

The existing road has two 12-foot lanes with 2-foot shoulders. This does not meet current standards for this type of highway. The project team proposes to keep the 12-foot lanes and increase the shoulders to 6 feet. To minimize the project footprint in the Chilkat River, a guardrail to decrease the “clear zone” will be used on some sections of the highway in the Chilkat River.

This project has been ongoing since 2005 and has included public and agency scoping, tribal consultation, engineering studies, and environmental documentation. Later this spring, a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) will be released to the public. A public hearing is anticipated in June 2013.

Jim reviewed the project team contact information and encouraged stakeholders to submit questions and comments to the project team.

Questions that were asked after the presentation (*answers are in italics*):

Why is this project an Environmental Assessment (EA) and not an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)?

During the project scoping process, the FHWA determined the appropriate class of action is an Environmental Assessment (EA), and not an EIS. This is partly because this project involves work on an existing portion of highway. An EA is used when it is not certain whether there will be significant impacts from the project.

Has any thought been put into jet boat access under the Chilkat Bridge during construction?

Yes, the proposed bridge provides 6 extra feet of clearance at high water and has 6 less piers for debris to accumulate.

Where can I access the eagle nest survey information and mitigation plan.

In April 2013 this information could be on the project website. (Jim offered to give an electronic copy of the survey information that day.) The mitigation plan does not address eagles, it is a mitigation plan for fill in waters of the US. The mitigation for impacts to eagle nest would be part of the permit issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A local eighth grade science teacher presented a youth-produced video about the bald eagle preserve. The video expressed concerns about increased vehicle speeds along the highway and impacts to bald eagle populations.

The posted speed limit of the highway would not increase. It is posted at 55 mph and it will stay at 55 mph. There are a few specific points on the highway that have clusters of accidents. This is usually at a curve. When accidents are on long straight sections of the road, it is usually because of a wildlife encounter. This project would straightening the curves on the highway, improve sight distances, and increase clear zones. This is an arterial highway, its primary function is to provide mobility.

Statistically-speaking, in the United States do more accidents happen at 45 mph or 55 mph? Are vehicle speeds investigated after an accident happens?

We hope fewer accidents occur in areas that are up to current design standards. Excessive speed is one of the causes that a State Trooper can choose when reporting accident information.

Are there two main areas (MP 17 and at the Wells Bridge) where most of the accidents happen? Is the width of the section that was improved in 1994 (MP 25 to the border) going to match this new section? Was there a geotechnical study on the 1980 project?

Jim offered to provide the accident mapping information. The sections of highway in this project will be built to match design standards and will match the section that was improved in 1994. All previous geotechnical work was done by DOT&PF and they have that data as background information.

It seems that a lot of the wildlife accidents happen at night when it is dark.

Generally when there is an area with a high level of animal collisions the DOT&PF will use wildlife awareness signs that are highly-reflective to vehicle headlights.

What does it mean when there is a tree that is flagged along the highway?

The orange flagging on trees along the highway are survey control points. Orange flagging does not mean that the tree is going to be cut down.

The discussion here has been about increasing the vehicle speed and improving human safety, but this is the bald eagle advisory council, so shouldn't we be talking about improving bald eagle safety? Is there a way to reduce speeds in this critical habitat area?

The designated critical habitat area is adjacent to the highway at the MP 19 slide area. The alignment of the roadway has been moved uphill so it does not impact the critical habitat area.

The critical habitat area is not on both sides of the road, it is a part of the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve. It is jointly managed between the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Speed limits can be reduced by permit for specific events, such as the Bald Eagle Festival.

(SECOND HALF)

The commenter thanked Jim for taking NEPA seriously. Is there more information the public can access regarding speed limits? How can communities influence the speed limit issue? Should the community be involved in the Environmental Assessment process through public comments?

Start with FHWA website for background research. That website will have a rundown of design standards and possibly speeds. Go to HainesHighwayAlaska.gov and make a comment and it will be addressed. The EA period is the last opportunity to make public comments.

There is a need for a wider road because vehicle traffic sometimes is in need of getting off highway (ie, breaking down, photos). We need a shoulder that is 8 feet wide for safety, but the current standard is 4 feet.

Current design width is 4 feet for rural arterial highways and DOT&PF opted to go to 6 feet to make a standard section from Haines to Haines Junction. Driver anxiety from a road with varying widths could be a cause of traffic accidents. We felt that traffic was light enough that vehicles that had to stop and pull off could do it more safely with 6-foot-wide shoulders as opposed to the current 2-foot width.

Regarding the Wells Bridge area relocation: what is your plan for communication with property owners in this area for the bridge relocation?

There will be a scoping period. The bridge will move downstream and adjacent to the existing bridge. It will be higher by approximately 6 feet.

Considering we have limited resources for law enforcement, is there any concern about turning a 55 mph highway into a 75 mph highway?

Yes, there is concern. The DOT&PF Highway Safety Office has federal aid, but they don't have enough money for more Troopers out there. They have instituted a 511 on the website to indicate where construction is taking place. They are trying to do everything possible to provide safety on a 55 mph highway.

Haines Highway MP 3.5 to 25.3
Presentation to the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve Advisory Council
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Which part of the highway are you going to be working on first?

About milepost 21-23.5. Town side of mile 21 where the train ends will probably be the start of the project. We will not impact access to the fishing area. We did a subsistence survey and we will maintain access there.

Question for Steve Lewis: Do you have the data for cause of mortality of bald eagles in the preserve?

Steve: We don't have that data. It's not what we track.