

FHWA policy clarifies that environmental considerations are to be integrated into every phase of transportation decision making (1994 Environmental Policy Statement) and that “Metropolitan Transportation Planning should include consideration of the protection of important natural ecosystems and biological resources...” and provide for “incorporation of ecological considerations early in the transportation system planning and development process” (1995 FHWA policy memorandum). FHWA, with assistance by seven other Federal agencies, prepared [*Eco-Logical: An Ecosystem Approach to Developing Infrastructure Projects*](#) to promote and facilitate ecosystem-based planning and mitigation across agency and disciplinary boundaries in order to develop more cost-effective transportation projects with better environmental outcomes.

In 2014, OKI worked with state agencies to integrate key information about endangered, threatened and rare species located within the region earlier in the transportation planning process. By considering these resources early in the planning process, transportation projects can proceed more efficiently through the NEPA process. In October 2015, FHWA and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) recognized OKI for its vision and commitment to integrate these steps in its transportation planning activities as a leader and champion of the Eco-Logical approach.

For transportation projects that use federal funds, environmental effects are considered during project planning, design and engineering as part of a federally required environmental review process. This process addresses NEPA requirements and is intended to result in decisions “based on an understanding of environmental consequences, and take actions that protect, restore and enhance the environment.” An unintended consequence of the NEPA process, however, has been to increase costs for project planning and implementation. Its effectiveness in protecting resources has been undermined by the frequency of allowing for adverse environmental impacts to occur but to offset resource loss and degradation through mitigation projects. The need for earlier review that would enable adverse impacts to be avoided instead of mitigated has led to new requirements for regional transportation planning.

In 2005, new transportation legislation (SAFETEA-LU) added two new requirements to regional transportation planning for agencies like OKI. One requirement calls for “environmental consultations” to bring state and local agencies involved in conservation and environmental protection more fully into the transportation plan’s development. The other requirement calls for the plan to include “a discussion of potential mitigation of environmental effects,” which involves consulting with federal and state agencies on types of strategies for avoiding, minimizing or compensating for transportation effects.

In 2012, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) built upon earlier programs and policies and promoted accelerating project delivery through the increased use of innovative approaches and the PEL process.

In 2015, with the passage of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, MPOs continue to be encouraged to consult with officials responsible for other types of planning activities. It adds to the list of such activities tourism and the reduction of risk of natural disasters. The FAST Act expands the focus on the resiliency of the transportation system as well as activities to reduce stormwater runoff from transportation infrastructure. In addition, it newly requires strategies to reduce the vulnerability of existing transportation infrastructure to natural disasters.