

West Vail Pass Vegetated Wildlife Overpass Pilot Project
740 Sims, USDA Forest Service Regional Office
Fernow Room, 10am-2pm

FULL Meeting Minutes – March 31, 2005

Attendance:

Colorado Department of Transportation – Roland Westl, Chris Paulsen

Federal Highway Administration – Ron Sperial, Mike Vanderhoof

Fish and Wildlife Service – Susan Linner, Alison Michael

Forest Service – Melanie Woolever, Nancy Warren, Bill Janowski, Dan Nolan, Keith Giezentanner

JF Sato – Evan Kirby

Colorado DNR – Tom Blickensderfer

Wilderness Workshop – Sloan Shoemaker

Southern Rockies Ecosystem Project – Monique DiGiorgio, Julia Kintsch

Meeting Goal: To assess agency interest in the proposed project as well as agency commitment to project development by clarifying roles and refining project details.

Project description, including current Congressional interest

Sloan Shoemaker of the Wilderness Workshop described the West Vail Pass vegetated overpass as a pilot *project* to demonstrate the effectiveness of these structures for allowing safe passage of wildlife from one side of the interstate to the other. This not only ensures their survival, but equally ensures the safety of the motoring public. This pilot structure would have tremendous visibility on this heavily traveled route, giving the public an opportunity to experience its safety, visual appeal, and utility, thereby building support for the larger initiative to construct vegetated wildlife structures at all the critical wildlife crossings across the state.

Sloan and Monique discussed Congressman Udall's office interest in this pilot project and his intent to submit a federal appropriation request through the **Public Lands Highways Discretionary (PLHD) Program of the Federal Highway Administration** (<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/discretionary/plhcurr3.htm>). Senator Salazar and Allard are also interested in the project, but would be more supportive if there is a demonstration of broad support from the pertinent agencies. A final conclusion was made that a summary of the meeting notes would be submitted to the Congressional members as a statement of their support and interest in working jointly on the project.

Sloan and Monique acknowledged the good work of the ALIVE program that identified this location as a high priority zone, and that CDOT has identified 12 additional important wildlife interference zones on I-70, and that CDOT is working with SREP throughout state of Colorado to prioritize additional wildlife linkages. It was clarified that the intention of this pilot project was to raise awareness in this high profile location and lay the ground-work for a successful construction of similar crossings throughout the state, including the ALIVE program's objectives.

A pilot project of this nature at the same time that the PEIS on I-70 is out, will also raise positive media and attention for CDOT and their commitment to wildlife crossings, which would be invaluable.

Local Support

The Town of Vail has signed a letter of support and Eagle County is poised to do so. It was mentioned that getting Vail Associates on board or to supply additional funding would be key. Sloan will try to contact them in the near future.

Press Coverage

Due to the likelihood that the press would eventually be informed of this project and want to do a story on it, Sloan and Monique proactively drafted a press release that they would like to release the first week in April. Sloan and Monique asked for the meeting participants to review the press release and get comments back to them in the next week. The group jointly decided that they would put a paragraph in the press release about the ALIVE program stating something like, “The Colorado Department of Transportation also identified the West Vail Pass “linkage interference zone” as a high priority in their recently released I-70 Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) as part of their ALIVE program. ALIVE, an interagency group, formed to assess and improve permeability for wildlife along the I-70 Corridor from Denver to Glenwood Springs, is working with advocates to further develop the concept and plan for the structure and is supportive of constructing a vegetated wildlife overpass in this location.”

Monique also offered to contact Lighthawk who has offered to take key policy makers, press, and others on an overflight of the Vail Pass area.

Federal Lands Program Funding

Mike Vanderhoof of FHWA reiterated that the requesting funds from the Public Lands Highways Discretionary (PLHD) Program of the Federal Highway Administration would indeed be an appropriate place to request these dollars from and that they would not conflict with existing or future CDOT projects because this would be a separate and additional source of funding.

Ron Sperial of FHWA raised the question of what would happen if the project goes over budget, since CDOT and FHWA cannot come up with the additional dollars needed. In addition, the following questions were raised for review by Michael and Monique: 1) would these funds carry over until the end of the next highway bill or would we need to obligate them more quickly? 2) If we got a lump sum, could we spend it as needed on project development (over 24 months) and use the remainder for construction? 3) would any state/local match be required if it is PLH Discretionary? 4) what happens if the project goes over budget? 5) is \$4.5 million enough for the project? 6) how much funding is in the pot for Colorado?

Monique mentioned that two independent cost estimates, one based off of the Banff National Park overpass and one from a private engineering firm *pro bono*, had been developed that both indicated \$4.5 million would be sufficient, but that an additional site visit with CDOT would be the best way to get an accurate cost estimate. Chris Paulsen agreed to contact CDOT engineers and coordinate a site visit as soon as possible.

In general, FHWA thinks this is a viable project and is committed to working with partners to make it happen if funding becomes available and timing with the I-70 PEIS can be worked out. FHWA is clarifying many of the funding questions, including timeline for project completion, etc.

NEPA and Environmental Impacts

A long discussion about the cost and timeline of the NEPA process, EAs, EISs, BAs, and BOs, was had. Monique received an estimate from the Forest Service approximating that an EA would cost anywhere from \$200,000 - \$250,000 (6 months) or \$600,000 with surveys and that an EIS would cost anywhere from \$225,000- \$300,000 (6 months) or \$575-\$750,000 (1 year).

The idea of combining the Forest Plan amendment and the NEPA process was raised. Ultimately, the NEPA analysis would have to weigh the short-term cost of construction with the long-term benefit that the structure would provide for wildlife. The group thought the NEPA process would go smoothly, but that the details of how it would be conducted needed to be refined. Because of the overwhelming positive environmental benefits to wildlife, the group thought that a categorical exclusion might be appropriate.

In general, Susan Linner and Alison Michael of the FWS said they were supportive of the project and would consider construction of the overpass as a conservation measure for the I-70 PEIS, enabling CDOT to receive credits for the project and hopefully streamlining the NEPA process.

Project Relation to I-70 PEIS

One of the most important questions raised by the group was the timing of the chosen I-70 PEIS alternative and how this would effect the construction and engineering of the overpass. It was agreed that the I-70 PEIS alternative needed to be chosen to ensure that the structure is built correctly. The group thought that the 24-month planning timeframe would considerably increase the chances that the timing of the project would work out.

CDOT agreed to work with the group to forward the project as long as funding for the project comes from the Federal Lands Program, thereby not conflicting with other CDOT projects, and timing with the I-70 PEIS can be worked out. In particular, CDOT will send an engineer on location for a site-specific assessment, including preliminary budget estimate.

Forest Service Land Management and Right of Way

Recreation, fen and wetland considerations, and a bike trail on the south side of I-70 was brought up as a major concern for the effectiveness of the overpass since human disturbance is known to be a factor in reducing crossing effectiveness.

Monique brought up the idea that placing the overpass further west, around milemarker 186.5, would reduce recreational conflicts as well as fen and wetland conflicts. Evan Kirby then passed around maps that showed the recreational use and fen locations in the proposed project area.

In addition, Keith Giezentanner, Melanie Woolever, and Nancy Warren of the Forest Service weighed on the public lands management aspects of this project and offered that if required for the crossing structure to be effective, a forest plan amendment could be done.

In general, the Forest Service stated that it is supportive of the project, which is consistent with direction in the White River Forest Plan, including *Strategy 1.c.8*, which calls for identifying site-specific locations where highway crossings are needed to reduce highway impacts on lynx. The Forest Service is committed to working with the Federal Highway Administration and CDOT to address wildlife movement and habitat connectivity needs. The specific proposal for a vegetated overpass will be

reviewed to assure that compatible land management occurs on the adjoining National Forest system lands.

It was discussed that both the FS and CDOT had right-of way on the project – CDOT on the land adjacent to the highway and the FS on the land adjacent to the CDOT right of way, entering into Forest Service land.

Engineering, Construction and Monitoring

Roland Wostl of CDOT posed that the appropriated dollars could be used instead for fencing the existing span bridges west of Vail pass and east of the Town of Vail to increase their effectiveness. Monique noted that the original cost estimate included 12 miles of fencing between the overpass and the existing span bridges to increase highway permeability, offer more options for wildlife, increase safety, and to increase the utility of the structures. There was agreement that this could be a good approach.

The entire group strongly concurred that this structure would be built not just for lynx, but for all wildlife use, including invertebrates like butterflies and moths, thus taking a multi-species approach.

Timeline

The group worked through a tentative timeline that was 24 months to include planning, engineering, NEPA processes, and pre-construction monitoring for one year.

It was noted by the group that this would also allow for the clarification and resolve of many of the questions that had been raised at the meeting thus far.

Tom Blickensderfer questioned why the project needed to happen this FY, and that it would behoove the group to consider holding off one more year to get all the appropriate questions answered. In particular, Tom noted that the hunting community should be brought into the discussion.

Monique pointed out that the political climate was ripe this FY and that the opportunity might not be available next year. Tom felt that that was not an issue, and that the politics would be aligned as well next year. The group agreed that communicating with RMEF and other hunting and game organizations would be a good thing to do.

In response to Tom's concern about potential opposition from the hunting community to fencing off the highway and reducing access, FHWA mentioned that hunters pulling off the side of the road to hunt is illegal and CDOT mentioned that from the feedback they have been getting there is more opposition to the fact that there are not enough of these kinds of structures along the highways.

In general, the DNR thinks the project is a good idea but would like to see questions answered, including additional stakeholder involvement. Russ George will be briefed about the project to determine the DNR's official stance and the DNR will contact CDOW about the project. Tom also mentioned that Tawnia Shenk, Ron Valardie, and John Broderick of CDOW should be briefed about the project and brought into the discussion.

Project Management

The question of who would be the lead on the project was raised. After discussion, it was agreed that the best project managers would be CDOT and FHWA, jointly.