



RIDGEFIELD NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE — RIVER 'S' UNIT ACCESS PROJECT

Top Eight Questions/Answers

1. Why aren't you looking only at downtown options?

With federally funded projects, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires agencies to develop a range of alternatives that meet the Purpose and Need of the project. The NEPA process will further select an action or no-action alternative that best meets the Purpose and Need. The purpose is to provide for long-term motorized access to the River 'S' Unit that addresses visitor demand and meets the operational and management needs of the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge Complex. Several alternatives will be developed within the study area, including the current River 'S' Unit location and additional alternatives with access through downtown.

2. Can you combine efforts with the Port of Ridgefield Rail Overpass Project?

The Port of Ridgefield and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have previously looked at combining the Overpass and River 'S' projects. In 2006, while the Port was conducting the environmental and design studies, a decision was made to drop the River 'S' access from the project because the Port was on a faster timeline for funding and construction. While the Port has reported to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) that it has nearly finished design work and secured a portion of funding, it is still uncertain when the Port's Overpass project will be constructed. Likewise, funding for the River 'S' Unit project has not been secured. With this funding uncertainty, there now appears to be time to analyze alternatives that utilize the Port's planned overpass.

Some considerations unique to this situation include:

- 1) Re-examining the design work for the Port's Overpass project to determine if it is feasible to build off its construction plans. Part of the alternatives analysis will consider the additional design work resulting from structural concerns of adding a connection to the Port design.
- 2) If this combined alternative is selected, the River 'S' Unit access and Port's Overpass project would need to be analyzed as a connected action, and the environmental effects of both actions will be analyzed in the NEPA document.
- 3) The additional design and environmental work associated with this alternative will be coordinated with the Port to assess the impacts.

3. What is the current status of the River 'S' Unit Road easement?

The Refuge has had an easement with a private property owner for over 45 years that allows the Refuge to maintain the road and provide access to the River 'S' Unit. This easement for the access road will be available for the foreseeable future.

4. Is the current River 'S' access road unsafe given its steep grade, narrow lanes, steep side slopes, at-grade railroad crossing, gravel surface, and aging bridge?

Steep Grade: The current River 'S' access road is designed and posted at 15 mph. For this speed, the sight distance and grade fall within the roadway design guidelines utilized by the US Forest

Service, USFWS and FHWA. (Guidelines typically used in the design of federally managed roadway facilities.)

Narrow Lanes: The existing roadway is a single-lane roadway with turnouts. Over half the existing roadway is less than 18' wide (18' is the minimum width of a two-lane roadway). Given the estimated volume of traffic using the roadway, FHWA guidelines suggest providing a two-lane roadway for the entire length to accommodate the usage. However, the sight distance appears to be sufficient to make accommodations for oncoming traffic and there have been no documented accidents.

Steep Side Slopes and At-Grade Crossing: The soils in the canyon are not extraordinarily prone to landslides, although roadway drainage in the canyon may lead to saturated soils. The railroad crossing is marked with cross-bucks and signals, which function to keep traffic moving and out of the way of train traffic.

Gravel Surface and Aging Bridge: The gravel road requires grading once to twice a year, periodic (every couple of years) resurfacing (additional gravel), and repairs when surrounding materials slide or fall on the roadway. The existing bridge is safe to drive on and does not have load restrictions, meaning heavier equipment can safely cross it. The bridge receives maintenance based on semi-annual bridge inspection condition assessments and funding availability. More intensive maintenance repairs did occur in 2009 as a result of inspection report findings that a support of the bridge was beginning to rot. The bridge is over 50 years old; the typical design life of a timber bridge is 40 or more years. A majority of the timber pilings that compose the bridge's structure have been in place since the 1950's (actual year of construction is unknown). These older piles are in poor condition with moderate to heavy rot above the water line. Given these conditions, it is likely the bridge will need additional major repairs in the next 5-10 years to stay open to the public.

5. Is the existing River 'S' Unit road maintainable/re-buildable?

Yes. As noted above, the road has been maintained for over 45 years. If an alternative is selected through the NEPA process that utilizes the existing access, the roadway could be rebuilt with some improvements.

6. Do trains impede access to the River 'S' Unit?

Train travel in the area and throughout the City of Ridgefield is a community concern and a common issue. Approximately 60 trains per day cross the access road to the River 'S' Unit. These trains have delayed access to and from the Refuge, generally from trains parking on the tracks for their operational needs. These types of delays are infrequent but do occur.

7. Will moving the access to downtown impact city parking and traffic circulation?

To ensure the quality of experience for wildlife observation on the Refuge, the average daily traffic on the River 'S' Unit is not anticipated to exceed 200 trips per day. This is a minor increase from existing conditions. All alternatives carried forward for detailed study in the NEPA process will be evaluated to assess any impacts on Ridgefield city streets.

8. When will the project be constructed?

Available funding only provides for the current NEPA process that includes a public scoping process to develop the Purpose and Need and a full range of alternatives to address access related to the River 'S' Unit. Funding for construction, design, and permitting has not yet been secured for the project. As a result, the timeline beyond the current work is unknown.