

Houma - Thibodaux to LA 3127 Connection Environmental Impact Statement

*State Project No. 700-99-0302
Federal Project No. HP 9902(518)*

Project Update

August 2009

Introduction

The purpose of this newsletter is to update the members of the South Central Planning and Development Commission on the status of the Houma-Thibodaux to LA 3127 Connector project. DOTD and its consultants initiated a screening study in July of 2007 to evaluate the feasibility and potential impacts of an east/west corridor extending from the Houma/Thibodaux area to the Sunshine Bridge (LA 70). The objective of the study was to determine whether a corridor following LA 1/LA 308 met the EIS' accepted *Purpose and Need* of enhancing north/south connectivity within the region in addition to providing functional hurricane evacuation. The study resulted from concerns raised by resource and regulatory agencies during the Alternative Development stage of the EIS.

Screening Study Scope and Summary

In July of 2006 work on the EIS was stopped by DOTD to allow for the resolution of concerns of the various resource agencies, including the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and US Fish and Wildlife. Due to Agency concern that not all possible alternatives had been considered, it was decided by DOTD to supplement the project with a study of possible east-west corridors connecting the Houma-Thibodaux area to the Sunshine Bridge via the Bayou Lafourche Ridge. The scope of the supplement included an expansion of the study area and a preliminary evaluation of alternatives within the expanded study area.

The study boundary was expanded to include the area known as the Bayou Lafourche Ridge from the Houma-Thibodaux area northwest to the Sunshine Bridge. The study area includes the parishes of Assumption, Lafourche and Ascension. Through the use of readily available information, four (4) potential corridors were developed. In placing the potential corridors, every effort was made to minimize impacts to cultural, agricultural and environmental resources. Two (2) of the four (4) corridors were expansions of existing facilities, LA 1 and LA 308. The remaining two (2) corridors were placed along the ridges delineating prime farmland and the environmentally protected wetlands along the northern and southern boundaries of the ridge. The alternative corridors are limited access with a width of 300 feet. The lengths of the potential corridors range from approximately 34 to 40 miles.

Screening criteria used in evaluating the alternatives' ability to achieve the project's *Purpose and Need* were broken into two categories, system linkage and hurricane evacuation. Matrices and preliminary findings developed were presented and discussed at an April 2008 Agency meeting.

Resource agency comments received in response to the draft of the screening report spawned a supplemental study comparing the effectiveness of a north-south alternative versus an east-west alternative at moving traffic in a northerly direction. This study evaluated forecasted traffic conditions for a representative north-south and east-west alternative utilizing the statewide travel demand model. Results from the study indicate a relatively minor impact to regional travel for the north-south alternative compared to the east-west alternative. This is due in part to the east-west alternative's tendency to divert traffic from the north-south corridor in addition to facilitating regional trips to as far north as Baton Rouge.

Given the relative performance of the representative east-west corridor compared to the north-south corridor with respect to travel demand and it's ability to reasonably achieve the project's stated Purpose and Need, it was recommended that the northern most east-west alternative be carried forward to a more detailed level of analysis in the NEPA document.

Where are we Now??

Based upon recommendations presented in the screening study, DOTD has decided to expand the project boundary and carry the northern-most east-west alternative forward into the EIS. Due to the amount of time that has elapsed since the field and GIS data have been gathered, it is necessary to update all GIS layers and reassess all environmental, cultural and industrial resources within the original boundary. It is also necessary to access and document these features within the newly expanded boundary as well. These task items and others required to restart the project and account for a larger study are have been identified and compiled into a proposal package currently under review by DOTD. It is our anticipation that the project will be restarted Fall of 2009 and will take approximately 2 years to secure a Record of Decision on the EIS.

