Overview of Session

- Background
- Why is it important?
- FHWA and Mn/DOT Initiative
- Focus Group Sessions
- Open Discussion
- Recap of Next Steps in Process
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Background

- AASHTO/ACEC/FHWA Report, “Improving the Quality of Environmental Documents”, May 2006
- 2007 Mn/DOT Workshop featured Washington DOT “Reader Friendly Environmental Documents” session by Carol Lee Roalkvam
What Do Previous Studies Tell Us?

AASHTO/ACEC survey found NEPA documents to be:

- Too large, wordy, repetitive, cumbersome
- Lack of consistency in format/approach
- Lack of coherent story
- Too focused on “legal” versus readability
- Improved focus on usability of decisions
- Inconsistent writing style
Why Is It Important?

CEQ Regulations Implementing NEPA:

“Agencies shall focus on significant environmental issues and alternatives and shall reduce paperwork and the accumulation of extraneous background data. Statements shall be concise, clear, and to the point, and shall be supported by evidence that the agency has made the necessary environmental analysis.”

40 CFR Section 1502.1
Core Principles Identified in AASHTO/ACEC/FHWA Report:

1. Tell the story so the reader can easily understand the purpose and need for the project, how each alternative would meet the project goals, and strengths/weaknesses.
2. Keep the document brief as possible, use clear, concise writing, and easy to use format…and discussion of issues and impacts in proportion to their significance.
3. Ensure that the legal sufficiency requirements are met.
General Tips for Improvement from AASHTO/ACEC/FHWA Report:

- Explain what the technical data means in relation to decision made
- Use of question/answer type headings
- Identify and explain key assumptions
- Describe methods used to develop data
- Use effective visuals
- Do not just summarize data…..Analyze it!!
- Document compliance with key regulatory requirements
- Focus on key project issues..do not discuss effects that do not matter.
- Consistency
- Supporting documents in Appendices

Source: AASHTO/ACEC/FHWA Report
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Washington DOT Reader Friendly Tools:

- Tell a Story
- Engage the Reader
- Make it Visual
- Make it Brief
FHWA and MN/DOT INITIATIVE

Goal:

“Develop training and/or guidance resources for those who prepare environmental review documents that will result in environmental documents that more clearly and simply communicate the need for a project and results of the technical analysis.”
Focus Groups

- Agency Reviewers
- FHWA/Mn/DOT/State Aid Reviewers
- Mn/DOT/State Aid/Local Agency – Preparers
- Environmental Advocates
- Consultants
What Are We Learning?

- Agency Focus Group:
  - Must serve multiply audiences
  - Executive Summaries are helpful
  - Concise ("just the facts") purpose and need….don’t just state “need” …need to substantiate it
  - Improve alternative development process/story
  - Strengthen avoid/minimize/mitigate discussion
  - Strengthen commitments/description of mitigation
  - Upfront agency participation on complex projects
  - Remove “fluff” from documents – provide the facts
Agency Reviewers (cont)

- Need to improve linkage of NEPA/MEPA with permits/construction activities
- Issue area background/methodology important
- Provide clear reasoning for selection of preferred alternative
- Don’t use “canned” statements in alternative decision making/impacts/mitigation… link to project for clarity
- Continue to improve “social” analysis
- Temporary/construction related impacts should be more thoroughly covered
- Important to remember “environmental process drives the design”
Open Discussion

- What do you view as the primary purpose for preparing environmental documents for transportation projects?

- What frustrates you most about preparing/reading environmental documents? ....the environmental review process? What could be improved?

- What is the importance of the purpose and need section of environmental documents? Do you think more training should be given; re: why/how to write the purpose and need section?

- How important is documenting mitigation commitments in environmental documents? How could this be done better?
Next Steps......

- Complete focus group sessions and prepare summary of findings
- Develop resource materials/training to address areas of concern/improvement
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THANK YOU

Excellent environmental documents = Sustainable project decisions