



WHAT DECISION WAS REACHED?

The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT), in association with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), proposes to construct Interstate 73 (I-73) on new alignment in northeastern South Carolina. The portion of the project to be analyzed in this environmental impact statement (EIS) is located in the northeastern corner of South Carolina. The project study area extends southeast from I-95, and is bounded to the northeast by the North Carolina/South Carolina state line, to the southeast by U.S. Route 17, and to the southwest by the eastern edge of the Great Pee Dee River floodplain, U.S. Route 378, and U.S. Route 501. The project would extend from I-95 in Dillon County, through Marion County and into Horry County. It would terminate at S.C. Route 22 in Horry County, which would be made part of I-73. An estimated 400-foot wide right-of-way would be acquired where frontage roads would be needed. Where frontage roads are not required, an estimated 300-foot wide right-of-way would be adequate.

The selected alternative is “Alternative 3.” Alternative 3 is the selected alternative because it would have the fewest impacts to wetlands, lowest impacts to farmlands, least impact to cultural resources, lowest cost to construct, and would be the least disruptive to existing traffic patterns to construct. The selected alternative is 43.5 miles long and would have interchanges with I-95, U.S. Route 501, S.C. Route 41A, U.S. Route 76, S-308, and S.C. Route 22. The selected alternative and its impacts have been fully discussed in the Final EIS that was approved on November 29, 2007.

WHICH ALTERNATIVES WERE CONSIDERED?

The Final EIS studied in detail the following alternatives: the No-build Alternative, and eight Build Alternatives (Alternative 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8). Federal and state regulatory agencies provided information pertinent to their particular areas of expertise throughout the EIS process and participated in the selection of the data layers used by the Corridor Analysis Tool (CAT). There were 26 meetings with the Agency Coordination Team to develop and evaluate the alternatives. Initially there were 141 potential alternatives developed by the CAT for this project. Alternative Evaluation Categories were developed to define and prioritize the issues of concern during alternative development. Many of the preliminary alternatives were eliminated because they did not meet the Purpose and Need or had extensive environmental impacts (refer to Chapter 2 of the Final EIS). This process led to the eight Reasonable Build Alternatives that received an additional level of analysis and coordination efforts.

The Final EIS contains an adequate description of the project’s Purpose and Need, the alternatives, and the impacts. The detailed analyses of the major environmental impacts have been summarized in the Executive Summary of the Final EIS. The environmental consequences that would result from implementation of the selected alternative are impacts to wetlands of approximately 313 acres (which includes approximately 3,860 linear feet of stream impacts), the relocation of 74 residences, 3 commercial establishments, and one government facility (a waste transfer station), impacts to a Section 4(f) resource, and potential noise impacts to 13 residences.



The No-build Alternative was eliminated because it would not satisfy the project's Purpose and Need, because it would not provide:

- **A direct link between I-95 and the Myrtle Beach region to improve system linkage.** I-73 has been named as a High Priority Corridor (Number 5) by the U.S. Congress. This section of I-73 is needed to provide the connection between the Myrtle Beach region and I-95. Without this link, the planned High Priority Corridor between Michigan and South Carolina would not be completed;
- **Opportunities for economic growth and tourism.** The interstate would provide economic opportunities to the project study area that would result from the connectivity to the interstate system. Dillon and Marion Counties are two of the most economically depressed counties in the state. They have high unemployment and low income levels. A key to maintaining and improving tourism is the ability of the tourist to readily access destinations. The connection provided by I-73 would increase the travel efficiency for tourists traveling through South Carolina;
- **The facilitation of a more effective evacuation of the Myrtle Beach region during emergencies.** In 2030 the estimated evacuation times on U.S. Route 501, without the construction of I-73, would range between 24 and 37.4 hours depending upon the category of hurricane. This is an estimated eight to 13.2 hours longer than the existing evacuation time. Hurricane evacuation times would be dramatically reduced with any of the Build Alternatives. Because I-73 is a controlled-access facility, it also would make lane reversal, switching in-bound travel lanes to handle out-bound traffic, simpler. I-73 would allow people leaving the Myrtle Beach area an alternative to the bottleneck on U.S. Route 501 and provide additional capacity for evacuees.
- **A reduction in existing traffic congestion on roads accessing the Myrtle Beach region.** The construction of the interstate would result in savings to the traveling public resulting from increased travel efficiency, reflected in reduced travel times on the local roadways. The diversion of traffic to the interstate from the local road network that would result from the construction of the proposed interstate would improve safety on the local network. This would take persons unfamiliar with the local roads off of that network and put them on the interstate, a more familiar situation for those traveling long distances. It would also remove truck traffic from the local network. Traffic congestion is currently a problem for this area primarily on "change-over day" when the tourists at the beach leave and new tourists arrive. This causes delays along U.S. Route 501 from Aynor south. By providing an interstate connection from S.C. Route 31 and U.S. Route 17 all the way to I-95, a high-speed alternative route to bypass this congestion would be available. The traffic travel savings between the No-Build and several of the Build Alternatives show savings of as much as 25 percent for the 65 mile trip, based upon the Annual Average Daily Traffic volumes. The travel time savings between the No-Build



and the Build Alternatives for the peak season, June 1 through August 31, would be as much as 29 percent for the 65 mile trip;

- **A plan for future provision of a multimodal facility.** Within its right-of-way I-73 includes the potential for two rail corridors that would allow for future passenger and/or freight rail. This has the potential for providing additional rail connectivity to northeastern South Carolina.

WOULD THE PROJECT IMPACT ANY SECTION 4(f) RESOURCES?

The Final EIS includes the Final Section 4(f) Statement (Appendix E). Based on the Section 4(f) evaluation, the proposed action would impact the Vaughn Tract of SCDNR's Little Pee Dee Heritage Preserve, a Section 4(f) property. An estimated 30 acres would be used from the Vaughn Tract to construct a crossing of the Little Pee Dee River parallel to the existing S.C. Route 917 crossing. This alignment shift through the Vaughn Tract was done with the Agency Coordination Team's advice and consent. It was done to keep impacts within the Little Pee Dee River system parallel to an existing crossing instead of on a new location crossing, which was viewed as more disruptive to the natural environment. This would result in less than one percent (0.78 percent) of the total acreage of the Vaughn Tract being used for right-of-way. Access to the Heritage Preserve would be maintained; however, recreational activities within the immediate area of construction, such as fishing in the area of bridge construction, would be temporarily disrupted. No noise impacts are anticipated to the Little Pee Dee Heritage Preserve.

A mitigation plan was developed in cooperation with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR), which provides compensation for a 10 to 1 mitigation ratio for the 30 acres of Heritage Preserve property impacted by the project. SCDNR would use these monies to purchase replacement property.

WERE ANY MEASURES ADOPTED TO MINIMIZE ENVIRONMENTAL HARM?

All practicable measures to minimize environmental harm have been incorporated and are detailed in the Executive Summary as Environmental Commitments. These include:

- A minimum design speed of 45 miles per hour, where appropriate, is necessary to be maintained in the construction area in order to minimize undue traffic backups and delays.
- Residential and business relocations will be conducted in accordance with the *Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of*



1970, as amended. Relocation resources will be available to all relocates without discrimination. A conceptual relocation study was completed (refer to Appendix F of the Final EIS), but relocations will be evaluated at a more detailed level during final design.

- According to 49 CFR Part 24.205(A)-(F), relocation planning and service will be provided to businesses. These relocation services include the following:
 - Site requirements, current lease terms, and other contractual obligations;
 - Providing outside specialists to assist in planning and move, assistance for the actual move, and the reinstallation of machinery and other personal property;
 - Identification and resolution of personalty/realty issues;
 - An estimate of time required for the business to vacate the site;
 - An estimate of the anticipated difficulty in locating replacement property; and,
 - An identification of any advance relocation payments required for the move.
- Non-interstate bridges constructed to elevate roadways over the interstate would have 10-foot shoulders, which could accommodate pedestrian and bicyclists safely.
- The Preferred Alternative was shifted to travel along the edge of the Zion community to avoid impacting the Zion Grocery, which serves as an important community store and meeting place. An interchange at S.C. Route 41A would be located west of the community center, and the right-of-way limits for the interchange would have potentially impacted the Zion Grocery. However, design considerations will be incorporated into the final interchange design to ensure this important local landmark is not impacted.
- In the event that previously unknown cultural resources are discovered during construction, the resources will be handled according to 36 CFR §800.11 in coordination with the State Historic Preservation Office and appropriate Tribal Historic Preservation Offices.
- The results of the noise analyses will be given to local governments to aid in future planning in their respective areas.
- Sufficient upland areas that could be utilized for borrow activities are present in close proximity to the Preferred Alternative alignment. Therefore, it appears that impacts to wetlands due to the borrowing activities could be avoided. Wetland



delineations would be performed at the borrow pit sites and potential impacts to federally listed species and cultural resources will be evaluated prior to beginning excavation, in accordance with the SCDOT Engineering Directive (EDM – *Borrow Pit Location and Monitoring*).

- The use of pipes or culverts and the final bridge lengths will be determined after performing detailed hydraulic studies during the final design phase and would be dependent on several factors, such as watershed size, and the presence of FEMA regulated floodplains and floodways.
- Pipe and culvert bottoms will be recessed below the bottom of perennial stream channels to allow movement of aquatic species through the structure.
- Where practicable, 2:1 side slopes were used that reduced the roadway footprint through wetlands and other sensitive areas and thus reduced the impacts.
- Properly sized pipes and culverts, as determined by the final hydraulic study, will be installed under the roadway to maintain the historic hydrologic connections of wetlands and prevent the drainage or excessive flooding of jurisdictional areas.
- Upon completion of the bridges, the temporary means of access will be removed and the area reseeded with native species to deter colonization by invasive species.
- A Section 404 permit from the USACE and a Section 401 Water Quality Certification from SCDHEC will be obtained for unavoidable impacts to wetlands and waters of the United States and mitigation will be completed for these impacts.
- Modifications, such as the installation of coffer dams in stream channels in order to construct footings for bridge pilings, may be required. However, if these modifications were needed they would be temporary and removed upon completion of construction and the natural grade of the wetland restored and reseeded.
- Construction activities will be confined within the permitted limits to prevent the unnecessary disturbance of adjacent wetland areas.
- During construction, potential temporary impacts to wetlands will be minimized by implementing sediment and erosion control measures to include seeding of side slopes, silt fences, and sediment basins, as appropriate. Other best management practices would be required of the contractor to ensure compliance with the policies of 23 *CFR 650B*.



- Measures will be taken to reduce the likelihood of importing invasive species.
- SCDOT will implement a seasonal moratorium pertaining to the shortnose sturgeon, in the Little Pee Dee River, for all in-water work between February 1 and April 30 of each year. Work will not impede more than fifty percent of the channel between January 1 and April 30. No special measures will be employed outside this moratorium except for normal Best Management Practices.
- A Spill Prevention, Control, and Countermeasures Plan will be developed to address potential impacts from construction activities.

HAS A MONITORING OR ENFORCEMENT PROGRAM BEEN ADOPTED?

The SCDOT and FHWA will ensure that the Environmental Commitments made in the Final EIS or developed subsequent to the Final EIS in the final design, related to human or natural environmental issues, are carried out.

WHAT COMMENTS WERE RECEIVED ON THE FINAL EIS?

Two comment letters were received on the Final EIS. A letter was received on January 3, 2008 from USEPA. A second letter was received on January 7, 2008 from the Southern Environmental Law Center. Specific comments were raised on several topics including general NEPA comments, wetlands mitigation and permitting, noise, and Section 4(f). The substantive comments and responses are shown below.

General Comments from USEPA:

Comment: Final EIS did not include copies of agency letters commenting on the Draft EIS.

Response: The Final EIS did include copies of agency comment letters. Refer to section 4.5 beginning on page 4-36.

Comment: Funding is not available for I-73 and tolling is uncertain. Therefore, updated NEPA documents and wetland data may be need if there is significant delay or changes to the project.

Response: Comment noted.

Comment: A mitigation plan will be required for impacts to wetlands. Jurisdictional streams will be mapped during delineations for the preferred alternative. Pipes and box culverts will result in water body modifications that could affect aquatic species movement. USEPA has concerns with any proposed in-lieu fee approach to mitigation.



Response: Please note that the amount of wetland impacted would be approximately 313 acres, not the 384 that was mentioned in the USEPA letter. The ACT is actively working on developing a mitigation process that will address the wetland impacts associated with both I-73 South and I-73 North. The last ACT meeting (December 12, 2007) was one of several that specifically dealt with the process that will be developed so that a means to mitigate for wetland impacts can be in place. The current plan is to submit one permit application for all of I-73 in South Carolina. It is the goal of the SCDOT and FHWA, as well as the other ACT members, to resolve the agency concerns regarding wetland mitigation prior to SCDOT submitting the Section 404 permit application to the USACE.

Comment: Unavoidable noise impacts should be reasonably mitigated.

Response: SCDOT policy, per 23 CRF Part 772.9, defines criteria for determining reasonableness. These criteria were used to determine the reasonableness of mitigating the potential noise impacts resulting from this project.

Comment: The Preferred alternative would impact the Vaughn tract which is a Section 4(f) property. Compensatory mitigation for this impact should be made to SCDNR.

Response: SCDOT is to provide funding to SCDNR for an agreed upon dollar value to locate and purchase replacement property (refer to Page 3 of the Record of Decision).

Southern Environmental Law Center Comments

A comment letter was also received from the Southern Environmental Law Center on January 7, 2008. The Final EIS was reviewed and it was determined that all of the issues raised in the Southern Environmental Law Center letter were addressed in the Final EIS itself and no new substantive issues were raised.

The USEPA and the Southern Environmental Law Center comments were given thorough consideration. Further analysis would not yield any more meaningful information in reaching the decision to select Alternative 3. No substantive new issues were raised that would warrant additional NEPA studies at this time. The Final EIS has adequately addressed alternatives and the basis for the decision.

Robert L. Lee, S.C. Division Administrator
Federal Highway Administration
February 8, 2008

Thomas J. Barrett, Deputy Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
February 8, 2008