

Federal Highway Administration
Every Day Counts
Innovation Initiative



Enhanced Technical Assistance for Ongoing EISs FAQs

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Why is Enhanced Technical Assistance needed?

Highway projects that require Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) typically take 12-13 years to complete. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process alone takes an average of 4 years. Enhanced technical assistance will help transportation planners meet EIS requirements much more quickly.

What are the goals of the Enhanced Technical Assistance initiative?

It will shorten project delivery by streamlining the EIS process. This initiative will encourage broader and more effective cross-disciplinary participation. It also encourages greater consistency in project development. Moreover, it will increase the effectiveness of Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Divisional staff members who act as resources for the Project Development process.

What is an EIS (Environmental Impact Statement)?

An EIS is a document required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Where federal government agency actions affect the environment in some significant way, an EIS must be created to explain:

- The project’s purpose and the transportation needs to be addressed
- Consideration of a range of reasonable alternatives
- Analysis of any potential impacts from the alternatives
- Proof of compliance with applicable environmental laws and executive orders

What is meant by the term “an ongoing EIS?”

An “ongoing EIS” refers to an EIS that is having difficulties with being completed in a timely way because of various delays or issues to the project’s NEPA process. . By taking advantage of the existing flexibilities, planners can avoid many issues that typically delay the EIS portion of NEPA.

Does this initiative involve new regulations?

No. Existing statutes, regulations, and standards already contain ways to speed up the EIS process. This initiative is intended to maximize their use.

What is the role of FHWA Technical Assistance teams?

The role of these teams of specialized FHWA resources is to focus on complex EISs, especially those facing delays in decisions leading to approval. They offer specialized onsite assistance as needed.

What types of problems do the teams handle?

Technical Assistance teams will resolve many issues that would otherwise hold up the NEPA review or otherwise delay a project’s progress. They can help Division and SDOT staff resolve project-specific issues. They also provide general guidance in understanding and effectively managing the NEPA process.

Are any Technical Assistance teams dedicated to specific issues?

Technical Assistance Teams of Subject Matter Experts (SME) can help resolve resource-specific issues. Examples include Wetlands, Endangered Species, and Cultural Resources. These teams can also develop recommendations on ways to avoid or minimize problems before new projects are initiated.

How are the Technical Assistance teams staffed?

Teams will be staffed by SMEs from the FHWA Resource Center, Headquarters, and Division Offices (DOs). SMEs serving as staff in the FHWA DOs will also be able to participate on the teams; participation is not limited to just the Division in which the subject project happens to be located. This is part of the Division Learning Objectives “Leaning Forward” approach.

Does enhanced technical assistance focus solely on the NEPA process?

Not entirely. This initiative recognizes that the NEPA process is a part of the project development continuum. Streamlining begins with transportation planning and reaches fruition in the construction of the project. Technical assistance offered under this initiative can impact multiple stages.

Is technical assistance available for specific project needs?

Yes. Technical Assistance teams will be prepared to address the unique problems of each project.

What is FHWA’s role in implementing this initiative?

FHWA will identify and select active projects with EIS’s facing issues related to environmental resources, interagency coordination, or other concerns that can affect a project’s timely completion and approval. It also offers training and project-specific help.

How are projects chosen?

The focus is on new projects where it is anticipated that there will be problems with conducting an effective project development process, or for “ongoing EISs” where 60 months or more have elapsed since the publishing of the project’s Notice of Intent (NOI) and no Record of Decision (ROD) has been issued.

Has enhanced technical assistance been proven to work?

Innovative Technical Assistance has been applied to the NEPA process on several projects. The result was a speedier resolution of project issue, which led to faster approval of the Final EIS (FEIS) documents.

What are specific examples of projects where enhanced technical assistance has been tried?

When the District of Columbia's 11th Street Bridge faced schedule challenges and environmental impacts to a park protected by Section 4(f), enhanced technical assistance greatly improved interagency coordination with the US Parks Service. The review of technical reports was expedited by a range of subject matter experts. For the Detroit River International Crossing, which faced competition from a private-owned bridge as well as community and Environmental Justice (EJ) impacts, enhanced assistance expedited review times and provided a more thorough analysis of traffic models.

What are the next steps for states and agencies?

DOs and SDOTs are assessing where they need assistance most. We're identifying potential barriers, implementing strategies, and working to resolve issues in a timely and cost-effective manner.