

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Study Purpose

This document discusses the findings and recommendations for the North Fork Flathead Road (NFFR) Corridor Study conducted for Flathead County by PB Americas, Inc. with technical support from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Glacier National Park and the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). This study was undertaken at the request of Flathead County, in response to the numerous concerns received from residents seeking a mechanism to make improvements along the gravel section of the roadway currently under the county's jurisdiction. The study was conducted based on the "Montana Business Process to Link Planning Studies and NEPA/MEPA Reviews" process. (Cambridge Systematics, 2009)

The purpose of this study was to gather information from the public to identify options and consensus, if any, to improve driving conditions and the surrounding environment. The corridor study evaluated the needs of the users of the roadway, those responsible for maintenance of the roadway, and the major landowners and land management agencies along the roadway including the USFS and National Park Service. The process also provided a means for facilitating resolution of major issues before any specific project programming and development begins. This study was not intended to meet NEPA/MEPA requirements but to determine where concerns exist. Information from this study may be used in the NEPA/MEPA analysis if improvement options from this study are forwarded into project development. The intent of the study is not to identify a specific project, but to give Flathead County options to consider in future planning on the NFFR, if public consensus exists. The process began in March 2010. Activities included in this process were:

- researching existing conditions;
- documenting existing and projected geotechnical, land use and environmental conditions;
- assessing future growth and land use plans; and
- analyzing improvement options for the corridor.

The analysis was performed with consideration given to public acceptance and recommendations, constructability, financial constraints, and environmental impacts.

1.2 Study Background and Location of Corridor Study Area

The NFFR is located in northwest Montana, entirely within Flathead County, and runs from the City of Columbia Falls northward passing near the community of Polebridge and up to the United States border with Canada. The 13-mile section of the NFFR (junction with Blankenship Road (RP 9.5) to the junction with Camas Creek Road (RP 22.7)) covered in this study is a Forest Highway (Forest Highway 61) on the state Secondary System (HWY 486), and maintained by Flathead County. Figure 1.1 shows this location.

HWY 486 is functionally classified as a rural major collector. This corridor is located in the eastern edge of the Flathead National Forest, and to the west of Glacier National Park and generally follows the North Fork of the Flathead River. The corridor study area is 300 feet wide and centered on HWY 486.

The existing geometrics of the NFFR within the corridor study area are challenging in that the roadway traverses mountainous terrain that abuts the North Fork of the Flathead River at numerous points. Surface widths vary from 28 to 44 feet, creating difficulties with maintenance activities. In addition, dust conditions produce poor visibility and safety concerns, especially

during the summer months. These conditions and challenges resulted in the decision for Flathead County and MDT to proceed with this corridor study process.

1.3 Corridor Issues and Needs

The issues and needs shown below were initially identified through public comments received at the beginning of the study process.

- Coordination of emergency services is needed to address long travel times from Columbia Falls up the NFFR for ambulances and fire fighting equipment vehicles.
- Seasonally a large amount of dust is present at speeds approximately 20 miles per hour (mph) and greater. The dust causes visibility issues which can lead to safety concerns for vehicles, and for pedestrians or cyclists on the side of the roadway.
- Maintenance of the roadway by Flathead County is challenging due to varying roadway widths, with some areas as wide as 44 feet. This width can require up to eight passes with the grader, which increases maintenance costs over the standard roadway width of 32 feet. The washboard conditions are of concern to regular travelers of the roadway; the tendency described is that vehicles slide off the road in the washboard condition areas. This washboard condition also has been cited as causing the need for vehicle maintenance.

Following public, stakeholder and agency input, these needs were re-evaluated and further refined. Additional needs for the corridor identified during the study process were:

- Improve safety conditions and decrease accidents
 - Improve geometric elements
 - Address inconsistent roadway widths
 - Improve maintenance, including washboard, pothole conditions and dust issues
 - Balance the needs of all users (residents, emergency responders, tourists, recreational)
- Minimize impacts to wildlife, including the threatened and endangered species
 - Maintain existing wildlife linkage zones
 - Preservation of the existing character of the area.

This study identified corridor issues and concerns along with potential solutions. With input from the public and resource agencies, the study team developed several possible improvement options to address the issues and concerns which currently exist in the NFFR corridor study area.

Figure 1.1 - Study Area Location Map

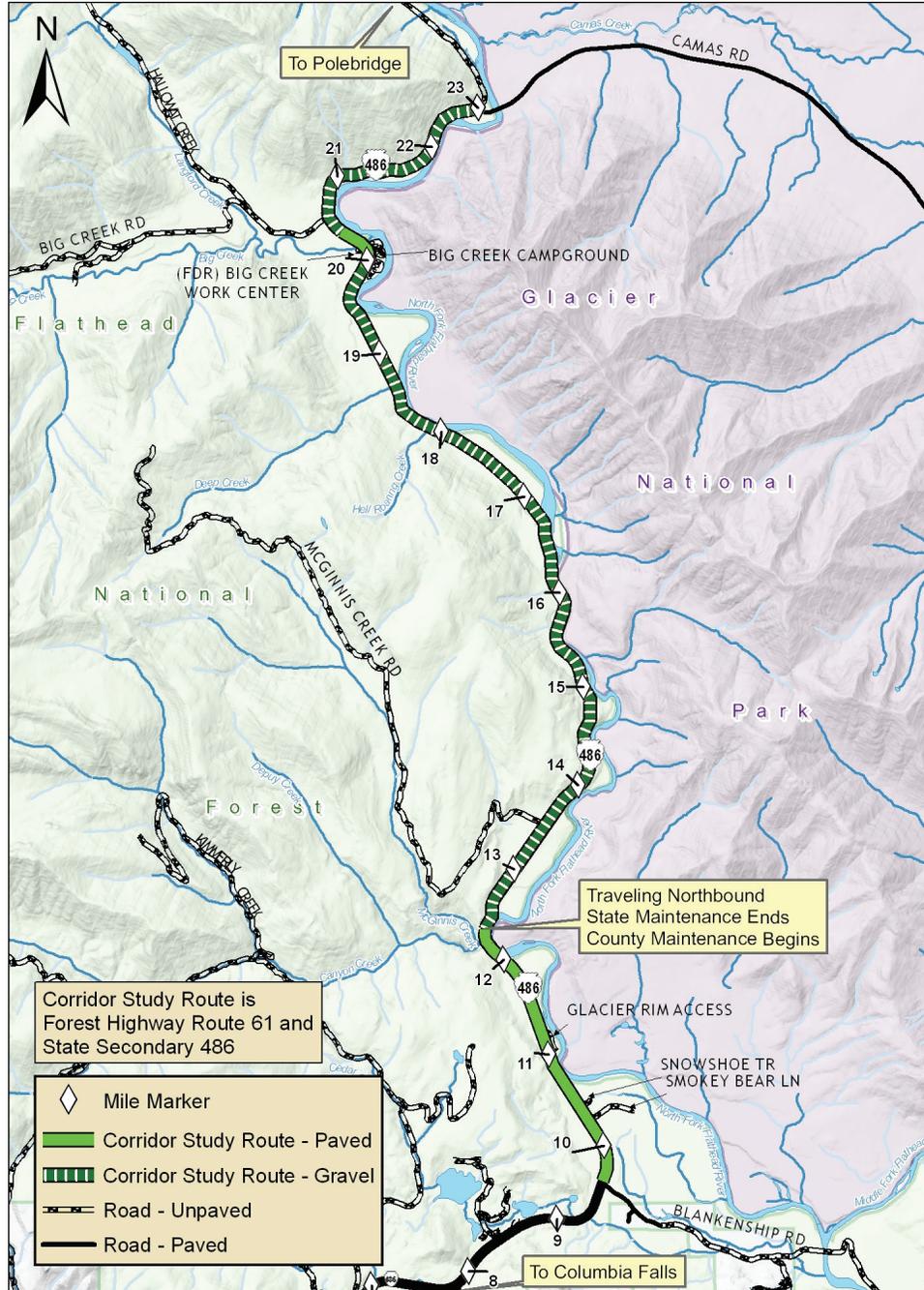


Figure 1.2 - Study Area Jurisdiction Map

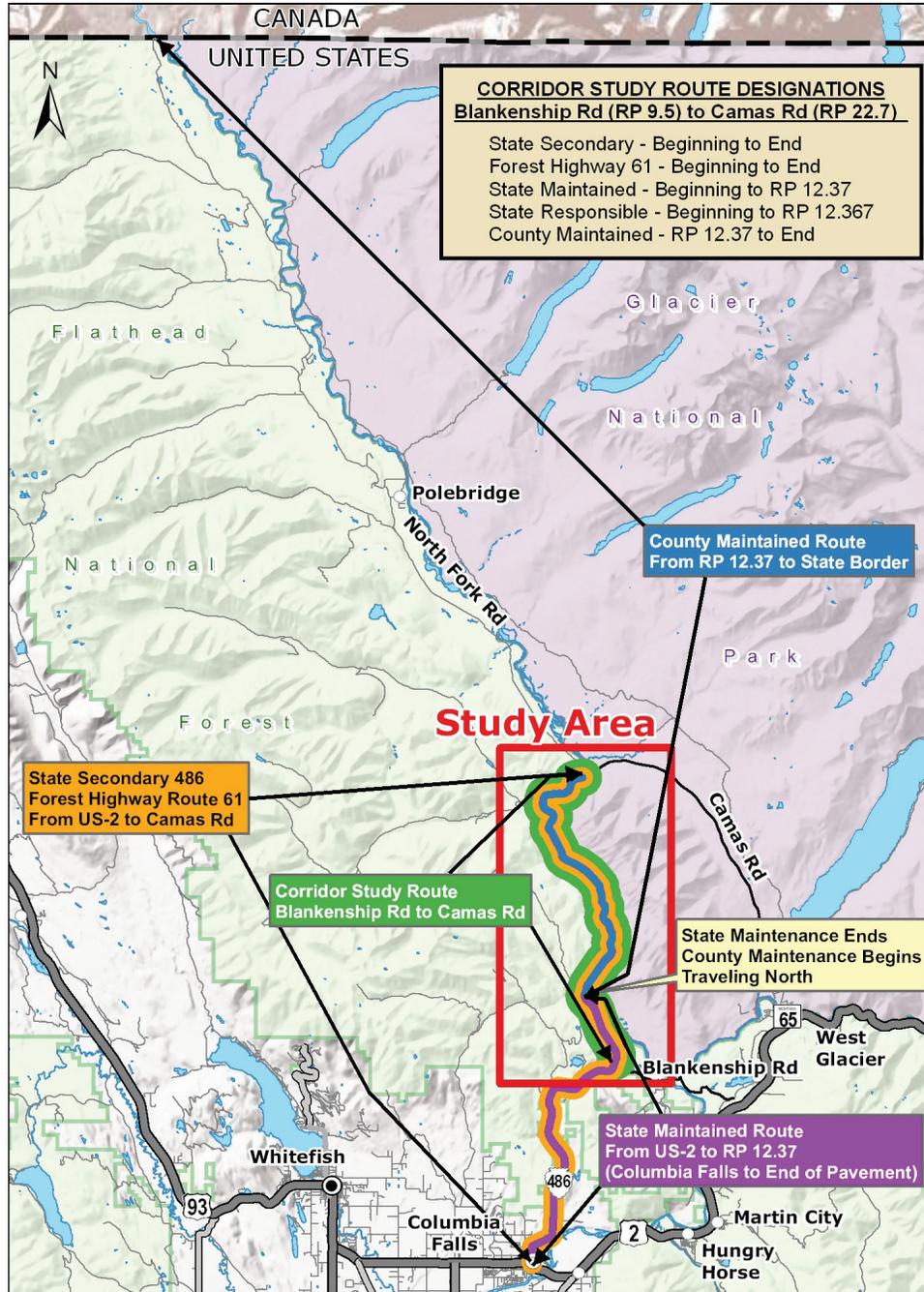


Figure 1.3 - Existing Typical Cross Sections

