SR-35 Columbia River Crossing Feasibility Study

Scoping Report

Prepared for:

Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council
Washington State Department of Transportation
Oregon Department of Transportation

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I. Overview

A. Scoping

Scoping is a process to gain input from the public and interested agencies on the extent of issues and impacts to be addressed in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). An EIS for the proposed SR-35 Columbia River Crossing project will be prepared in compliance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Scoping for the SR-35 Columbia River Crossing Feasibility Study (Study) was held from February 27 through March 30, 2001. Activities consisted of two public scoping meetings, information sharing on a project Internet web site, and comment period to submit comments via telephone, email, and written correspondence.

To advertise the scoping meeting, a Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement was published in the Federal Register on February 27, 2001. Scoping notices were also published in the *Hood River News* and White Salmon *Enterprise* newspapers during the week of March 5, 2001, announcing the environmental process and public scoping meetings. Press releases were submitted to other newspapers including: The Dalles *Chronicle*, Goldendale *Sentinel*, Skamania County *Pioneer*, Vancouver *Columbian*, *Oregonian*, and *Business Journal*. Notices were also posted at the tollbooth on the Hood River Bridge.

The first public scoping meeting was held March 8, 2001 at the Oregon Department of Transportation office in Troutdale, Oregon, for natural resource and environmental regulatory agency representatives. Thirteen agency representatives attended the meeting.

The second public scoping meeting was held March 8, 2001 at *Fidel's at the Gorge* in Bingen, Washington. Approximately 60 participants from the public attended the scoping meeting. The meeting was arranged as an open house forum to facilitate one-on-one interaction between project staff and the public.

B. Other Public Involvement Activities

The Southwest Washington Regional Transportation (RTC) maintains an Internet web site dedicated to this project in which the public can submit comments via email. The RTC web site is expected to be open throughout the project until a final decision has been made.

In addition to the public scoping meetings and Internet web site, an ongoing public involvement program has been initiated to gather comments prior to the scoping period. In October 2000, a round of public meetings and stakeholder interviews were conducted to provide an understanding of the project and receive input regarding issues to be studied, crossing areas ("corridors"), locations and facilities ("alternatives").

Three advisory committees have been formed to advise the project team: a Resource/Regulatory Committee (RRC), comprised of representatives of state and federal agencies which will be reviewing alternatives analyses, documents, and permit applications pertinent to agency regulations; a Local Advisory Committee (LAC) made

up of area residents, and business owners; and a Steering Committee which includes local elected and appointed officials and senior agency staff.

Interviews were conducted with individuals representing relevant governmental agencies, businesses, and community and civic organizations that would be interested in the project (stakeholders). Thirty-five stakeholders representing twenty-eight different agencies and organizations were interviewed.

A project Management Team comprised of lead RTC, Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), and consultant staff meet regularly to oversee the project.

II. Public and Agency Comments

During the scoping period, 77 written comments (letters and email) were received from individuals, groups, and agency representatives. After review, the content of the comments were categorized as pertaining to: the purpose of and need for the project, corridors, specific issues, and alternative evaluation process. A summary of the comments received during the scoping period is provided below.

A. Purpose and Need Statement

Public support for the Study has been largely positive. Many cited that the existing bridge is unsafe and does not provide access to pedestrians and bicycles. Thus, a new or improved crossing would be beneficial to alternative modes of transportation.

Although most people are in support of the Study, several comments directly questioned the fundamental need for a new or improved crossing within the area. Those who question the need or oppose a new or improved crossing cited concerns for the costs that would be borne financially and environmentally.

Commenters generally recommended that the Study proceed with careful consideration of a full range of alternatives that take into account safety improvements, potential environmental impacts, and funding strategies, and potential impacts to the recreational uses and users of the area.

B. Corridors

Six corridors were presented to the public at scoping meetings and through various media: West, City Center, Existing High, Existing Low, East A, and East B. All corridors received some form of support albeit some corridors were viewed more favorably than others. Similarly, each corridor had detractors with the exception of Existing Low, which had no voiced opposition.

All corridors were believed to impact the usability of the Columbia River for wind-powered recreation (e.g., windsurfing, kite boarding). Particular opposition to the West and City Center Corridors was voiced for potential adverse impacts to these activities (use by and safety of users) and the associated revenue generated in local communities.

Due to the need to cross the Columbia River, all corridors were believed to have a potential impact to fisheries and habitat. Moreover, potential visual impacts were a

concern due to the natural setting and Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area designation.

Support for or opposition to particular corridors can be differentiated by people's expectations of each corridor's potential impacts to transportation, recreation, land use and development, local economies and the environment. The following summaries indicate strengths and weaknesses that the public identified for each corridor.

West Corridor

The West Corridor had a few supporters; most people were opposed to further consideration of this corridor. Major issues were impacts to prime windsurfing areas, launch sites, and recreation generated revenue. A few positive comments for this corridor were received regarding a reduction in commuting distances to Portland and perceived disruption to already congested I-84 interchanges.

Traffic/Transportation

- Least disruption to current traffic patterns and congestion
- Reduces long commutes to Portland
- Further away from White Salmon and Bingen

Recreation: Use and Access

- Adverse impacts to windsurfing
- Potentially eliminates or reduces use of Spring Creek Hatchery and Swell City launch areas
- Potentially improves access to downriver sites

Economy

- Adverse impact to tourism
- Adverse impacts to recreation based economies

Design/Engineering

- High costs associated with elevation on the Oregon side

Visual

- Adverse impacts to natural surroundings and scenic values

City Center Corridor

The City Corridor also had a few supporters. Major issues were impacts to prime windsurfing areas, launch sites, and recreation generated revenue. A few positive comments for this corridor were received regarding a reduction in commuting distances to Portland and providing a direction connection between I-84 and Washington State Highway 141.

Traffic/Transportation

- Most direct connection between I-84 and State Highway 141
- Adverse impacts to traffic and congestion
- Reduces long commutes to Portland

Recreation and Access

- Adverse impacts to windsurfing
- Directly impacts a launch site

Land Use/Development

- Bypasses existing commercial development at existing bridge while encouraging similar, duplicative development at new location
- Reduces waterfront property and public open space

Economy

- Adverse impacts to the event center recreation use and associated businesses
- Adverse impacts to tourism
- Adverse impacts to recreation based economies

Environmental

- Less potential than other corridors to impact sensitive wildlife

Visual

- Extends visual impacts
- Adverse impacts to natural surroundings and scenic values

Existing High Corridor

There was both general support for and against the Existing High Corridor. However, no specific issues were raised regarding this corridor, thus, it is not further detailed.

Existing Low Corridor

Support for the Existing Low Corridor was generally positive. Many believed that this corridor is the most practical in terms of traveling patterns between Washington and Oregon communities, proximity to existing development, having the fewest impacts to water- and land-based recreation, and minimizing impacts to environmental and visual resources. Some concerns were raised about adding to already congested areas.

Traffic/Transportation

- Best for traveling convenience between Washington and Oregon
- Most practical for traffic flow reasons
- Adds to an already congested area
- May not provide alternative route to alleviate construction impacts to traffic

Recreation and Access

- Best corridor to minimize impacts to recreation

Land Use/Development

- Accommodates previous development of communities
- Accommodates existing I-84 exit and overpass
- Best corridor for reducing urban sprawl

Economy

- Best corridor for economies of White Salmon and Hood River
- Best corridor for reducing taxpayer cost

- Most practical corridor for economic reasons

Environmental

- Best corridor for minimizing environmental impacts
- Best corridor for minimizing impacts to cultural/historic resources
- Less potential than other corridors to impact sensitive wildlife

Visual

- Most practical corridor for supporting Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area provisions

East A Corridor

Support for the East A Corridor was mixed. Many commenters highlighted transportation, land use/development, and economic benefits associated with this corridor. Recreational use within this corridor, specifically that related to Bingen Pond, was a drawback.

Traffic/Transportation

- Better connection to SR 14, Bingen Point, and road to White Salmon
- Can keep existing bridge for pedestrian and bicycle use or for one-lane peak hour traffic relief
- Provides direct access to Bingen
- Improves access to businesses and facilities near I-84 at exits 63 and 64
- Has less impact to current traffic patterns
- Can continue to use existing bridge during construction
- Relieves congestion at existing I-84 exits
- Reduces congestion at OR 35 and downtown Hood River
- Less wind would affect traffic on a new bridge within this corridor

Navigation

- Navigation channel could be spanned by high bridge without need for costly lift span
- Can provide good height for navigation

Recreation and Access

- Minimal impacts to windsurfing
- Reduces wind at Bingen sailing park
- Least impacting of all corridors to recreation and wildlife sites
- Minimal impact on recreation sites in Oregon
- Adverse impacts to Bingen Pond and associated wetlands and bird habitat
- Adverse impacts to various recreation associated with Bingen Park
- Adverse impacts to Bingen launch areas
- Adverse impacts to only public access to Columbia River on Washington side

Land Use/Development

- Eliminates costly intersection modifications
- Keeps traffic in industrial area in Washington
- No room for development, thus motorists would still use services at current locations

Economy

- Positive impact to economic development in White Salmon and Bingen

Design/Engineering

- Has the most narrow place to cross river
- Can avoid at-grade railroad crossing

Environmental

- Native American treaty access (in lieu fishing) site, rest area and park could be avoided with a high bridge

Visual

- Few impacts to scenic values

East B Corridor

The East B Corridor had few supporters. Major issues of concern were impacts to windsurfing areas, launch sites, and Bingen Park. Benefits of this corridor was the narrow river crossing in this location as well as minimal impact to existing local traffic in Hood River, White Salmon, and Bingen.

Traffic/Transportation

- Too far from Hood River and Bingen communities
- Has less impact to current local traffic

Recreation and Access

- Few impacts to windsurfing
- Adverse impacts to windsurfing, specifically Bingen sailing park
- Adverse impacts to various recreation associated with Bingen Park
- Adverse impacts to Bingen Marina and associated birding and fish habitat
- Adverse impacts to Bingen launch areas
- Adverse impacts to only public access to Columbia River on Washington side

Economy

- Less cost associated with the facility to span the narrow part of the Columbia River

Visual

- Few impacts to scenic values

Other Corridor Comments

Several comments were received questioning other potential corridors. These include considering a crossing between East A and East B and a crossing closer to Carson, Washington (approximately 20 miles west of White Salmon).

C. Issues

Other issues were raised about the project in general rather than corresponding to a particular corridor. These issues are summarized below.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities

Many commenters cited the lack of facilities for bicycles and pedestrians on the current bridge. There was general support in providing a means for these types of transportation in order to accommodate those who do not own a vehicle, those who choose to walk or bicycle, and those who recreate in the area. Several suggested using the existing bridge for bicycle and pedestrian use while building a new facility (e.g., bridge or tunnel) to accommodate motorized vehicles.

Environmental Concerns

Comments were received from several public agencies to consider potential impacts to fisheries and fish habitat. These considerations should be included in the design of any new or modified structure that would be close to the Columbia River and create large shaded areas in the water, which would serve as refugia for predatory fish that prey on migrating juvenile salmonid fishes.

Impacts associated with construction, especially in-water work to place bridge piers, can be damaging and disruptive to migratory and resident salmonids. Siltation from in-water or shoreline work can also adversely affect fisheries resources. If an option that involves removing or demolishing the existing bridge, public agency representatives recommended that removal methods would have to accommodate the needs of fish and wildlife resources.

Long-term operation and maintenance of a new or improved crossing would also need to address storm water runoff that may affect water quality of the Columbia River and any associated wetlands.

Other environmental concerns addressed developing a design that is consistent with the natural surroundings if a new bridge is built. Any new bridge should have a style that minimizes impacts to the area's scenic values.

Facility Type

Several comments voiced a preference on the type of new facility that could replace the existing bridge. Suggestions ranged from a high elevation bridge, a parallel bridge to the existing bridge, to a fixed span bridge, or a lift-span bridge (similar to the existing bridge). Some believed that a tunnel might have fewer impacts to the environment, but may limit access or be too costly.

Comments were also received about reducing the noise associated with the current bridge surface.

Safety

Concerns about safety on the existing bridge were raised repeatedly. The existing bridge lanes are narrow and do not easily accommodate large vehicles or wide loads. Reports of several accidents and many "close calls" are frequently heard. A concern about the structural integrity of the bridge was also voiced.

Tolls

Comments on bridge user tolls were mixed. Some people would like to see the toll eliminated, while others “have no quarrel” with paying a toll. Others prefer that if the toll remains, that the revenue be used to fund maintenance and improvements such as bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

Toll collection is also perceived by some to contribute to congestion. Suggestions were made to consider improved options that would lessen queuing at the tollbooth.

Traffic

Congestion and delays are among traffic-related issues with the existing bridge. A few people stated that delays are frequent due to constant maintenance associated with the existing bridge. Delays are also common when traffic is limited to one lane to allow for wide loads. Congestion is also a concern to many when it backs up onto I-84. One suggested remedy was to build a new crossing and keep the existing bridge to handle excess traffic during peak hours or seasons.

D. Process

A few comments addressed the process of developing a range of alternatives and considering the potential environmental consequences of the alternatives.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provided guidance on the elements that should be included in the DEIS. These elements are: a purpose and need statement; actions to ensure the protection of listed species and their habitats; proposed bridge [or other facility if a new crossing is chosen] alignment and associated environmental consequences related to water quality and critical areas; and potential impacts to tribal areas of concern.

Agencies recommend that a broad range of alternatives should be developed. This range of alternatives should address all elements of multi-modal transportation options, complimentary uses of the existing bridge, a variety of routes or locations, and a no action alternative. EPA recommends that alternatives omitted from further consideration in the DEIS should be briefly reviewed in the DEIS as to the reasons for their dismissal. Comments from the public also voice agreement on evaluating alternatives that “truly make sense” rather than wasting resources on studying unreasonable alternatives.

The EPA, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Washington Department of Natural Resources indicated that the Columbia River provides important habitat to federally listed endangered and threatened species. Recommendations were made to carefully consider what design and construction techniques would be employed and how impacts to aquatic resources, wetlands, and riparian areas would be avoided, minimized, or compensated. Similarly, operation of a new or improved crossing should also consider impacts to water quality over the life of the crossing.

III. Next Steps

Comments received during scoping will be incorporated into the project development and the EIS. The following sections describe how particular categories of comments will be incorporated throughout the project development stages.

A. Purpose and Need Statement

A Purpose and Need Statement will be drafted early in the NEPA project development stages. Comments received during scoping will be incorporated into the draft Purpose and Need Statement. All advisory committees (LAC, SC and RRC) will have an opportunity to further review and comment on the Purpose and Need Statement before it is finalized. In addition, the federal and state agencies involved in formal environmental streamlining processes (Washington Merger and Oregon Collaborative Environmental Agreement) will review this Statement. The Purpose and Need Statement will be included in the draft and final EIS.

B. Corridors

The range of corridors will be narrowed to begin the process of identifying reasonable and practicable alternatives (i.e., specific locations and facilities). The corridors will be screened based on public comments, consistency with the project purpose and need statement, baseline conditions, supplemental technical expertise, and resource reconnaissance.

C. Issues

Issues raised during scoping as well as those identified through other public involvement activities will be incorporated into the project development. Issues such as bicycle and pedestrian facilities, environmental concern, facility type, safety, tolls and traffic will be addressed in the project purpose and need statement. These issues will be further considered as the project alternatives (specific locations and facilities) are developed and evaluated. A comprehensive environmental evaluation of alternatives will be completed and documented in an EIS. Further design and engineering analysis will also be conducted as part of the alternative development and evaluation.

D. Process

Project development thus far has included the following activities: project coordination and study planning, identification of study corridors, and scoping. The next steps in project development involves generating a broad range of alternatives and defining criteria to select alternatives to be carried into the DEIS for further study.

In order to develop alternatives, the number of study corridors will be narrowed to those that meet the purpose of and need for the project as well as meet other project objectives including minimizing impacts to the environment. The alternatives will be specific locations and facilities identified within each of the promising corridors. Criteria will be developed to select which alternatives will be carried into the DEIS for further consideration.

The DEIS will then provide a more detailed description of the affected environment, potential environmental consequences associated with each alternative, and mitigation strategies to avoid, minimize, compensate, and monitor potential impacts. The DEIS will also briefly explain which corridors and alternatives were previously considered but omitted from detailed study.

Public input into the alternatives development, selection, and evaluation is ongoing throughout the project development process in various forums that include periodic

advisory committee meetings, open houses, project Internet web site, and environmental streamlining meetings with selected agencies. Newsletters and the Internet web site provide project updates and information on upcoming meetings.

IV. List of Participants

A. Public Participants

Susan Bernhardt
Jeff Bialer
Dave Bisset
Don Bradford
Joseph Burke
David Burns
Brian Butler
Sean Corcoran
John Crim
Linda DeCarlo
Brian Dennis
Barb Doscher
Robert Ehelebe
Michael Fick
Chuck Gale
Mike Gallagher
Elke Geiger
Judy Gottschalk
Laura Green
Charlie Grist
Frank Haas
Patrick, Susan, Jillian and Edith Hartford
Marc Harvey
J.D. Hattenhauer
Erik Hauge
John Inglis
Brad Jensen
Stuart Johnson
Charlie Jones
Duane Karren
Christine Kreps
Dick Lamm
Vernhes Laurence
Ken Lucus
Norberto Maahs
Ken Maddox
Chelsea Marr
Greg McCaw
Carl E. McNew
Michael Medlock
Sherry Meier
Peggy Menasco
Steve Parks
Penny Paynter
Haydn Piper
Mark Prussing
Barry Ritchey
Terry Rogers
Teresa L. Schuemann
Jody Seaborn
Melody Shellman
Dianne Sherwood
Elliot Solway
Carl Spiess
Mike Stroud
Michael Sullivan, Ph.D.
William Sullivan
Steve Tessmer
Cindy Wadman
Marvin Wayne
Julie Wyatt
Ken Zeman
Karmen Zorza

The project Management Team also received comments from many people who attended the public open house in Bingen, Washington on March 8, 2001. These individuals' comments have been included in this Scoping Report. Approximately 60 people attended this event; however, the sign-in sheet has been misplaced so we cannot specifically acknowledge those who attended. If the sign-in sheet is found, we will update this scoping report to include the names of individuals who attended.

B. Agency Participants

Robert Anderson, National Marine Fisheries Service
Bill Davis, US Army Corps of Engineers
Tom Connor, US Environmental Protection Agency
Carl Dugger, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
David Grant, Washington Department of Natural Resources
Eric Holman, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
Larry Ksionzyk, Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development
Jeanette Kloos, Oregon Department of Transportation
John Marshall, US Fish and Wildlife Service
Art Martin, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife/ODOT Coordinator
Tom Melville, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality
Steve Purchase, Oregon Division of State Lands
Ken Ratcliff, Bureau of Indian Affairs
Diana Ross, US Forest Service
Kristen Stallman, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department