

## Chapter 5: Planning / NEPA

### Overview of NEPA

The Hidalgo County Metropolitan Planning Organization (HCMPO) is working towards strengthening the transportation planning process by working to link it in accordance with The National Environmental Policy Act's (NEPA) goals for the protection, maintenance, and enhancement of the environment.

When developing a long range transportation plan, the HCMPO will consult and work with appropriate agencies on the state and local levels to ensure proper considerations are taken into account in land use management, natural resources, environmental protection, conservation and historic preservation. Furthermore, the HCMPO will provide an opportunity for participating agencies and the public to provide input on proposed projects in order to assess the purpose and need for a given project.

The HCMPO will strive to incorporate environmental considerations in their planning and decision making through a systematic approach. The level of planning and analysis seeks to be accurate and up to date, adequately support recommended improvements, and focus on setting a context and following acceptable procedures set by NEPA, EIS and the EA.

### SAFETEA-LU Mitigation Discussion

The purpose of environmental mitigation activities are to create and implement strategic policies, programs, actions and activities which are to minimize or compensate for the impacts to or disruption of elements of the human and natural environment.

The regulations require transportation plans to be developed, as appropriate, in consultation with Federal, State and local agencies responsible for land use management, natural resources, environmental protection, conservation and historic

preservation. Such agencies would include those involved with tribal wildlife, land management and other regulatory agencies.

Metropolitan Planning Organizations are then required to consult with the above agencies and have a discussion of potential environmental mitigation activities and those that will have the greatest impact on the Long Range Metropolitan Transportation Plan that is implemented by the Hidalgo County MPO.

Examples of the ways mitigation discussion can be initiated include a comparison of potential mitigation activities to a subset of projects in the Long Range Metropolitan Transportation Plan. Also, mitigation discussion includes sensitive area maps such as wetlands or conservation lands can serve to facilitate discussions for awareness and preparedness of potential affected sites in the future.

### NEPAssist

NEPAssist is a user-friendly web based GIS tool and application that enhances environmental review and planning activities. Specifically, the application allows project developers the ability to investigate environmentally sound site alternatives for proposed projects at the earliest planning stages, while also affording EPA an early opportunity to engage in environmental analysis. The application allows users to delineate a project point, line or boundary, input background information about the project, and output a report on critical environmental features that are in close proximity to the proposed project.

The GIS Screening Tool (GISST) has been integrated into the NEPAssist application. GISST is a screening level identification tool that uses GIS data and imposes a decision structure on given data. This structure is usually in a ranked form (i.e. 1-5 ranks) that is created by the user and is imposed on specific projects also identified by the user. THE GISST tool helps evaluate and compare project alternatives in order to prioritize which projects may have the greatest potential impacts.

The following data sources are available with GISST:

- EPA Envirofacts
- USGS
- DOT
- US GDT
- ATSDR
- US CDC
- USFWS
- US Census 200 Tiger/Line
- National Cancer Institute
- Microsoft Terra Server
- Globe Explorer
- ESRI Geography Network
- EPA One Stop Server
- ERSRI Geography Network
- Earth Satellite Corporation
- NOAA/NGDC
- The Nature Conservancy
- USGS Eros Data Center
- USGS National Map
- Intergraph
- NYS Image Service