Chapter One

Introduction to the Project, and Its Purpose and Need

What Is the History of the US Highway 12 Wallula to Frenchtown Vicinity Project?

The portion of US Highway 12 (US 12) that traverses the state of Washington begins in the city of Aberdeen on Grays Harbor near the Pacific Ocean, and ends in Clarkston at the Idaho border (**Exhibit 1**). In 1967, it was designated a Class 1 highway under the Washington Administrative Code (WAC), which is defined as follows:

> *These Highways have the capacity for safe and efficient speed and/or high volume traffic movements, providing for interstate, interregional, and intercity travel needs and some intracity travel needs. Service to abutting land is subordinate to providing service to major traffic movements. Highways in this class are typically distinguished by a highly controlled, limited number of public and private connections, restrictive medians with limited median openings on multilane facilities, and infrequent traffic signals.*

Exhibit 1. Map showing the location of the US 12 corridor through Washington State.

Since first constructed, traffic volumes throughout the US 12 corridor from the junction of State Route (SR) 124 to the city of Walla Walla have been steadily increasing. Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) traffic records show that the number of vehicles within this corridor typically exceeds 12,000 vehicles per day, and freight traffic accounts for approximately one-third of the total volume. This increase in traffic has been accompanied by a rise in the number of property- and injury-related accidents. In response to this increase, the WSDOT implemented a number of safety measures that included the following improvement projects:

- 1973 – The improvement of US 12 within the Walla Walla city limits to a four-lane facility called the Walla Walla Bypass

- 1993-1996 – The addition of turning lanes, illumination, and other improvements at key intersections within that portion of the US 12 corridor from the junction of US 12 and SR 124 to Walla Walla
- 1996 – The addition of a center-line rumble strip

These safety measures resulted in a short-term reduction in the number of accidents occurring within the corridor. However, even with these improvements in place, property- and injury-related accidents began rising within several years of their installation.

A WSDOT **footprint report** was initiated in 1998 to assess the feasibility of various routes for a four-lane divided highway spanning approximately 40 miles of the US 12 corridor from the Snake River to the city of Walla Walla. The first part of the report was completed in 1999 and it assessed the geographic area from the intersection of US 12 and SR 124 south to the intersection of US 12 and US Highway 730 (US 730) at Wallula Junction. The second part of the report was completed in 2001, and it examined the area from the community of Wallula east to the city of Walla Walla.

What is a Footprint Report?

A Footprint Report compares different highway routes based on how constructible they are, their costs, right-of-way requirements, access impacts, and their potential for social, economic, and environmental impacts.

A number of independent construction projects were identified and developed from the footprint report. **Exhibit 2** shows the approximate location of each project. All of these projects have independent utility and logical termini because they connect traffic generators and address capacity and safety issues. Three of these projects are complete and one is being constructed. They include the following:

- Phase 1 – SR 124 to McNary Pool (construction completed in 2005)
- Phase 2 – McNary Pool to Attalia (construction completed in 2004)
- Phase 3 – Attalia Vicinity (construction completed in 2007)
- Phase 6 – Frenchtown Vicinity to Walla Walla (estimated completion in 2010)

Construction of Phase 6 west of Walla Walla is nearing completion. This is a view of the Myra Road roundabout constructed in late 2008.

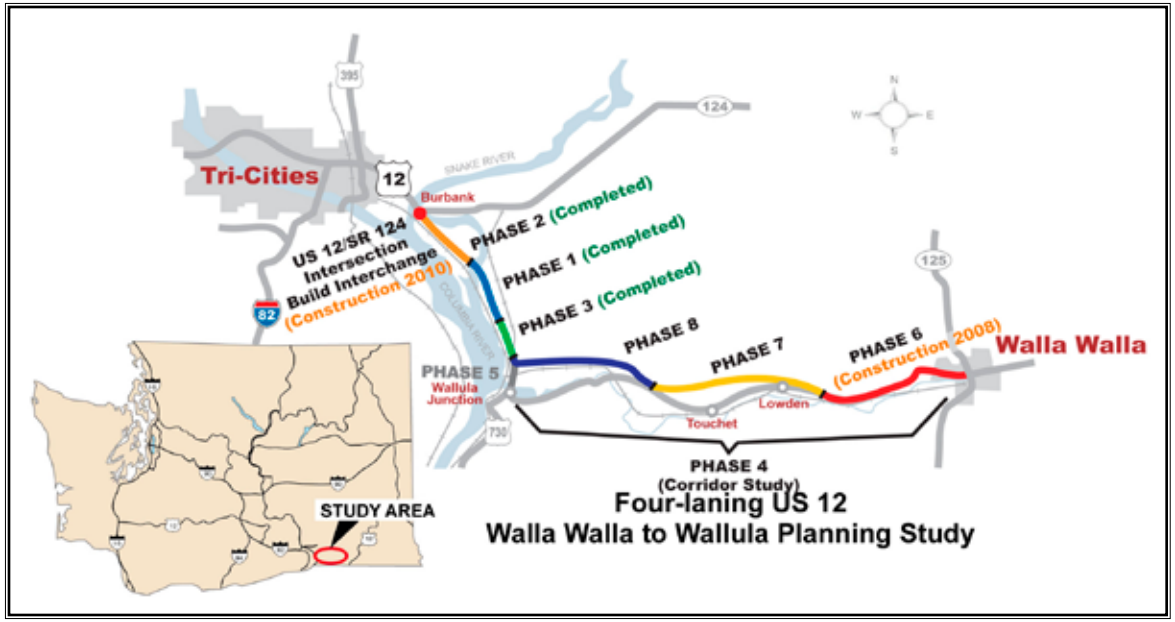

Exhibit 2. Map showing the location of construction projects within the US 12 corridor from the intersection of US 12 and SR 124 to the Walla Walla Bypass.

Phase 4 is a corridor study that comprises Phases 6, 7, and 8. It resulted in a Phase 8 alignment that eliminated the need for a separate Phase 5 project from Attalia Vicinity to the intersection of US 12 and US 730 at Wallula Junction.

Additionally, two other construction projects are the subject of this Environmental Assessment (EA). These projects occur between Phases 3 and 6, and include the following:

- Phase 7 – Nine Mile Hill to Frenchtown Vicinity (planning and design)
- Phase 8 – Wallula to Nine Mile Hill (planning and design)

Once constructed, these projects will improve the safety, capacity, and **mobility** of the regional transportation system between the Tri-Cities area and the cities of Walla Walla and College Place.

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.

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

WSDOT is currently designing the US Highway 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 proposed project consists of two phases: Phase 7 and Phase 8. Both phases are located in the southwestern part of Walla Walla County, Washington. **Exhibit 8** in Chapter Two shows the proposed alignment and the current highway on a 2006 aerial photo of the area.

The project begins north of the community of Wallula at Milepost (MP) 304.2 near the Boise pulp and paper mill. It extends eastward to an area known locally as Frenchtown at MP 328.1 (**Exhibit 3**). 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, depending on inflation rates and when funding becomes available.

Why is Phase 8 discussed before Phase 7?

This report discusses the project from west to east, which is the way US 12 mileposts are numbered. When phases of US 12 Four-laning were assigned between Wallula and Walla Walla, highway improvements were expected to start at Walla Walla and proceed westward.

Why does the cost have such a large range?

The estimated cost for each alternative was developed through a Cost Risk Assessment and Value Engineering study. The estimated total costs are based on the recommended range for a project at the scoping level of design (10%-30% complete). The estimated cost range uses a low-end figure that is 30% less than the estimated total cost, and a high-end figure that is 50% more than the estimated total cost, for each alternative. This range is included to reflect the degree of uncertainty associated with a project in an early design stage.

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, maintain mobility, and continue improvements along this portion of US 12 corridor from the Snake River to Walla Walla.

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.

What are Roadway Deficiencies?

Roadway deficiencies refer to conditions that do not fully meet current highway access management standards as set by the state of Washington Administrative Code. For example, the number and spacing of intersecting streets, roads, and private drives shall be consistent with the highway classification and designated uses.

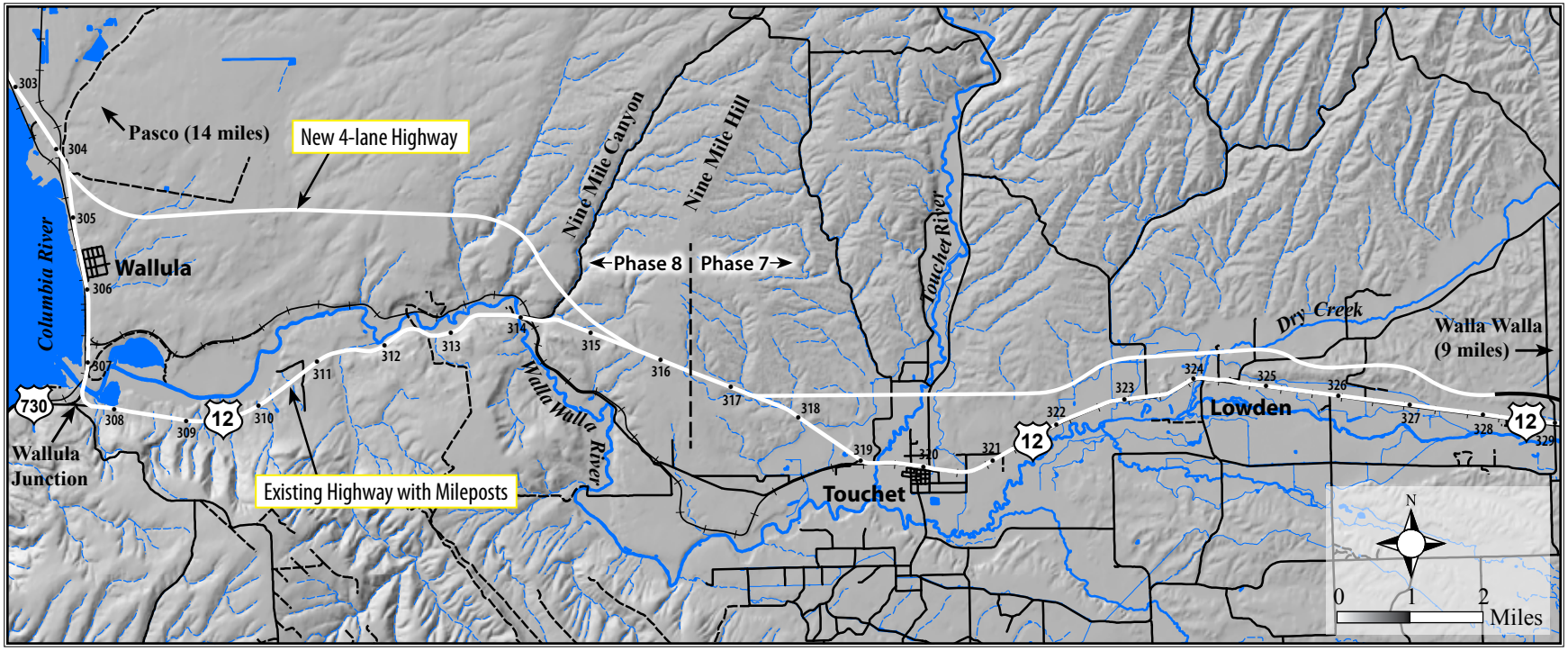

Exhibit 3. Map showing the existing US 12 and the proposed 4-lane highway.

To Improve Safety of the Traveling Public

The increased use of US 12 between the Tri-Cities and Walla Walla has been accompanied by a rise in the number of accidents occurring within the project limits. WSDOT accident records reveal the number and location of these accidents.

From 1999 to 2007, 286 accidents were reported on US 12 between the Wallula and Frenchtown vicinities. Four of these were fatalities that occurred within Phase 8. WSDOT collision data show this to be more than a tenfold increase in accidents as compared to

Traffic delays behind slower moving trucks reduce the level of safety for the traveling public on US 12, west of Walla Walla.

the previous decade. This sharp increase in accidents reflects the increase in both overall traffic and freight traffic on the highway.

The accidents demonstrate the location and effect of several roadway deficiencies on the safety of the traveling public, which are discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

- Driver's line of sight is limited on curves and at Wallula Junction.
- Spacing between the intersections of US 12 and several local roads within the project limits are less than the standard set by the WAC.
- The number of and spacing between private drives with direct access to US 12 in Phase 7 do not meet the standard set by the WAC.
- Acceleration and deceleration lanes are absent at most intersections for vehicles entering and exiting US 12.

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. Another safety concern is that the highway currently passes through the communities of Touchet and Lowden, increasing the potential for accidents involving pedestrians and bicyclists; even though speed limits are briefly reduced from 60 miles per hour (mph) to 40 mph, and pedestrian and school crossings are marked.

Eastbound drivers need to take extra care at the US 12 Wallula Junction stop sign because the intersection angle limits view of US 730 traffic.

Several curves in Phase 8 make it difficult to see oncoming traffic on the existing highway. This is a view west, near Oasis Road.

To Improve Capacity and Mobility

WSDOT traffic records show that traffic volumes within this part of the US 12 corridor have been increasing at approximately 2.0 percent per year since 1993. Additionally, the Benton-Franklin Council of Government's (BFCG) Regional Travel Demand Model also indicates that volumes will continue rising at an average of 2.0 percent per year through 2032. This means that the traveling public will experience a 50 percent increase overall in the number of vehicles driving on this stretch of US 12 by 2032.

Comparing the 2008 and 2032 traffic volumes suggests that the effects of substandard roadway conditions will worsen if measures are not taken to increase capacity on this highway. Additional capacity would correct substandard features and prevent safety levels from deteriorating further. Chapter Three provides more details on traffic volumes and how capacity is measured for rural highways and intersections.

As traffic volumes increase into the future, the number of **heavy vehicles** using US 12 will rise proportionately. This is an especially compelling argument for increasing capacity, given that the typical behavior of a driver following a slower moving vehicle is to risk passing that vehicle. If not improved to meet projected future demand, a lack of capacity will ultimately lead to longer travel times for passenger and freight traffic, associated economic impacts, and an increase in accidents and injuries.

Rising traffic volumes and an increase in use by heavy vehicles, combined with roadway deficiencies, is predicted to continue to erode the level of safety on this portion of US 12. When taken together with driver behavior problems such as excessive speed, crossing the centerline, failure to yield the right-of-way, failure to stop, and driving under the influence, the safety of the traveling public is further jeopardized.

According to the Traffic Safety Bureau, a 40 percent reduction in serious injury and fatal crashes can be expected when a highway is improved from two lanes to four lanes. Thus, improving Phases 7 and 8 would equate to a substantial reduction in the number of deaths and serious injuries occurring within the project area.

What are Heavy Vehicles?

All vehicles are classified by weight. Heavy vehicles include tractor-trailers (semis), concrete mixers, dump trucks, fire trucks, and buses.

Some students in Touchet must cross US 12 to get to the combined elementary and secondary school.

Why Is WSDOT Preparing This Environmental Assessment?

At the federal level, pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), an environmental analysis must be performed if the proposed action is being implemented by a federal agency, requires a federal permit, or has federal funding.

Under Washington's State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), any agency that proposes to take an official action is required to perform an environmental analysis to ensure that minimal impacts will result from that action, unless that action is exempt under SEPA.

As a result, this project—a proposed federal and state funded action that will require regulatory permits—must follow federal and state environmental regulations as dictated by NEPA and SEPA. Accordingly, the WSDOT is preparing this **Environmental Assessment** (EA) in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).

Under NEPA, a federal agency is required to be the **lead agency.** The federal lead agency for the project is the FHWA. Like NEPA, the SEPA also requires a lead agency. As the state agency proposing the project, the WSDOT is the lead agency under SEPA.

Analysis of potential positive and negative effects of the proposed project for elements of the social, economic, and natural environment is proportional to the level of anticipated impact. Thus, some technical reports on the CD provided with this EA are relatively brief if effects for that element are expected to be minor on the project. Conversely, detailed reports were prepared where effects may be more substantial or are unknown. These technical reports were prepared consistent with the WSDOT Environmental Procedures Manual (EPM) and the FHWA Technical Advisory T 6640.8A.

To satisfy both NEPA and SEPA requirements, the two agencies have developed this combined NEPA/SEPA document for Phases 7 and 8 of the US 12 Project. This EA evaluates environmental impacts from both direct and indirect effects, as well as cumulative effects that would result if the proposed project is built.

What is an Environmental Assessment?

A document that is prepared for an action in which the signfiicance of the social, economic, and environmental effects are not clearly established.

What is a Lead Agency?

A lead agency is the agency with the primary responsibility for complying with either federal or state regulations.

US 12 traffic also currently passes through the community of Lowden.

Who Else Participated in Developing This EA?

The WSDOT convened an **Interagency Project Team (IPT)** to provide guidance and direction during the planning and design phase for the proposed project. IPT membership consists of the following:

- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
- Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT)
- Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR)
- Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation (Yakama Nation)
- United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service
- United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
- Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW)
- Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology)
- Walla Walla County Public Works Department
- Walla Walla County Conservation District (WWCCD)
- Port of Walla Walla

IPT members have contributed information to help determine the different possible routes the proposed project could take.

What is an IPT and What Does it Do?

The IPT is a collection of resource experts from the federal, tribal, state, and local governments. These experts contribute input during the NEPA process to ensure the consideration of all potential impacts on natural, social, and economic resources present within the project area and geographic region.

WSDOT conducted field reviews of Phases 7 and 8 for IPT representatives. Here, wildlife biologists check conditions in the canyons north of Oasis Orchard.

How Was the Preferred Alternative Identified?

The FHWA and WSDOT identified a **Preferred Alternative** based on findings from this EA, as well as input received from state and federal agencies, tribal governments, local governments, and the public. Following circulation of this EA, the FHWA will select an alternative for construction, or decide on another course of action. If the selected alternative is a **Build Alternative**, then it will advance to design and permitting, and ultimately, construction of the project.

What is a Preferred Alternative?

For an environmental analysis, the term "Preferred Alternative" refers to the alternative identified from a comprehensive evaluation of all reasonable and feasible alternatives.

What is a Build Alternative?

For an environmental analysis, the term "Build Alternative" refers to any alternative under consideration other than a "No Action" or "No Build" alternative. A No Action or No Build Alternative usually refers to a situation where the transportation infrastructure remains as is.

How Has the WSDOT Kept the Public Informed?

The public has participated in the planning and design process through a series of open house events held at various locations more or less annually since 2004. The most recent open house was held at Touchet School in January 2008. A final open house will be held to address public comments on this EA.

Project descriptions, time-lines, planning and design concerns, and project effects were presented at each event, affording the public an opportunity to learn about and discuss their concerns first-hand with WSDOT engineering, environmental, maintenance, and real estate staff.

In addition to open house events, the public was updated through various avenues of media that include the following:

- Project bulletins that were placed at the city of Walla Walla's Administrative Building, the Walla Walla County Courthouse, the WSDOT Maintenance Facility in Walla Walla, the Port of Walla Walla office, and various private businesses throughout the corridor from Wallula to Walla Walla.
- Project information is also made available via the internet at http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Projects/US12/PlanningStudy/. This website will be updated as project and schedule information changes.

Citizen participation has been high at public open houses, as shown here at Touchet High School in 2008.

WSDOT also conducted a survey among local businesses as part of the research for this EA. The survey indicated that some businesses anticipate positive effects from the project such as improved access for shipping and employees, while others anticipate negative effects from the reduction in drive-by customers.

What Are the Next Steps in This Environmental Process?

WSDOT makes this EA available for public and agency review and comment. Following a 30-day public comment period, the project team will evaluate all comments and, if necessary, revise the EA. If the FHWA determines that the proposed project will have no significant impacts, FHWA will issue a **Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)**. Once a FONSI has been issued, the WSDOT will complete and circulate a **SEPA Adoption Notice**. If the FHWA determines that the proposed project will have significant unavoidable effects, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will be prepared.

What is a FONSI?

A Finding of No Significant Impact briefly presents why an action does not have a significant effect, and includes and references the EA.

What is a SEPA Adoption Notice?

An Adoption Notice is used to "adopt" a previously prepared environmental document that adequately analyzes the environmental effects of a proposed project to meet the requirements of the SEPA; for example, an EA and FONSI prepared under the NEPA.

What Information Is Contained in This EA?

This EA follows standard NEPA and SEPA guidelines. This chapter has introduced and discussed the purpose and need for the project. Chapter Two presents the project alternatives. Chapter Three describes the social, economic, and environmental resources that may be affected by the project as compared to what would happen if nothing were built. Measures taken to avoid, minimize, and mitigate direct negative effects that would occur if the Preferred Alternative were constructed are also presented in Chapter Three, as are potential indirect and cumulative effects. A reference list and supplemental technical information is provided at the end of this document in Chapter Four.

The accompanying CD provides electronic files of

- this EA,
- planning studies used to identify the Preferred Alternative, and
- technical reports analyzing the Build and No Build alternatives.

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