

Purpose and Need Statement

The purpose of the proposed project is to provide for long-term access to the River 'S' Unit that addresses visitor demand and meets the operational and management needs of the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The proposed project is intended to achieve the following objectives: a) improve the reliability and mobility of public access to and from the River 'S' Unit, b) improve the USFWS's ability to efficiently carry out their operations consistent with their management goals within the Ridgefield Refuge Complex, and c) provide for a transportation solution that is sustainable for the resources on the refuge and the community of Ridgefield.

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

Reliability of Long Term Public Access to River 'S' Unit: The existing road and bridge were constructed sometime in the late 1960's. The single lane road and bridge are narrow and passage can be difficult for the passenger vehicles and buses 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. In order 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 Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The USFWS is mandated by law to manage refuge lands. These lands require routine maintenance operations in order to provide the highest quality of wildlife habitat possible. These operations include, grazing, mowing, invasive species removal, tree planting, flooding and draining wetlands, delivery of goods and materials, and regulating visitor and hunter use. All of 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. Due to the single lane bridge, public traffic on the River 'S' Unit can be in conflict with the USFWS's ability to efficiently carry out their operations.

Sustainable Transportation Solution: The Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge draws over 120,000 visitors per year (CCP, 2009). In 2012, there were approximately 73,000 visitors to the River 'S' Unit with 75,000 anticipated in 2013. While visitation is expected to increase, the USFWS has identified goals and objectives to ensure the quality of the experience on the refuge and the habitat itself can be preserved. A transportation facility that is both economically and environmentally sustainable is needed for the refuge to provide safe, accessible, and high quality wildlife-dependent recreation over the long term. Key elements of a sustainable transportation solution for the Refuge include reducing operations and maintenance expenses associated with the existing bridge, accommodating the projected increase in visitation and vehicle traffic, and encouraging non-vehicular access by enhancing pedestrian and bicycle connectivity between the River 'S' Unit and the community.