

### Introduction

This National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Environmental Assessment (EA) discusses the process used to evaluate the effects of the proposed improvements to the nearly 24-mile portion of US Highway 12 (US 12) within Walla Walla County, Washington.

Positive and negative effects and their impacts to key social, economic, and natural resources were evaluated based on best available science, and in accordance with federal, state, and local regulations. The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) made every effort to avoid and minimize negative effects to these resources during the project's planning and preliminary design phases. As a result, the proposed project will not substantially affect any of the resources evaluated.

### Where Is the Project Located and How Much Will It Cost?

WSDOT has completed a conceptual design of the US 12 Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity project. This project is included in the current approved Benton-Franklin-Walla Walla Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) and the Washington State Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).

The project begins north of the community of Wallula at US 12 Milepost (MP) 304.2 near the Boise pulp and paper mill. The proposed project consists of two phases: Phase 7 and Phase 8. Both phases are located in the southwestern part of Walla Walla County, Washington. It extends eastward to an area known locally as Frenchtown at MP 328.1 (see **Exhibit 2 in Chapter 1**). The transition between Phases 7 and 8 occurs on the east slope of Nine Mile Hill near MP 316.5. The current (2009) budget for designing, acquiring right-of-way, mitigating for impacts, and construction is estimated to range from \$296 million to \$633 million.

### What Is the Purpose of the Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity Project?

The purpose of constructing this project is to improve motorist safety, accommodate increasing traffic volumes, and maintain mobility along this portion of US 12 over the long-term.

## Why Do We Need the Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity Project?

The need for this project is based on the increased use of US 12 that has been accompanied by a rise in the number of accidents occurring within the project area. Eliminating roadway deficiencies and increasing capacity will lower the number of both property and injury accidents while maintaining **mobility**. If not corrected, the combined effect of increasing traffic volumes and roadway deficiencies will continue eroding the level of safety on this section of US 12.

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**What do we mean by “mobility”?**  
*The term “mobility” is used in this EA to mean the movement of vehicular traffic. A highway with good mobility is a highway that can move traffic and freight efficiently.*

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## What Alternatives Were Considered for This Project?

The project design team identified four preliminary alternatives for consideration in this EA. They include the following, and are shown on **Exhibit ES-1**:

- Alternative 1: The No Build Alternative (required by NEPA)
- Alternative 2: Widen the Existing US 12 Highway
- Alternative 3: Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity (North Alignment)
- Alternative 4: Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity (Middle Alignment)

### Alternative 1: The No Build Alternative

No major construction activities would occur under the No Build Alternative. US 12 would remain in its present location. The current highway would continue to be maintained to WSDOT standards.

### Alternative 2: Widen the Existing US 12 Highway

Widening US 12 to four lanes in its current location would require constructing two additional lanes adjacent to the existing roadway. The portion south from Wallula to the Walla Walla River would be similar to the new four-lane highway constructed in previous phases to the north.

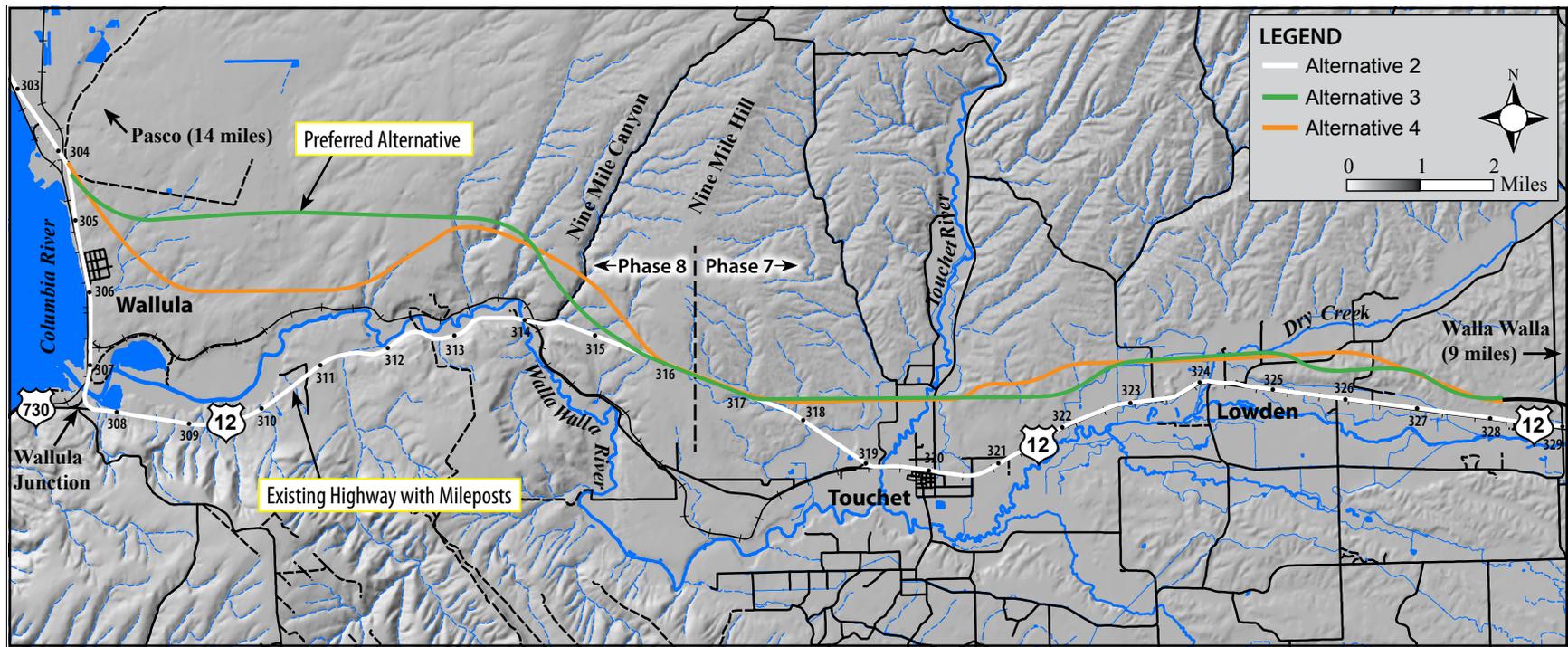


Exhibit ES-1. Map showing the three build alternatives.

This alternative requires replacing current bridges and adding new ones across the Walla Walla River (at two locations), Touchet River, and Dry Creek. It also necessitates building frontage roads for those residents that currently access US 12 directly, thus widening the project footprint and further displacing businesses and residences in Touchet and Lowden.

### Alternative 3: Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity (North Alignment – Preferred Alternative)

This alternative would construct a new roadway north of the current US 12 almost all the way from near Wallula (MP 304.2) to the Frenchtown Vicinity (MP 328.1). This alternative includes several connections to local roads. The connection near Wallula would require a full interchange. The other connections are intersections that would become interchanges when warranted by future traffic volumes. Some local roads would end as cul-de-sacs instead of connecting to the four-lane highway. The current intersection at Wallula Junction would be reconfigured.

### Alternative 4: Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity Alternative (Middle Alignment).

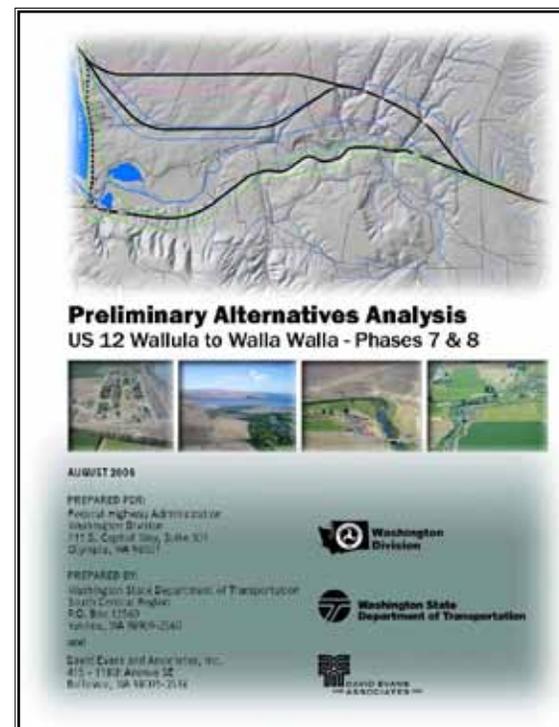
This alternative is similar to Alternative 3, but constructs a new highway farther south in the western portion of Phase 8. It shifts the alignment to the southern portion of irrigated agricultural land associated with corporate farms. This alternative then swings north before crossing several canyons.

### What Criteria Were Used for Assessing the Preliminary Alternatives?

WSDOT completed a Preliminary Alternatives Analysis for Phases 7 and 8 in 2006 (WSDOT 2006b). Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 all satisfied the purpose and need for the project. The No Build Alternative was not analyzed because it is required later in the NEPA process as the baseline for the subsequent determination of environmental impacts.

Social and economic criteria that were used in the preliminary analysis included:

- archaeological, cultural, and historic resources
- noise
- real estate and businesses, including farms
- public parks, recreation, and wildlife refuges
- hazardous materials and environmental contamination



- estimated cost
- land use

Environmental criteria that were considered in the preliminary analysis included:

- federal and state threatened and endangered species
- water quality of rivers and streams
- wildlife habitat
- floodplains and floodways
- wetlands and open water
- geology and soils
- complexity of environmental permitting and potential mitigation requirements

Several engineering considerations were also evaluated:

- road curves (gentle versus sharp), median width, and stopping sight distance
- vertical grade (percent slope)
- earthwork quantities (cubic yards of excavation and embankment)
- potential to construct in segments as funding becomes available
- traffic control requirements during construction
- number, length, and complexity of bridges
- total length of four-lane highway

## **Which Alternatives Were Eliminated from Further Study and Why?**

### **Alternative 2: Widen the Existing US Highway 12**

Widening the existing US 12 was considered but rejected from further evaluation for the following reasons:

- The two crossings of the Walla Walla River in Phase 8 and associated in-water work to replace and add bridges raised concern for federally listed fish under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).
- Impaired conditions in the river contributed to the need for a water quality implementation plan for the entire watershed, which includes most of the county.
- This alignment crosses three regulated 100-year floodplains in Phase 8 that are avoided by the other alternatives (the Walla Walla River in two places and in Vansycle Canyon).
- It was estimated this alignment would affect between 1.5 and 4.4 acres of jurisdictional wetlands near Wallula and the mouth of the river, which would require substantial mitigation.
- Two of the four publicly owned parks and recreation areas near the existing highway would be affected if US 12 is widened.
- Preliminary calculations estimated that 15 to 29 acres of right-of-way would need to be acquired from the Wallula Habitat Management Unit (HMU) that is managed as part of the McNary National Wildlife Refuge.
- Approximately 1 to 2 acres of right-of-way would be needed from Madame Dorion Memorial Park.
- Approximately 25 residences and 5 businesses in the communities of Touchet and Lowden would need to be displaced.

From the Preliminary Alternatives Analysis, WSDOT recommended to Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) that widening the existing highway not be retained for further development and subsequent analysis through NEPA and the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) since it would cause the greatest impact.



Replacing and adding bridges across the Walla Walla River is avoided by the Preferred Alternative. In this photo near the mouth of the river, the current US 12 bridge (center) is flanked by the remnant of Madame Dorion Bridge and a railroad bridge (foreground).



Effects to public parks are avoided by the Preferred Alternative. The wildlife viewing area at Wallula HMU is pictured above.

### Alternative 4: Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity Alternative (Middle Alignment)

The Preliminary Alternatives Analysis also concluded that Alternative 4, Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity (Middle Alignment), should not be carried forward for further analysis. It offered few advantages over the northern alignment, and included a higher cost and a greater area of ground disturbance. This alternative also runs just east of the community of Wallula and just north of the Wallula HMU, so the public and regulatory agencies would be concerned about the proximity and isolating effects of the new highway.

### What Is the Preferred Alternative?

#### Alternative 3: Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity Alternative (North Alignment)

Working with federal and state agencies, tribal and county governments, and the public, WSDOT has identified Alternative 3, Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity (North Alignment), as the Preferred Alternative. Constructing a four-lane highway from Wallula to Frenchtown vicinity satisfies the project’s purpose and need at the lowest cost while generating the fewest negative overall effects to social, economic, and environmental resources. **Exhibit ES-2** shows details of the alignment over a 2006 aerial photo.

### What Would Happen If Nothing Were Built?

No major construction activities would occur under the No Build Alternative. Therefore, substandard roadway conditions would persist, as would the need for increasing traffic capacity and mobility. Thus, the No Build Alternative would not resolve the safety, capacity, or mobility issues associated with this section of US 12 and, therefore, does not satisfy the purpose and need for the project.



Severe impacts to homes and businesses through Touchet are avoided by the Preferred Alternative.

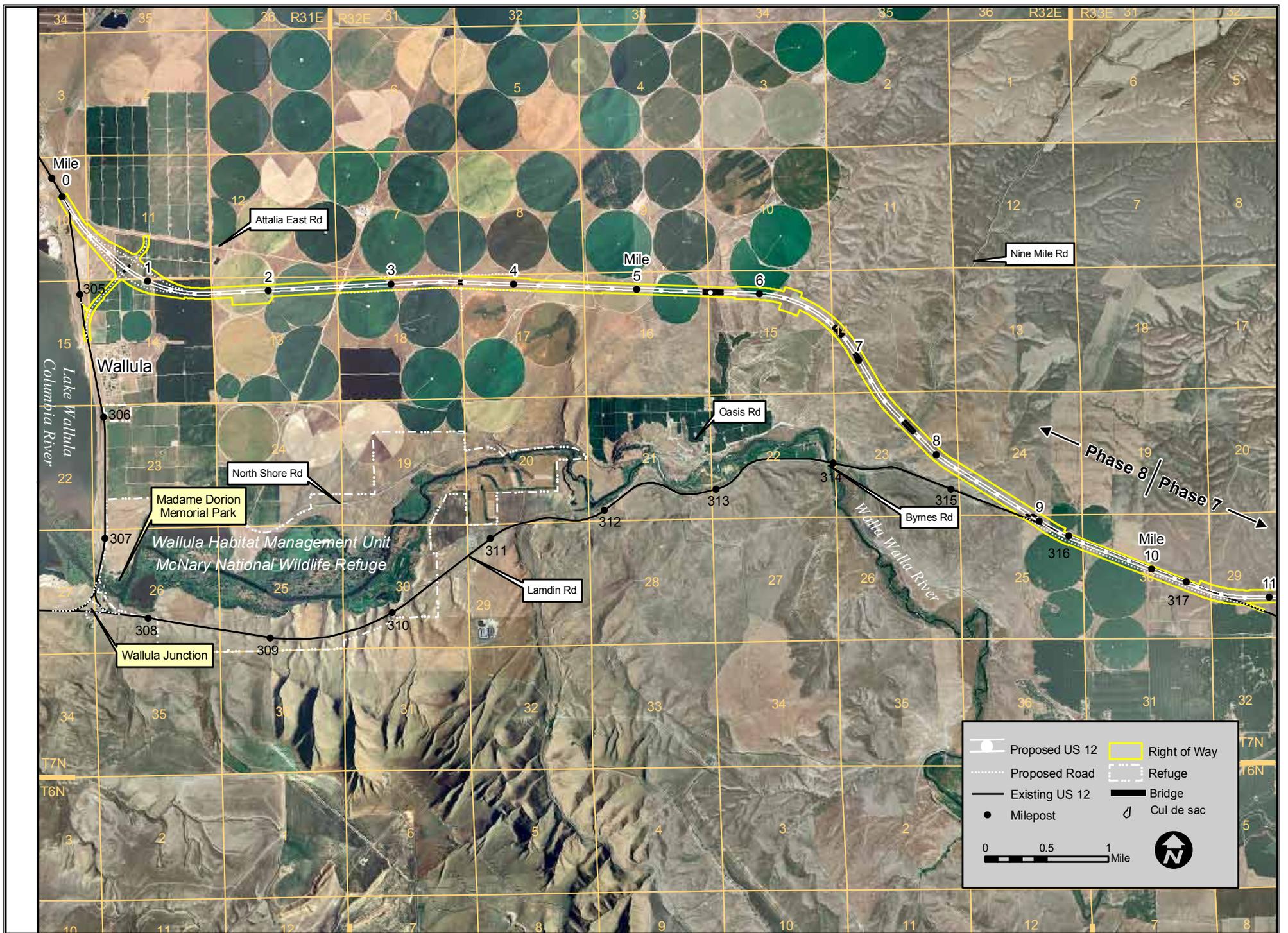


Exhibit ES-2. Two-page map of the Preferred Alignment.



## Which Social, Economic, and Natural Resources Would Be Impacted, and What Mitigation Will Occur?

Several social, economic, and natural resources would experience adverse impacts from constructing the Preferred Alternative. The following list describes those resources and the mitigation that will occur:

### Social Resources

- There is a potential to impact archaeological sites during construction of the proposed bridge structures over the Touchet River, Touchet North Road overpass, and Dry Creek. The bridges will be constructed within alluvial floodplains which have been classified as archaeologically sensitive. However, no archaeological materials were discovered during field investigations at the Touchet River and the proposed Touchet North Road bridge locations. No effects to this area were identified in the Cultural Resources Report for Phases 7 and 8. The project is located within areas that are culturally and historically significant to the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) and the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation (Yakama Nation). WSDOT will continue to consult with the CTUIR and the Yakama Nation regarding potential impacts during design and construction of this project.
- Approximately 100 acres of soils supporting **Prime Farmland** and 820 acres of soils supporting **Farmland of Statewide Importance** will be affected by constructing the Preferred Alternative. The total affected acreage is less than one percent of the land farmed within Walla Walla County, and as such does not warrant protection under the federal Farmlands Protection Policy Act because they are not substantive impacts.
- In general, visual quality will be reduced compared to the existing condition due to encroachment by the new highway. However, views from the highway are expected to improve as a result of this project when comparing the existing US 12 alignment to the proposed US 12 alignment. Views toward the road, from residences or businesses that now overlook rolling agricultural fields, will see the new highway. For these viewers, the project will have some negative effects to visual quality.



The alluvial floodplains of Lower Dry Creek (pictured here, north of Lowden and the Touchet River) are considered archaeologically sensitive because flood deposits over time may have buried prehistoric archaeological sites.

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#### What is Prime Farmland?

*Prime farmland has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, fiber, forage, oil seed, and other agricultural crops with minimum inputs of fuel, fertilizer, pesticides, and labor, and without intolerable soil erosion.*

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#### What is Farmland of Statewide Importance?

*Other than prime farmland, it is farmland that is of statewide importance for the production of food, feed, fiber, forage, or oil seed crops, as determined by the state agency or agencies, using U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines.*

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## Economic Resources

- The new alignment will shift traffic north of businesses located on the existing highway, resulting in potential economic losses such as a decline in sales and revenues. Most businesses to be affected are located in the main Touchet and Lowden business corridors and will not be visible from the new alignment. Access to these businesses from the new highway will also be restricted to fewer intersections and routes. Although the shift in traffic to the new highway will significantly reduce traffic volumes on the existing highway, existing US 12 will likely see an increase in tourist traffic upon conversion to a county road. Tourists are attracted to a more leisurely recreational route leading to nearby parks, wineries, and bed and breakfasts. Local businesses that are reliant on drive-by traffic may still see a substantial reduction in retail sales. To minimize these effects, WSDOT will coordinate with the wineries and business owners to post signage along the new highway alignment in accordance with the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices and the Scenic Vistas Act.
- The WSDOT will ensure continued access to businesses and farm fields during construction where and when feasible.

## Natural Resources

At a minimum, the following measures will be implemented to reduce adverse affects to soil, air, water resources, wetlands, fish, wildlife, and vegetation:

- To reduce erosion of soils from wind and water the WSDOT will develop a Temporary Erosion and Sediment Control (TESC) Plan as outlined in chapter six of the *Highway Runoff Manual* (WSDOT 2008b).
- To reduce air quality effects, WSDOT will utilize Best Management Practices (BMPs) including measures to reduce fugitive dust from construction traffic. A Source Permit will be required for any rock crushers, concrete, or asphalt batch plants used for the project.



The Touchet Mercantile estimates that 99 percent of its business comes from drive-by traffic. The owner of the Touchet Mercantile anticipates that business will drop by 50-60 percent with construction of the new highway.



The good air quality of the region will not be diminished by this project. This a view of the Walla Walla Valley from the hills southeast of Lowden.

- No direct impacts are expected within wetlands on any part of this project because the proposed bridges will span wetlands associated with the Touchet River and Dry Creek. Some minor buffer impacts are expected to affect less than 0.01 acre of wetland buffer. Compensatory mitigation will be provided for direct impacts to wetlands that cannot be avoided or minimized. Compensatory mitigation measures will be determined during the design phase of the project and will follow guidelines established by the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology), the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Walla Walla County, and WSDOT.
- The proposed alignment avoids several stream channel crossings including the Walla Walla River. No special mitigation is needed for surface water, water quality, or groundwater because there are little or no impacts associated with the proposed alignment. The bridges over the Touchet River and Dry Creek will be designed to protect water quality in these water bodies by routing highway runoff away from the open channel before treatment.
- The proposed alignment is expected to require some fill material within the Touchet River floodplain and floodway. Bridges over this river will be designed with the intention of minimizing fill in the floodway and minimizing potential obstruction to the flow of floodwater. The Walla Walla County Code requires an analysis of the effects to the floodway. WSDOT will provide compensatory mitigation to a level commensurate with the Walla Walla County Code to ensure that this project will not affect the base flood elevation of the Touchet River floodplain.
- Construction of the new highway would remove a total of approximately 871 acres of various habitat types, of which approximately 37 percent (323 acres) is some type of natural habitat (i.e., grassland, water, or shrub-steppe). Approximately 20 acres of this natural habitat would be temporarily removed by construction and then restored. In addition, there are areas of shrub-steppe habitat that are important to associated species like burrowing owl, long-billed curlew, black-tailed jackrabbit, and sage sparrow. Measures incorporated into the conceptual design of the project to minimize,



Linear riparian wetlands in the Phase 7 corridor, like these on the Touchet River north of Touchet, would be spanned by new bridges.



Ephemeral streams, like this one in the study area, are dry except during extreme storm events. Pictured here is the current US 12 crossing of Vansycle Canyon.

rectify, and reduce impacts to vegetation, wildlife, and aquatic life include bridging all perennial waters, installing bridges and oversize culverts for wildlife passage, and conducting surveys for sensitive species.

- No fish habitat would be affected. A large amount (approximately 200 acres) of new impervious surface will be created by the proposed project, but all runoff from the project will disperse and infiltrate prior to reaching any perennial waterbodies, including runoff from the bridges over Dry Creek and the Touchet River, so water quality impacts are not anticipated. During construction of the proposed project, methods will be used to minimize, rectify, and reduce any potential impacts to aquatic resources. This includes the use of BMPs and implementation of a Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) as required by Ecology.

## Conclusion

Construction of the Preferred Alternative will improve the level of safety for the traveling public on US 12 between Wallula and Frenchtown Vicinity by increasing capacity and maintaining traffic mobility. The proposed project has been planned and designed to avoid and minimize negative effects to social, economic, and natural resources to the greatest extent possible.



The largest intact patches of shrub-steppe habitat are found in the Phase 8 study corridor. They are often surrounded by cropland, like this 200-acre patch near project Mile 4.

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