWA's PEL program will focus on the following activities:

1. Technical Assistance and Training
 - a. Conduct additional sessions of the PEL 101 web-based training.
 - b. Deliver additional PEL training webinars focused on specific topics and tools for implementing PEL. The PEL team will develop training on implementing the corridor and subarea planning guidance. The team will also coordinate with other FHWA program areas, including Eco-Logical, Transportation Capacity Building Program, and the Resource Center to create and deliver additional PEL-related trainings.
 - c. Provide state specific trainings on implementing PEL to states on an as requested basis. Potential states include Vermont and New Jersey.
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, including the Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting.
3. Research
 - a. Continue to track progress at State DOTs and MPOs to link planning and NEPA through implementation of the EDC/PEL Questionnaire or equivalents.
 - b. Address challenges to fiscal stewardship in planning and project development through development of guidelines, identification of effective practices, and coordination across disciplines.