



RIDGEFIELD NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE — RIVER ‘S’ UNIT ACCESS PROJECT

Project Update

JUNE 2012

In 2009, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) published its Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. The CCP included a Transportation Access Study completed by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) that was a preliminary review of alternatives providing access improvements to the River ‘S’ Unit. The USFWS selected a new access to the River ‘S’ Unit in its final CCP, meaning a new access point for River ‘S’ is desired. A specific location for this access was not selected in the CCP.

The USFWS and FHWA’s Western Federal Lands Division office in Vancouver, Washington, have been developing a comprehensive understanding of land uses, ownerships, rights of way, and environmental issues by gathering agency input, interviewing interest groups in the area, and soliciting general public comment about River ‘S’ access. Through these efforts FHWA has compiled eight common questions with responses that provide a common understanding to the framework the team will work under in developing a range of alternatives. See *Top 8 Q&A on the project website*.

What’s Next?

Spring 2012 through the Fall 2012

FHWA will produce an in-depth transportation analysis to assess the current access location and identify specific alternative locations to the River ‘S’ Unit. With this new effort, FHWA will continue to engage the public through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process to further define the Purpose and Need and obtain input on the full range of alternatives to address access-related problems to the River ‘S’ Unit.

	Task	Timeline
On-Going Activities	Newsletter Update	Summer 2012
	Traffic Impact Assessments	Summer/Fall 2012
	River Navigation Assessment	Summer/Fall 2012
	Existing Access Railroad Crossing Assessment	Summer/Fall 2012
	Develop Range of Alternatives	Fall 2012
	Public Meeting on Range of Alternatives	Fall 2012
	Screening of Alternatives	Fall 2012
Completed Activities	Baseline Conditions Assessment	Summer 2012
	Stakeholder Interviews w/ Summary	Summer 2012
	Update Purpose and Need Statement	Summer 2012
	Top 8 Questions & Answers from Outreach Efforts	Summer 2012
	Existing Access Technical Memo	Summer 2012



Get Involved/Stay Involved

The FHWA is continuing to seek your input in this process. As this project continues to develop and evolve it is important that we maintain a conversation with people interested in the process and outcome. You will be helping the project team identify and understand your interests, issues, and concerns regarding current conditions and the proposed new access location for the River ‘S’ Unit.

Our intentions is to continue to use your input to help define and locate access options that best meet the needs of the Refuge and its management goals while listening and accommodating, where possible, the needs of the community.



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Updated (May 2012) Draft Statement of Purpose & Need

The proposed action is to replace the bridge over Lake River and improve access to the River 'S' Unit. The purpose of this action is to provide for long-term access that addresses visitor demand and meets the operational and management needs of the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex (Complex)*. When compared to the no-build alternative, the proposed action is intended to achieve the following objectives: 1) improve the reliability and mobility of public access to and from the River 'S' Unit, 2) improve the USFWS's ability to efficiently carry out operations consistent with its management goals within the Ridgefield Refuge Complex, and 3) provide for a transportation solution that is sustainable for the resources on the Refuge and in the community of Ridgefield.

Project Need

The specific needs to be addressed by the proposed action include:

Reliability of Long-Term Public Access to River 'S' Unit: The existing road and bridge were constructed sometime in the 1950's. The single-lane road and bridge are narrow and passage can be difficult for the passenger vehicles and Refuge's heavy equipment accessing the River 'S' Unit. Access to the River 'S' Unit has been closed several times to conduct major repairs to the road and bridge and to allow heavier equipment to pass without conflicting with passenger vehicles. When constructed, the existing timber bridge had an anticipated life span of about 40 years. The bridge now requires routine maintenance, and major reconstruction in the short term will be necessary to keep the bridge open to the public. These routine repairs can have undesirable environmental impacts and impede the ability of the public to access the Refuge. To maximize the federal transportation funds available, long-

term solutions to access the River 'S' Unit should be examined.

Continuity and Efficiency in Refuge Operations: The USFWS maintains over 7,000 acres in the Complex. The USFWS is mandated by law to manage Refuge lands. These lands require routine maintenance operations to provide the highest quality wildlife habitat possible. These operations include grazing, mowing, invasive species removal, tree planting, flooding and draining wetlands, and regulating visitor and hunter use. All the heavy equipment (farm tractors and implements and trucks with trailer equipment) used to conduct these operations is stored on the Bachelor Island Unit, accessible only by the River 'S' Unit bridge and road. On peak-use days up to 200 vehicles enter the River 'S' Unit. Due to the single-lane bridge, this amount of traffic on the River 'S' Unit can be in conflict with the USFWS's ability to efficiently carry out its operations.

Sustainable Transportation Solution: The Refuge draws over 120,000 visitors per year (CCP, 2009). While visitation is expected to increase, the USFWS has identified goals and objectives in its CCP to ensure the quality of the experience on the Refuge and the habitat itself can be preserved. These goals include reducing congestion on the Auto Tour route at peak times and providing pedestrian access to Refuge walking trails from Ridgefield. For many, the Refuge is considered the 'heart' of the community. Yet access to the River 'S' unit is separated from the Refuge headquarters by local streets (often without sidewalks), a busy railway, and Lake River. The single-lane bridge and road provide for a challenging pedestrian experience. Recognizing the importance and significance the Refuge has for the community highlights the need to improve the access connection between the two.

* The Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex is made up of several other refuges including: Steigerwald Lake, Pierce, and Franz Lake refuges further east on the Columbia River. Farming and maintenance equipment for all four refuges is stored on the River 'S' unit. An important function of the River 'S' access is to serve as the access road for the equipment used on the complex of refuges in Southwest Washington.

