



RIDGEFIELD NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE — RIVER 'S' UNIT ACCESS PROJECT

Project History

DECEMBER 2011

In 2009, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) published its Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Ridgefield Wildlife Refuge. The CCP included a Transportation Access Study completed by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA); that study 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 their final CCP, meaning a new access point for River 'S' was desired. A specific location for this access was not selected in the CCP.

The USFWS has now requested FHWA's Western Federal Lands Division office in Vancouver, Washington, to lead the River 'S' Unit Access Project under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). By building upon past planning efforts, the 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 is planning on engaging in a public scoping process under NEPA to develop the Purpose and Need and a full range of alternatives to address access related problems to the River 'S' Unit.

What's Next?

In January 2012, the project team will be directly interviewing 10 groups of stakeholders. Questions will include:

1. Do you access the River 'S' Unit or visit the Refuge?
2. What is your interest in the access to the River 'S' Unit Refuge entrance?
3. Do you have any concerns with the current access to the Refuge's River 'S' Unit?
4. Do you have ideas for improving the access?
5. Do you feel the entrance should move from its current location? If so, why? If not, why?
6. If you think the entrance should move, where do you think an appropriate location is for a new entrance?
7. Are you concerned about any particular environmental impacts, or impacts to local residents or businesses from a new access point?
8. Do you perceive any potential development impacts from an improved or relocated access to the River 'S' Unit?

After the stakeholder interviews and evaluating comments provided through our web site or other outreach efforts, the project team will use the information gained to further refine the Purpose and Need (page 2). The FHWA team will then develop a range of alternatives.

Next spring, there will be public meetings so the community can review and comment on the Purpose and Need statement, and the range of alternatives identified through the public involvement process. A second newsletter will announce the meeting and provide more information on the alternatives.



Get Involved

The FHWA is seeking your input in this process. As this project gets underway it is important that we establish a conversation with people interested in this project. 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 intention is 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.

The FHWA has developed a project questionnaire and a draft Purpose and Need statement for the River 'S' Unit Access project. Review the Purpose and Need on page 2 of this newsletter and look for the questionnaire on our project website the week of December 12 at <http://www.wfl.fhwa.dot.gov/projects/wa/ridgefield-wildlife-refuge/>

Contact

Michael Traffalis
FHWA Project Manager
610 E. 5th Street | Vancouver, WA 98661

Email: RiverSUnit_AccessProject@dot.gov

Web: <http://www.wfl.fhwa.dot.gov/projects/wa/ridgefield-wildlife-refuge/>

Draft Statement of Purpose and Need

The project team is developing the project's Purpose and Need under NEPA. The following is the first draft for the public to consider. Please review and forward comments on your perceptions, what you think may be missing, or what we should consider refining further. You can submit comments at <http://www.wfl.fhwa.dot.gov/projects/wa/ridgefield-wildlife-refuge/> or send an email to the project email address: RiverSUnit_AccessProject@dot.gov.

Project Purpose

The purpose of the proposed action is to enhance mobility and provide for long-term access to the River 'S' Unit of the Ridgefield Wildlife Refuge by addressing present and future visitor demand and mobility needs. Visitors currently access the River 'S' Unit from Hillhurst Road via a single-lane gravel road through private property and an at-grade rail crossing of the BNSF Railway. Visitors must then

cross Lake River on a 330-foot long, single-lane, wooden bridge to access the Refuge facilities and the Auto Tour Route.

When compared to the No-build Alternative, the proposed action is intended to achieve the following objectives: a) improve the reliability of public access to and from the River 'S' Unit and b) improve Refuge and visitor connectivity between the Carty and River 'S' Units.

Project Need

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

- **Reliability of Access:** The existing road is very steep and has sharp turns which substantially decrease the sight distance available to drivers. The road and bridge are narrow and passage can be difficult for the types of vehicles and volumes of traffic accessing the River 'S' Unit. Vehicles often need to stop or pull over to avoid oncoming traffic. Access to the River 'S' Unit has been closed several times to conduct major repairs to the road and bridge. Because the road and bridge are single lane, access has also been closed to reduce conflicts between Refuge operations and the traveling public.
- **Growing Visitor Demand:** The Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge draws over 100,000 visitors per year (CCP, 2009). During summer months the River 'S' Unit sees over 120 trips per day (FWS, 2011). There are two major units to the Refuge providing year round public access; the Carty Unit and the River 'S' Unit. These entrances are located approximately two miles apart. Visitors wanting to access both units must travel through residential areas, and travel time between the two units often prevents visitors from accessing more of the Refuge. As visitation is forecasted to increase there is a growing need to centralize year-round public access to the Refuge.

