

Pilot Implementation of Planning-Environment Linkage at INDOT

October 25, 2019

Planning-Environment Linkage (PEL) is an approach to performing planning studies that allows decisions made in planning to be carried forward into the NEPA process. Without PEL, these decisions usually need to be revisited in order to be valid in NEPA. PEL generally requires that decisions made during planning receive public involvement and resource agency coordination in order to be brought into NEPA. PEL can be used by any planning agency, including state DOTs, MPOs and LPAs.

INDOT proposes to incorporate basic PEL elements into all INDOT planning studies and to incorporate more complex PEL elements into selected INDOT planning studies on a pilot basis, consistent with 23 CFR 168. INDOT has created a PEL Committee to screen potential PEL studies for appropriateness as PEL pilots; it consists of one expert each from INDOT's planning, environmental, and corridor planning divisions.

MPOs and LPAs are encouraged to incorporate PEL elements in their planning studies. PEL may provide local transportation planners with analytical tools and funding options that are not otherwise available.

All studies: Labeling and discussion of basic PEL elements and red flag investigations during planning.

Within all planning studies, the location description and deficiency analysis should identify the NEPA concepts of logical termini, independent utility, purpose and need, and an identified no build alternative. Red flag investigations should identify known features in the human and natural environment that may be impacted, and may also identify likely points of controversy or environmental obstacles. These elements provide the groundwork for NEPA documents for the proposed capital program projects that result from the planning study. Incorporating the NEPA elements will mainly require statements in the text of the planning document, and the red flag investigation will use existing information and existing INDOT guidance.

FHWA will not certify these elements for inclusion in NEPA because they have not received public involvement and resource agency coordination, but the elements would be formulated and ready for such coordination when NEPA is initiated. Information from the RFI would be available to inform analysis of possible remedies for identified deficiencies.

Implementation: The development of these elements will be added to the scope of work for consultant services contracts for planning studies. INDOT's Technical Planning and Programming Division and the Environmental Services Division will monitor deliverable quality.

PEL Pilot Level 1: Add public involvement and resource agency coordination: Some planning studies will benefit from incorporation of public involvement and resource agency coordination. The results of public involvement and resource agency coordination will be recorded in the planning study.

For localized planning studies, public involvement and resource agency coordination will be piloted on upcoming studies that can accommodate this level of publicity. FHWA will be asked to certify the elements that receive public involvement and resource agency coordination are consistent with PEL and can be carried forward into NEPA.

Public involvement and resource agency coordination also will be performed routinely on statewide planning studies, with the understanding that there will be very little detail for the public and resource agencies to react to.

Implementation: Public involvement and resource agency coordination will be added to the scope of work for the pilot study's consultant services contract and monitored by INDOT's Technical Planning and Programming Division, Environmental Services Division, and Office of Public Involvement. The FHWA's PEL questionnaire will be completed as FHWA's certification.

PEL Pilot Level 2: Add alternatives development and screening: Alternatives in planning studies will be formulated consistent with NEPA—they will be based on scoping with the public and resource agencies and they will be wide in range. The human and natural environmental impacts of the alternatives will be described using existing data. If the planning study goes further and screens the alternatives, the screening will be based on environmental impacts and on performance criteria derived from the purpose and need. FHWA will have to certify that the alternatives analysis in these pilot PEL studies are consistent with PEL in order for the screened alternatives to carry forward into NEPA. INDOT's PEL Committee may be called upon to determine whether the planning study should screen alternatives.

Implementation: These elements will be added to the scope of work for the PEL pilot planning study's consultant services contracts and monitored by INDOT's Technical Planning and Programming Division, Environmental Services Division, and Office of Public Involvement. The FHWA's PEL questionnaire will be completed as FHWA's certification.

Additional information: General information about PEL is available at https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/env_initiatives/PEL.aspx. The PEL questionnaire is available at https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/env_initiatives/pel/pel_quest.aspx