Sterling Highway MP 45–60 Project

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated January 2016

1. What is the Purpose and Need for the project?

The purpose of the project is to bring the highway up to current standards for a rural principal arterial to efficiently and safely serve through-traffic, local community traffic, and traffic bound for recreation destinations in the area, both now and in the future. In achieving this transportation purpose, DOT&PF and FHWA recognize the importance of protecting the Kenai River corridor." There are three interrelated needs that the project would address:

- Need 1: Reduce Highway Congestion.
- Need 2: Meet Current Highway Design Standards.
- Need 3: Improve Highway Safety.

2. Is this the "Cooper Landing Bypass" that has been talked about for a long time?

Yes. A bypass of Cooper Landing, either to the north or to the south, is included in the alternative routes that are under consideration. The build alternatives include varying lengths of new highway, ranging from a full bypass to a partial bypass. The Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (Draft SEIS) also evaluates a No Build Alternative that would not improve the existing highway in this corridor, beyond normal maintenance and eventual bridge replacements. Visit the project website (www.sterlinghighway.net) for more information on project alternatives.

3. Why is this project taking so long?

The project area around the Sterling Highway MP 45–60 is a complex area with many constraints, including challenging topography (steep valleys and proximity to the Kenai River); recreational resources (world-class sport fishing, hiking trails, state and federal lands); Alaska Native and historic cultural resources; and the existing community of Cooper Landing. There is simply no easy solution that is readily available, so each potential solution needs careful study and coordination in all of these areas, which takes time.

4. How does it differ from other road projects in the area?

This project addresses long-term transportation issues. There are three other Sterling Highway projects in the project vicinity:

- **Pavement Preservation:** An asphalt overlay was added to the MP 45-60 area during the summers of 2013 and 2014. This treatment addressed immediate driving surface needs and does not reduce the need for this project.
- **MP 57 Erosion Protection:** The Kenai River has eroded the river bank to within 16 feet of the highway near MP 57. DOT&PF is currently realigning about a half-mile of roadway. This section is part of the shared alignment of all proposed alternatives, and the new

alignment would be incorporated into the 45-60 project design. This project needs to occur on an accelerated schedule and is anticipated to be completed in 2015.

» **MP 58-79 Rehabilitation and Passing Lanes:** This project proposes to widen and add passing lanes from the west end of the 45-60 project, through the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, to the community of Sterling. This project is anticipated to go to construction during the summer of 2016.

5. What is a SEIS? How does it differ from an EIS?

The project was initially part of a larger project extending from MP 37 (junction with the Seward Highway) to MP 60 that began in the 1970s. DOT&PF and FHWA released two draft EIS documents for the project – in 1982 and 1994. Based on the complexity in the MP 45-60 area, and on a determination that the MP 37-45 project would be useful on its own, the 8-mile segment was expedited and constructed by 2001. The Sterling Highway MP 45-60 Project EIS is formally considered a supplement to the work started decades ago. Enough time has passed, however, that all research (scoping, alternative screening, and impact analyses) was begun anew.

6. What is a Section 4(f) Evaluation?

Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966 protects certain properties from use for transportation projects. FHWA may not approve a project requiring the use of publicly owned land of a public park, recreation area, or wildlife/waterfowl refuge, or land of an historic site of national, state, or local significance (for example, historic sites, archaeological sites, or traditional cultural properties) unless (1) there is no feasible and prudent alternative to such use, and (2) the project includes all possible planning to minimize harm; or unless the impact is determined to be "de minimis." A Section 4(f) evaluation considers these issues. The evaluation often is a chapter of an EIS.

7. What alternatives are being considered?

DOT&PF has identified four reasonable alternatives plus the No Build Alternative for consideration in the Draft SEIS. The alternatives are:

» No Build Alternative
» Cooper Creek Alternative
» G South Alternative
» Juneau Creek Alternative
» Juneau Creek Variant Alternative

Each of the four build alternatives would construct new highway with two 12-foot-wide travel lanes, 8-foot shoulders, passing lanes, and turning lanes. For all build alternatives, DOT&PF proposes to control access in areas built on new alignment, which means that direct access (public or private roads and driveways) would be restricted. This will preserve the function of the new highway and avoid roadside commercial development. Under the No Build Alternative, the highway would remain as it is today with routine maintenance and eventual bridge replacement.

The Cooper Creek Alternative would route the highway south around the portion of Cooper Landing located south of the Kenai River, reconnecting with the existing alignment near MP 51. Under the G South Alternative, the highway would be routed around all of Cooper Landing on an alignment located north of the community, reconnecting with the existing highway near MP 52. The Juneau Creek Alternative would be routed around all of Cooper Landing and most National Forest recreational destinations in the area (Cooper Creek and Russian River campgrounds, Resurrection Pass Trailhead, and Sportsman's Landing), reconnecting near MP 56. Under the Juneau Creek Variant Alternative, the highway would be routed similarly to the Juneau Creek Alternative, but it is specifically designed to avoid Federal Wilderness in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Its western intersection with the existing highway is located at Sportsman's Landing and the Refuge boundary near MP 55.

8. Is there a preferred alternative? *New**

Yes. DOT&PF and FHWA have identified the G South as the preferred alternative in December 2015. The G South Alternative provides the best balance between meeting the project needs and minimizing impacts to the human and natural environment. The decision on which alternative will be selected is not final until the Record of Decision. A Final EIS and Record of Decision are anticipated in 2016

9. Why did DOT&PF and FHWA identify G South as the Preferred Alternative? *New**

The G South Alternative provides the best balance between meeting the project needs and minimizing impacts to the human and natural environment. The routing avoids impacts to the Resurrection Pass Trail, the Juneau Falls Recreation Area and important cultural properties, and avoids using designated wilderness land within the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The alternative skirts the Cooper Landing community to reduce community impacts associated with traffic, noise and property acquisition.

The G South Alternative largely avoids the Cooper Landing community to the north, would not impact undeveloped lands to the extent that the Juneau Creek alternatives would. Its natural environment impacts are between those of the Cooper Creek Alternative and the two Juneau Creek alternatives, but its function for traffic would be much better than the Cooper Creek Alternative, and it would have much less impact on the community. The G South can be seen as a compromise between the Juneau Creek alternatives and the Cooper Creek Alternative.

10. How does the G South Alternative Compare to the Juneau Creek Alternatives? *New**

- Juneau Creek Alternative would impact Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and its Congressionally designated Wilderness.
- The Juneau Creek Variant Alternative would impact the Sqilantnu Russian River Confluence Traditional Cultural Property and bisect "Tract A," an ANCSA* 14(h)(1) selection parcel owned by CIRI* that was selected because of its geographic location and cultural importance—it is not property that can be replaced. (*ANCSA= Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. CIRI=Cook Inlet Region, Inc., a regional Alaska Native corporation formed under ANCSA)
- Both of the Juneau Creek alternatives would impact the Resurrection Pass National Recreation Trail and Juneau Falls Recreation Area and would change the falls area from a backcountry destination to a front country, roadside destination.
- Both of the Juneau Creek alternatives would impact the historic/recreational Bean Creek Trail more than G South would impact the trail.
- Both of the Juneau Creek alternatives would affect approximately double the acreage of Wetlands and wildlife habitat, compared to the G South Alternative. Functions of the wetlands affected are similar. Both alternatives would have a greater length on new alignment which would require that wildlife cross two roads for movement across the valley.
- Both of the Juneau Creek alternatives would have greater conflicts with Forest Service management prescriptions and Inventoried Roadless Areas.

11. How does the G South Alternative compare to the Cooper Creek Alternative? *New**

- The Cooper Creek Alternative would continue to carry 100% of the highway's traffic, including truck traffic, through a substantial portion of the community. Traffic, noise, and the general atmosphere of the community (including division of the community by the highway) would continue to impact community character and make local access to homes and businesses difficult.
- The number of driveways and side streets in Cooper Landing would continue to frustrate through drivers, and would be less efficient and less safe than G South. The highway is a rural principal arterial and is part of the National Highway System and Interstate Highway System. It is meant to function primarily to serve connections between distant destinations, and the driveways and side streets mean the Cooper Creek Alternative would not resolve the highway function issues as well as the other alternatives. This is reflected in its lower level of service rating.
- Cooper Creek Alternative would relocate several households. Other properties would be partially acquired.
- Traffic through town and the proximity of homes and businesses mean there would be substantial noise impacts in Cooper Landing, and DOT&PF has no good way to mitigate those impacts.
- Construction impacts would be greatest, for the longest period, under the Cooper Creek Alternative. Cooper Landing residents would be impacted by truck traffic, direct construction, pilot cars, and delays more than other alternatives because the construction area would be more constricted and construction would occur in town where traffic congregates.
- The Cooper Creek Alternative would affect more historic sites than the other alternatives, including the Kenai Mining and Milling Historic District.
- The Cooper Creek Alternative would require temporary closures of the Cooper Landing Boat Launch. Other alternatives would not require closures of boat launches.

12. What are the G South Alternative's the key impacts and can those be mitigated? *New**

- The G South Alternative largely avoids the Cooper Landing community to the north and would not impact undeveloped lands to the extent that the Juneau Creek

alternatives would. Its natural environment impacts are between those of the Cooper Creek Alternative and the two Juneau Creek alternatives, but its function for traffic would be much better than the Cooper Creek Alternative, and it would have much less impact on the community. The G South can be seen as a compromise between the Juneau Creek alternatives and the Cooper Creek Alternative.

- Its largest impacts are to wildlife habitat in the lower Juneau Creek area and a new crossing of the Kenai River.
- DOT&PF and FHWA believe the habitat impacts can be reasonably mitigated to avoid new human incursion from the highway into the lower Juneau Creek area and to provide for good wildlife movement in and out of this area under the highway bridges.
- DOT&PF and FHWA believe that overall recreational experience on the river will not change substantially. Impacts to hydrology, water quality, fish habitat, and the riparian edge would be minimized and would be lower than corresponding impacts to terrestrial wildlife habitat under the Juneau Creek alternatives. Managers of the river and its stream banks in the bridge crossing area did not express strong objections to the bridge.
- Trail impacts would be least of all the alternatives, with a crossing of Bean Creek Trail near its trailhead. This trail disruption can be reasonably mitigated by providing an undercrossing for community access to the trail from the platted Slaughter Ridge Road and by providing a new formalized trailhead parking area west of Bean Creek.
- Impacts to cultural sites would be low to moderate compared to other alternatives. Remaining on the existing highway alignment from about MP 51 to MP 58 would result in the least change from current conditions and minimal impact to the setting and feeling of the Sqilantnu Archaeological District and Confluence Traditional Cultural Property.
- Remaining on the existing alignment in the MP 51 to MP 58 area would avoid the greatest impacts to the heart of the Traditional Cultural Property and would minimize impacts to Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and its Wilderness.

13. What Happens Next

DOT&PF and FHWA will be publishing a Final EIS in 2016. The Final EIS will contain updates and changes to the draft EIS based on comments received on the draft. It will provide additional details on the identification of the preferred alternative, publish the comments received on the draft, and provide responses to the substantive comments. The decision on which alternative will be selected is not final until the Record of Decision. A Final EIS and Record of Decision are anticipated in 2016.

14. Who makes the final decision?

The FHWA is the lead Federal agency for the SEIS and makes the final decision about selection of an alternative. This decision is made in conjunction with the DOT&PF. Other Federal agencies have their own authorizations, including permits for fill in wetlands and water bodies and land transfer authorizations. Those agencies will also use this SEIS and your comments in making their decisions.

15. When will a final decision be made? *New**

FHWA will select an alternative in the Record of Decision (ROD). This alternative may or may not be the preferred alternative based on public and stakeholder comment received during the Draft EIS public comment period. This alternative selected in the ROD will become final when the ROD is approved. FHWA anticipates a Final EIS and Record of Decision are in 2016.

16. Why can't the road be improved along the existing alignment?

Improving the highway in place was studied extensively. Steep slopes between MP 49 and MP 50.5 would require long and very tall retaining walls (reaching up to 170 feet) as the highway is pinched between the mountainside and the Kenai River. This alternative, called the Kenai River Walls Alternative, was eliminated from full consideration in the SEIS due to engineering challenges, costs, and environmental impacts that were considered unreasonable.

17. Will this project include a pedestrian and bicycle path in Cooper Landing?

Reconstructed and new highway segments would include 8-foot-wide shoulders to accommodate pedestrians and bicycles. There are no separated pathways planned as part of this project. There are also no pedestrian and bicycle facilities planned for the "old" segments that are bypassed by an alternative. It is anticipated that the majority of vehicle traffic would use the new highway alignment, leaving the "old" segment of the Sterling Highway more suitable for pedestrian and bicycle traffic.

18. How will driveways and private properties along the existing highway be affected by this project? *New**

Most private property in the project area is clustered around the existing highway. Reconstructing and widening along the existing highway would impact private property. The Cooper Creek Alternative follows the existing highway the longest distance and therefore has the greatest impact on private property. The other alternatives avoid the community to a greater extent, and therefore have fewer impacts to private property.

19. Will this project increase the speed through town?

The project alternatives are being designed for 60 mph. However, the alternatives each route traffic around Cooper Landing to a different extent (i.e., some bypass more of the existing highway than others), which would lessen traffic congestion in town on the bypassed sections of the existing highway.

20. How will businesses be impacted if the traffic is routed away from Cooper Landing?

All build alternatives would bypass part or all of the Cooper Landing community, including roadside businesses that depend in part on impulse stops by travelers. Under any of the build alternatives, 70 percent of traffic is forecast to use the new alignment. The Cooper Creek Alternative would continue through the existing commercial and residential area on the north side of the Kenai River, and bypass only a portion of the businesses on the south side. This alternative may have the least impact on existing local businesses, but would have the greatest physical impact on the community. The other alternatives bypass more commercial areas within Cooper Landing.

21. Will my access to recreational activities be impacted?

The entire area is rich in recreation resources, and each of the alternatives would parallel the Kenai River at close range for varying lengths, cross USFS trails, and run near popular campgrounds and fishing holes. Bridge construction under some alternatives would restrict Kenai River use temporarily. The two Juneau Creek alternatives would cross the Resurrection Pass National Recreation Trail. Depending on the alternative selected, access to hiking and recreation facilities may be changed or temporarily impacted. DOT&PF intends to phase construction activities to minimize impacts as much as practicable.

22. What is the project schedule?

The Draft SEIS is available for public and agency review and comment through May 26, 2015. The Final SEIS is anticipated to be completed, a final alternative selected, and a Record of Decision (ROD) issued in 2016.

23. When will something be built?

The project will enter the design phase following a ROD on the Final SEIS. We anticipate the earliest construction could start is 2018.

24. How much will the project cost? How will the project be funded?

Depending upon the alternative selected the project is estimated to cost between $250 to $304 million dollars. Once the project moves into design, cost estimates will be refined in greater detail.

The project is a Federal Aid Highway Project. Under that program the federal government pays about 90% of project costs from State of Alaska apportioned funds from the Federal Highway Trust Fund, with the State paying the remaining 10%.

25. How can I get involved? What happens to public comments?

FHWA and DOT&PF will consider public input prior to selecting a preferred alternative and issuing a Final SEIS. Comments will be responded to in the Final SEIS. Some EISs receive many, many comments, and processing them takes time. Comments will be categorized by topic in a database, and the entire email or letter is captured electronically for context. DOT&PF and FHWA will consider all comments and develop responses. Comments sometimes result in changes to the analysis in an EIS. Text clarifications are common. Comments can result in new or modified environmental analyses or new measures proposed to mitigate impacts. A summary of comments and responses will be appended to the Final SEIS to document the comments and record how each was addressed.

26. Who can I contact about the project?

Leadership on this project (below) may be reached by sending an email to sterlinghwy@hdrinc.com.

Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities

- Kelly Petersen, PE, Project Manager
- Brian Elliott, Environmental Manager

Alaska Division, Federal Highway Administration

- John Lohrey, Statewide Programs Team Leader (Draft SEIS)
- Tim Haugh, Environmental Program Manager (Section 4(f) and ANILCA)