



# HIGHWAY INFRASTRUCTURE

## Stakeholders' Views on Time to Conduct Environmental Reviews of Highway Projects

Highlights of [GAO-03-534](#), a report to the Chairman, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

### Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government has a long-term commitment to helping states construct, improve, and repair roads and bridges to meet the nation's mobility needs. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) expects to provide states about \$20 billion for highway construction projects in fiscal year 2003. State departments of transportation are primarily responsible for initiating and completing projects. Many federal and state agencies with environmental responsibilities (called resource agencies) help ensure that environmental issues are considered. The environmental review of a federally funded highway project can take from several days to several years.

GAO is reporting on the (1) activities involved in the environmental reviews of federally funded highway projects and (2) stakeholders' views on the aspects of environmental review, if any, that unduly add time to gaining environmental approval. GAO obtained stakeholder views from 16 transportation improvement and 12 environmental officials from a variety of federal, state, and private organizations with responsibilities for or interests in constructing federally funded highways. The Department of Transportation had no comments on a draft of this report. Other agencies provided either technical comments or did not respond to our request for comments.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-534](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-534).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or [siggerudk@gao.gov](mailto:siggerudk@gao.gov).

### What GAO Found

Environmental review activities typically consist of identifying and assessing environmental impacts, evaluating alternatives, and gaining input and/or approvals from FHWA, resource agencies, and the public; and become more complex if significant environmental impacts are anticipated. For the 91 percent of projects that are expected to have minimal environmental impacts, state departments of transportation need only to identify environmental features, assess possible impacts, address any resource agency and public concerns, and obtain permits, if needed. For the 6 percent of projects where it is initially unclear whether significant environmental impacts may exist, additional activities occur, including evaluating alternatives to the proposed project and obtaining FHWA approval. For the 3 percent of highway projects with expected significant environmental impacts, states conduct extensive environmental review, including evaluating all reasonable alternatives and their environmental impacts and consult with resource agencies.

Stakeholders we contacted identified 43 aspects that they said frequently (more than half the time) add more time than viewed as necessary to environmental reviews of federally funded highway projects. A majority of stakeholders with primary responsibilities for environmental and historical preservation issues and those with primary responsibilities for transportation improvement identified five aspects as occurring frequently. However, there was no overall agreement about which aspects frequently add undue time to environmental reviews. A majority of environmental stakeholders told us that state departments of transportation waited too long to consider environmental impacts and involve important stakeholders. In contrast, a majority of transportation improvement stakeholders told us that state departments of transportation and federal resource agencies lack sufficient staff to handle their workloads and that meeting statutory criteria for historic preservation projects on public lands and obtaining wetlands permits are too time consuming. However, the stakeholders generally could not tell us how much time these aspects add to the reviews.

**Aspects Viewed as Frequently Adding Undue Time to Environmental Reviews**

Aspect cited by majority of environmental or transportation improvement stakeholders	Environmental stakeholders	Transportation improvement stakeholders
Environmental impacts are not considered early enough	✓	
Stakeholders are not involved early enough	✓	
Transportation and resource agencies lack staff		✓
Statutory criteria for projects involving historic properties on public lands are burdensome		✓
Obtaining wetlands permits is time consuming		✓

Source: GAO analysis of responses of at least 26 of the 28 stakeholders.