

## Why GAO Did This Study

Projects to construct, improve, and repair roads and bridges are fundamental to meeting the nation's mobility needs. However, completing highway projects—which generally involves four phases consisting of (1) planning, (2) preliminary design and environmental review, (3) final design and right-of-way acquisition, and (4) construction—can sometimes take a long time. In 2005, SAFETEA-LU established provisions to help expedite highway projects, including streamlining some portions of the environmental review process, allowing states to assume greater environmental review responsibilities under certain conditions, and establishing efforts that permitted delegation of some authority from the federal government to states. GAO was asked to (1) describe the process and factors that could affect highway project time frames, (2) examine state DOTs' views on the benefits and challenges of the provisions to expedite highway projects established in SAFETEA-LU, and (3) describe additional initiatives that state DOTs and FHWA have implemented to expedite the completion of highway projects. GAO surveyed officials from 52 state DOTs, including all states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico; interviewed officials at FHWA, state DOTs, and federal resource agencies (agencies tasked with protecting natural, historic, or cultural resources); and analyzed legislation, regulations, and other reports and publications. U.S. DOT provided technical comments on a draft of this report, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-12-593](#). To view an e-supplement with more data see [GAO-12-637SP](#). For more information, contact David J. Wise at (202) 512-2834 or [wised@gao.gov](mailto:wised@gao.gov).

## HIGHWAY PROJECTS

### Some Federal and State Practices to Expedite Completion Show Promise

## What GAO Found

The process to complete highway projects is complicated and lengthy due to multiple factors. Specifically, highway projects can involve many stakeholders, including agencies at all levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, and the public. These stakeholders perform a number of tasks—for major highway projects, as many as 200 steps from planning to construction—but their level of involvement varies. For example, resource agencies like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service generally only become involved in a highway project if it affects the environmental or cultural resources that agency is tasked with protecting. Additional factors can lengthen project time frames, including the availability of funding, changes in a state's transportation priorities, public opposition, or litigation.

State departments of transportation (DOT) that GAO surveyed generally agreed that the provisions meant to help expedite highway projects established in the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) could decrease time frames but found some provisions more useful than others. They most frequently agreed that the provision allowing for the use of protected public land—if such use has minor impacts on the property and is approved by relevant resource agencies—has the potential to save time and has few challenges to implementation. State DOTs reported that the other SAFETEA-LU provisions GAO studied have both potential benefits and challenges but, in some cases, they identified alternative solutions that could better serve their needs. For example, although respondents indicated that they could save time by implementing the issue resolution process established in SAFETEA-LU, they also noted that the use of written agreements between highway project stakeholders—such as federal resource agencies—could better serve their purposes. Survey respondents also indicated that they are generally not interested in implementing two SAFETEA-LU provisions that would delegate environmental review decision-making authority from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to states, primarily because the states did not want to accept federal court jurisdiction for the decisions made under those provisions.

States have implemented a variety of efforts to expedite highway projects and FHWA has initiated efforts to expedite projects by sharing innovative practices. For example, in 1997, the North Carolina DOT implemented a project development process that promotes early involvement of highway stakeholders and reduces permit processing times from years to months. Other state efforts are more recent, prompted by streamlining concepts promoted by FHWA beginning in 2010 under an effort known as Every Day Counts. Through Every Day Counts, FHWA encouraged states to consider implementing 15 specific innovative practices during 2011 and 2012, including 13 practices that could help expedite highway project completion. FHWA plans to introduce a new set of initiatives during 2012 for implementation during 2013 and 2014. FHWA developed performance measures for Every Day Counts and is currently collecting data to determine if these initiatives have had a positive impact on expediting highway projects.