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459.01 Introduction

Visual perception is an important component of environmental quality that can be affected by transportation projects. The location, design, and maintenance of highway, ferry, rail, and aviation facilities may adversely or positively affect visual features of the landscape. Concern over adverse visual impacts can be a major source of project opposition. This chapter focuses on highway projects, but the same, or similar, requirements apply to other transportation modes and facilities (see [Section 459.07](#)). For related information on historic and cultural resources, see [Chapter 456](#).

Because of the public nature and visual importance of transportation projects, both negative and positive visual impacts must be adequately assessed and considered during project development. The goal of the project is to fit the facility into the surrounding landscape in harmony with the visual resource. The project should minimize the impact and enhance the visual environment.

In discussing and reviewing the visual impacts of a highway project, two views must be considered: the view from the road and the view toward the road. Americans have repeatedly ranked pleasure driving on scenic roads as one of their favorite pastimes. Researchers have also shown that the view from the road is the basis for much of what people know about the everyday environment and their mental image of the landscape. A positive visual experience by motorists can also contribute to traffic calming.

Projects must be carefully planned to ensure that the facility blends into the community and its environment. Pleasing vistas for travelers should not be developed at the expense of views from surrounding areas.

(1) Summary of Requirements

A Visual Impacts Analysis must be completed for all projects that change the roadside character, including changes in road alignment, expansion of the roadway, new intersections or ferry terminal improvements, increased lighting, or removal of considerable vegetation.

During project development, visual impacts, including aesthetics, light, glare, and night sky impacts, should be considered for all project alternatives by evaluating views from the road and views toward the road that will be in existence during the construction phase and the operational phase. The Visual Impacts Discipline Report is developed from a detailed analysis of the project area, including a photographic log of the affected viewshed. The report must include a qualitative and quantitative analysis of all significant views from and toward the facility throughout the project length. The number of views needed depends upon the geographic extent of the project, its setting in the landscape, the effects on the identified viewer groups, and their sensitivity to changes in the view. Mitigation measures and opportunities must be outlined through design using Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) criteria.

Project alternatives will need to be sufficiently developed for a complete analysis to occur. The person doing the Visual Impacts Analysis must have an understanding of the changes that each alternative will have on the visual environment. Large cuts or fills, walls, bridges, and horizontal and vertical alignments must be described and analyzed.

The findings and recommendations in the Visual Impacts Discipline Report are used in a Documented Categorical Exclusion (DCE), Environmental Assessment (EA), or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

An abbreviated Visual Impacts Analysis is to be completed by a disciplinary expert for the Environmental Review Summary and SEPA checklist. This process will evaluate the potential for impacts to the visual resource without an in-depth analysis. Typically, mitigating measures that would avoid or minimize impacts to the visual resource are outlined in these documents.

All Visual Impacts Analysis discipline reports should be written by, or coordinated through, the region Landscape Architect or the Headquarters Roadside and Site Development Unit for regions without a Landscape Architect.

(2) **Glossary**

Community Enhancement Areas – Features such as community gateways, roadside parks, viewpoints, agricultural uses, and historic markers.

Corridor – Road and highway right of way and the adjacent area that is visible from and extending along the highway. The distance the corridor extends from the highway could vary with different intrinsic qualities.

Intrinsic Quality – Scenic, historic, recreational, cultural, archaeological, or natural features that are considered representative, unique, irreplaceable, or distinctly characteristic of an area

Landscape Unit – An area or volume of distinct landscape character that forms a spatially enclosed unit at ground level, differentiated from other areas by its slope and its pattern of land cover. A unique segment of the landscape.

Scenic Byway – Public road having special scenic, historic, recreational, cultural, archaeological, and/or natural qualities that have been recognized as such through legislation or some other official declaration for its scenic, historic, recreational, cultural, archaeological, or natural qualities.

Scenic Corridor Management Plan – Written document that specifies the actions, procedures, controls, operational practices, and administrative strategies needed to maintain the scenic, historic, recreational, cultural, archaeological, and natural qualities of a scenic byway.

Viewshed – All the surface areas visible from an observer’s viewpoint.

Viewer Group – Classes of viewers differentiated by their visual response to the facility and its setting. Response is affected by viewer activity, awareness, and values.

Viewer Sensitivity – The viewer’s variable receptivity to the elements within the environment they are viewing. Sensitivity is affected by viewer activity and awareness.

Visual Element – A particular feature of the visual environment.

Visual Function – The component of a transportation project that is designed and experienced primarily from a visual perspective; includes positive guidance and navigation, distraction screening, corridor continuity, roadway and adjacent property buffering, and scenic view preservation.

Visual Quality – Character of the landscape, which generally gives visual value to a setting.

459.02 Applicable Statutes and Regulations

This section lists the primary statutes and regulations applicable to visual impacts.

(1) **Federal**

The federal statutes on visual impacts are codified under several programs, described below. For general information on highway-related legislation, see the FHWA [Resources](#) web page.

- (a) **National Environmental Policy Act** – The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), [42 USC 4321](#), requires that all major actions sponsored, funded, permitted, or approved by federal agencies undergo planning to ensure that environmental considerations such as impacts related to aesthetics and visual quality are given due weight in decision-making. NEPA Section 101(b)(2) states that it is the “continuous responsibility” of the federal government to “use all practicable means” to “assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and esthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings.” For details on NEPA procedures, see [Chapters 410](#), [411](#), and [412](#).

Federal implementing regulations are at [23 CFR 771](#) (FHWA) and [40 CFR 1500-1508](#) (CEQ). According to the CEQ implementing regulations, environmental analysis is to consider impacts on urban quality, historic and cultural resources, and the design of the built environment” (Section 1502.6). Agencies shall “identify methods and procedures . . . to insure that presently unquantified environmental amenities and values may be given appropriate consideration” (Section 1507.2).

- (b) **Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU)** – SAFETEA-LU (2005) authorizes the Federal surface transportation programs for highways, highway safety, and transit for the five-year period from 2005 to 2009. Eligible activities include: acquisition of scenic easements and scenic or historic sites, scenic or historic highway programs, landscaping and other scenic beautification, historic preservation, preservation of abandoned railway corridors (including the conversion and use for pedestrian or bicycle trails), control and removal of outdoor advertising.

To implement the Scenic Byways Program created under 23 USC 101(g)-133(e), FHWA has set criteria for designating scenic byways, based upon their scenic, historic, recreational, cultural, archaeological, and/or natural intrinsic qualities. For details, see the FHWA [Environmental Guidebook](#) web page.

- (c) **Highway Beautification Act** – The Highway Beautification Act of 1965 ([23 CFR 750](#)) was enacted to provide effective control of outdoor advertising and junkyards, protect public investment, promote the safety and recreational value of public travel and preserve natural beauty, and provide landscapes and roadside development reasonably necessary to accommodate the traveling public. Implementing procedures are set forth in [23 CFR 750](#), [751](#), and [752](#).
- (d) **National Historic Preservation Act** – Implementing regulations for Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (see [Section 456.02](#)), adopted in 1976, define criteria of adverse effect ([36 CFR 800.5](#)) to include the “introduction of visual, atmospheric, or audible elements that diminish the integrity of the property’s significant historic features.”
- (e) **DOT Act, Section 4(f)** – This act declares a national policy to make a special effort to preserve the natural beauty of the countryside and public park and recreation sites, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and historic sites.” For details on Section 4(f), see [Section 411.12](#), [Chapter 450](#), and [Chapter 457](#).
- (f) **Wild and Scenic Rivers Act** – This act, as amended, directs that “each component of the national wild and scenic rivers system shall be administered in such manner as to protect and enhance the values which caused it to be included, without, insofar as it is consistent therewith, limiting other uses that do not substantially interfere with public use and enjoyment of these values. In such administration, primary emphasis shall be given to protecting its esthetic, scenic, historic, archaeological, and scientific features.” For information on wild and scenic rivers in Washington, see [Chapter 450](#).

(2) State

- (a) **State Environmental Policy Act** – The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), requires that all major actions sponsored, funded, permitted, or approved by state and/or local agencies undergo planning to ensure environmental considerations such as impacts related to aesthetics and visual quality are given due weight in decision-making. State implementing regulations are in [WAC 197-11](#) and [WAC 468-12](#) (WSDOT). For details on SEPA procedures, see [Chapters 410](#), [411](#), and [412](#).
- (b) **Highway Beautification Act** – Washington’s Highway Beautification Act ([RCW 47.40.010](#)) adopted in 1961, declared improvement and beautification of any state highway right of way to be a “proper highway purpose.” The act specifically mentions the following improvements: “planting and cultivating of any shrubs, trees, hedges or other domestic or native ornamental growth; the improvement of roadside facilities and view points; and the correction of unsightly conditions.”
- (c) **Open Space Land Preservation** – In [RCW 84.34](#), the legislature declared that “it is in the best interest of the state to maintain, preserve, conserve and otherwise continue in existence adequate open space lands for the production of food, fiber and forest crops, and to assure the use and enjoyment of natural resources and scenic beauty for the economic and social well-being of the state and its citizens.” Open space was defined as including any land area that would preserve visual quality along highway, road, and street corridors or scenic vistas. One of the criteria to be used in determining open space classification for current use or conservation futures is whether granting this classification would preserve visual quality along highway, road, and street corridors or scenic vistas ([RCW 84.34.037](#)).

459.03 Policy Guidance

WSDOT roadside policy is found in the [Roadside Classification Plan M 25-31](#) and in the [Design Manual M 22-01](#).

459.04 Interagency Agreements

None.

459.05 Technical Guidance**(1) WSDOT Discipline Report Checklist**

A Visual Impacts Discipline Report is needed for an EIS project when the Project Manager, in consultation with any federal lead agencies, conclude (based on discipline expert advice and a preliminary Visual Impacts Analysis) that there is a reasonable probability that the project would have more than a moderate visual impact in the project area; for example if it would substantially alter the visual quality along a Scenic Byway, despite any proposed mitigation. For an EA project, a Visual Impacts Discipline Report is needed when it is determined that the project

may have more than a moderate visual impact, but further analysis is needed to establish whether there is a reasonable probability that such an effect will occur. A Visual Impacts Discipline Report may also be needed to verify (in a DCE) whether a project will have little visual impact when that appears to be the case.

A Visual Impacts Discipline Report should also be right-sized to adequately address the impacts or level of controversy regarding a project's visual impact, without over-analyzing the existing conditions or impacts or providing unnecessary information. For instance, the level of analysis provided for a small project with no structures or change in alignment should be less than the level of analysis provided for a project that will construct a new interchange, add structures, or construct an entirely new alignment.

WSDOT's [Visual Impacts Discipline Reports Checklist](#) identifies the criteria to be used. It provides guidelines for describing the affected environment and impacts from the perspective of the views from the road and the view of the road under different alternatives. The report includes mitigation measures and a discussion of impacts during construction. The checklist includes a rating scale for assessing visual quality and a matrix for comparing existing and future views under different alternatives.

(2) WSDOT GIS Workbench

Useful information may be obtained from the WSDOT GIS Workbench, a GIS interface for internal WSDOT users only. It has numerous layers of environmental and natural resource management data. WSDOT works with federal, state, and local agencies to maintain a collection of the best available data for statewide environmental analysis. Current data sets relevant to visual quality include roadside landscape classifications and the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. For more information, see the WSDOT [Environmental GIS Workbench](#) web page.

For a list of current data sets, see the WSDOT [GeoData Distribution Catalog](#) web page.

(3) Other WSDOT Guidance

Other technical guidance related to aesthetics and visual quality includes the [Roadside Manual](#) M 25-30, particularly Section 500, Visual Functions; the WSDOT [Design Manual](#), including its chapter on Public Art (see link above); and a [Design Manual](#) companion document entitled [Understanding Flexibility in Transportation Design](#) that provides information on context sensitive design.

(4) FHWA Technical Advisory

FHWA [Technical Advisory T 6640.8A](#) (October 1987) gives brief guidelines for preparing environmental documents, including any EIS sections on visual impacts. It says when there is a potential for visual impacts, "the draft EIS should identify the impacts to the existing visual resource, the relationship of the impacts to potential viewers of and from the project, as well as measures to avoid, minimize, or reduce the adverse impacts." It also says that "the draft EIS should explain the consideration given to design quality, art, and architecture in project planning.

These values may be particularly important for facilities located in visually sensitive urban or rural settings. When a proposed project will include features associated with design quality, art or architecture, the draft EIS should be circulated to officially designated State and local arts councils and, as appropriate, other organizations with an interest in design, art, and architecture. The final EIS should identify any proposed mitigation for the preferred alternative.”

(5) FHWA Visual Impact Assessment Guidance

FHWA has developed a methodology for assessing the visual impacts of road projects for NEPA and Section 4(f) evaluations. An FHWA field guide, *Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects* (DOT FHWA-HI-88-054), developed with assistance from WSDOT and other state transportation agencies, gives detailed guidance on scoping, performing, and documenting the visual impact assessment. It also includes background on legal requirements, a scoping questionnaire for visual assessments, and guidance on graphic techniques for displaying the visual effects of highways.

See the FHWA memorandum (August 18, 1986) *Esthetics and Visual Quality Guidance Information*.

(6) Other FHWA Guidance

Other documents related to visual quality are available on the FHWA [Environmental Guidebook](#) web page.

459.06 Permits and Approvals

None required.

459.07 Non-Road Project Requirements

Federal agencies maintain their own unique NEPA procedures in CFR. As such each agency may have different documentation and procedural requirements for complying with NEPA. If your project has a federal nexus with more than one federal agency, it is critically important to meet with the federal lead agencies and determine how to proceed. In some cases the federal agencies may agree to co-lead the NEPA process. In others, one agency may serve as lead and the other as a cooperating agency. This decision needs to be made very early in the process to ensure timely approval of your environmental document. The exact requirement will vary depending on the nature of the project, federal permits and approvals required, and individual circumstances. Common examples of projects that require coordination with more than one federal agency are:

- An FHWA funded project that crosses National Forest Lands.
- A project that receives FHWA and FTA funding.
- Any highway project involving FRA or FAA.
- An FHWA funded project that requires an Army Corps of Engineers Individual permit.

Environmental documentation for ferry projects must address aesthetics and visual issues during the shoreline permit process, including specific details about height of structure, use, and potential impacts.