

Successes **in** Stewardship

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Federal Lands Highway: Finding an Efficient Method to Track Environmental Commitments

Tracking environmental commitments can be a challenging task for transportation professionals, especially when projects are long-term and the agencies have a high staff turnover. Environmental documents created under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) typically identify most of these commitments, but effective tools are still needed to ensure that all environmental commitments are tracked and implemented.

Tools for tracking and managing environmental commitments range from simple paper checklists to intricate online databases. Given the increasingly complex and environmentally sensitive issues surrounding transportation projects, ordinary tracking methods may no longer meet the growing expectations for environmental stewardship and streamlining. Seeing an opportunity to promote improvement, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) conducted a [Domestic Scan Tour on Environmental Commitment Implementation](#) (Domestic Scan) in 2002 to examine successful practices and procedures for tracking environmental commitments. Federal Lands Highway (FLH), an adjunct to the Federal-Aid Highway Program and FHWA, conducted a similar study to improve its own commitment tracking practices.



A roadway through Mount Rainier National Park in the State of Washington. The goal of FLH is to improve transportation access to and within Federal and tribal lands.

FHWA's Domestic Scan Tour

Recognizing the importance of environmental stewardship and streamlining activities in the implementation of project commitments, FHWA's Office of Project Development and Environmental Review conducted the Domestic Scan in 2002. The Domestic Scan focused on successful practices and procedures for the follow-through of commitments made both during and after the NEPA process. The Domestic Scan team visited seven state departments of transportation (DOTs) to review successful processes, procedures, and methodologies used in fulfilling environmental commitments made throughout the transportation project development process. The team observed that, in order to achieve success in this highly visible area, implementation of environmental commitments must be embedded in the transportation project development process, not viewed as an elective add-on.

FLH's Follow-up Study

In 2006, FLH conducted a follow-up study to the Domestic Scan, after finding the management of environmental commitments to be particularly challenging due to the number, size, and location of projects in each of its three Divisions (Western, Central, and Eastern). The study documented current practices in each Division and identified needs and opportunities for improvement. It was intended as a first step in developing a tracking system that could be used by all three Divisions. Results indicated that Divisions were doing a fairly good job of implementing commitments, but individual tracking

systems being used were labor intensive and varied in effectiveness.

FLH and its Divisions are responsible for transportation projects that access Federal and tribal lands. These projects are often in extremely sensitive environments such as national parks, wildlife refuges, and forests and may require hundreds of specific environmental commitments to obtain approvals for any given project. Some commitments, such as mitigation monitoring, require action years after construction is completed. Tracking these commitments and their implementation is difficult and requires sophisticated tools to ensure that staff are aware of their existence and associated deadlines. Within FLH, the three Divisions have different needs and approaches to tracking environmental commitments (see box).

Similar to the FHWA Domestic Scan, FLH visited several state DOTs regarding their environmental commitment tracking systems and practices. These DOTs included Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, New York, Texas, and Washington. The latter two states also provided an online demonstration.

Next Generation Systems for Tracking Environmental Commitments

Initially, FLH was planning to implement a stand-alone environmental commitments tracking system that could be used by all three Divisions. However, FLH ultimately concluded that the identified needs could be provided by planned upgrades to each Division's Project Management Information System. All three Divisions are now moving to web-based systems that will provide multiple features for tracking environmental commitments. As these upgrades are integrated, FLH will be working to modify project delivery processes and practices to maximize the tracking and reporting capabilities of the new systems.

FLH's development of upgraded tracking systems for its three Divisions will lead to increased integration of environmental practices in the planning, construction, and maintenance of highway and other transportation projects as well as to better management in tracking commitments. FHWA's and FLH's scans and research of environmental tracking systems illustrate the progress and diverse options available for tracking and implementing environmental commitments.

Federal Lands Highway Divisions

The three FLH Divisions provide stewardship and transportation engineering services to the highways and bridges that provide access to and through federally owned lands. Each Division is different in the type and size of projects administered.

- [Central Federal Lands Highway Division \(CFLHD\)](#) delivers projects for 14 states in the Midwest, Southwest, and Hawaii as well as in Guam and Samoa. Using Excel spreadsheets, CFLHD tracks permits and commitments on major projects. It recently revised the project development process to include an environmental commitment summary prior to construction of major projects.
- [Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division \(EFLHD\)](#) oversees projects in 31 states in the eastern U.S., including the District of Columbia as well as in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. It deals with more (but often smaller) projects than the other two Divisions and typically tracks projects as a whole rather than specific commitments. The staff maintains an Excel spreadsheet of permits and compliance documents that contain most of the commitments.
- [Western Federal Lands Highway Division \(WFLHD\)](#) administers projects in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Alaska and in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks in Wyoming. It has developed requirements for long-term mitigation tracking and reporting as well as an environmental commitment summary that identifies all commitments from both NEPA documents and permits and specifies how each commitment will be addressed. Tracking of commitments is typically done with Excel spreadsheets and small, independent databases.

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Look What's New!

FHWA is seeking grant applicants for projects that support the [Eco-Logical](#) framework and the ecosystem approach to mitigation of transportation infrastructure projects. Complete information can be found at www.grants.gov/search/search.do?oppld=13223&mode=VIEW or by contacting [Bethaney Bacher-Gresock](#).

Read the FHWA Resource Center's *Environmental Quarterly* newsletter at <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/resourcecenter/teams/environment/publications.cfm>.