Executive Summary

The City of Polson, Lake County, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), in partnership with the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), initiated a pre-National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)/Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) corridor study for US Highway 93 (US 93) near Polson, Montana, to identify and analyze alternate route options for US 93 from Reference Post (RP) 56.5 to RP 63.0. The potential of an alternate route to US 93 through Polson was initially brought forward in the 1996 US 93-Evaro to Polson Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and alternate routes were proposed and evaluated in order to improve traffic operation and safety on US 93 from Evaro, Montana through Polson, Montana. Although the 1996 FEIS and Record of Decision (ROD), as well as the 2001 EIS Re-Evaluation and second ROD, deferred making a decision on the portion of US 93 traversing through the Polson community, the commitment was made in those documents that…*the three governments (i.e. CSKT, MDT and FHWA), Lake County, and the City of Polson will continue to work together to determine the appropriate improvement project applicable for US 93 from the US 93/MT 35 intersection north 3.8 miles through Polson to the vicinity of the US 93/Rocky Point Road intersection.* By completing this pre-NEPA/MEPA corridor study, these entities have fulfilled that commitment by beginning the decision-making process to identify what the appropriate future improvement will be.

This US 93 Polson pre-NEPA/MEPA Corridor Study contains a high level analysis of the US 93 corridor through the Polson community that will inform the environmental process and allow for better scoping of a project before moving into the project development process. Should this corridor study lead to a project (or projects), compliance with NEPA (if federal funding is utilized) and MEPA (regardless of funding source) will be required. Further, this corridor study will be used as the basis for determining the impacts and subsequent mitigation for the selected alignment in the future NEPA document. Any project (or projects) developed will need to be in compliance with the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Title 23 Part 771 and the Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) 18, sub-chapter 2 which sets forth the requirements for documenting environmental impacts on highway projects.

The corridor study was strictly intended as a planning study, not a design project, and involved proactive outreach to the community, stakeholders, and resource agencies. A thorough evaluation of known and publically available resource and technical information was performed. Activities that were completed for the development of the study included the following:

- Research and analysis of existing US 93 roadway conditions,
- Research and synthesis of known environmental resources and applicable regulations in the study area,
- Documentation of future conditions,
- Identification of community, stakeholder, and resource agency concerns,
- Identification of corridor needs and objectives,

- Development and screening of alternate route options with consideration to costs, feasibility, community input, and known environmental resource impacts, and
- Documentation of potential funding mechanisms for alignment options.

ES.1 Corridor Issues

At the various informational meetings, statements made by the community suggested that congestion was an issue on US 93 but was only an issue during the summer months. Based on an evaluation of congestion, the existing roadway may likely carry year 2010 AADT traffic volumes, but may likely not carry year 2010 peak summer traffic volumes.

Based on the evaluation of the existing conditions of US 93 within the study area, roadway issues were identified. The issues included alignment geometry, roadway width, and higher crash trends compared to similar routes statewide. The identified issues are presented below:

Vertical Alignment

The vertical alignment directly affects the operational characteristics of the roadway. The vertical alignment from RP 57.2 to RP 57.8, near Polson Hill, does not meet current design criteria. However, a design exception was approved in April 2004 at this location. A section of roadway along US 93 was constructed to design standards in 1955. However, design standards have changed since 1955; therefore, west of Rocky Point Road at RP 62.5, the vertical alignment does not meet current design criteria.

Roadway Surface Width

Throughout the study area, the existing roadway surface width varies from 28 feet to 71 feet. The varying width does not meet the suggested surface width for US 93. According to the MDT National Highway System (NHS) Route Segment Map reference, the suggested roadway width for US 93 is 40 feet or greater. Currently, the section from RP 60.851 to 63.0 does not meet this suggested surface width. Given that the Route Segment Plan no longer defines a standard roadway width, the MDT Roadway Width committee would determine the appropriate width during future project development.

Crash Trends

Safety concerns were documented along the existing US 93 route through an evaluation of crash rates for the rural and urban-like portions of the roadway, and compared to statewide averages for roadways of similar type (see section 2.11). For the "rural" segments of US 93, the crash rate for all vehicles is higher than the average comparable rural routes throughout the state of Montana for the same analysis period. These "rural" segments include the southern portion of US 93, between Caffrey Road and MT-35 (all vehicle crash rate of 1.58), and the northern portion of US 93 between Irvine Flats Road and RP 65 (all vehicle crash rate of 1.32). The average comparable all vehicle crash rate for rural routes statewide is 1.07. The section of US 93 between MT-35 and Irvine Flats Road exhibits "urban" characteristics, and therefore the all vehicle crash rate was compared to the average comparable all vehicle crash rate for urban routes throughout the state of Montana for the same analysis period. The

"urban" segment of US 93 all vehicle crash rate of 2.33 was much less that the average comparable statewide urban route all vehicle crash rate of 5.06.

ES.2 Corridor Study Needs and Objectives

Based on the analyses of existing and future conditions of the US 93 corridor, the following needs and objectives were established for use in the development of potential alternate route options found later in this study. The needs or objectives followed by an asterisk implies a variation on the needs or objectives contained in the 1996 FEIS fully referenced in Chapter 9 of this document. Needs and objectives without an asterisk were developed by the community and/or TOC.

Need Number 1: System Linkage and Function

Preserve functionality of US 93 as a principal arterial.

Objectives

- Maintain connections of Polson with other Montana communities.
- Maintain connections to other major highways in the corridor.

Need Number 2: Transportation Demand and Operations

Accommodate existing and future transportation demand on US 93 through the planning horizon of the year 2030.

Objectives

- Maintain a level of service (LOS) B or better for roadway segments along US 93 (rural principal arterial), to the extent practicable. *
- Maintain a LOS C or better for roadway segments along US 93 (urban principal arterial), to the extent practicable. *
- Acknowledge the increase in non-motorized transportation uses and provide for appropriate infrastructure, to the extent practicable.

Need Number 3: Roadway Geometrics

Provide a facility that accommodates the diversity of vehicle types.

Objectives

- Provide appropriate lane configuration(s) to accommodate the vehicle demand expected under existing and future conditions, to the extent practicable.
- Provide for unique turning movements and grade requirements for specialized vehicles such as semi-trucks and recreational vehicles, to the extent practicable.
- Improve the road and bridge surfacing widths to meet current MDT design criteria, to the extent practicable.

- Provide modifications to the roadway horizontal alignment and vertical alignment to meet current MDT design criteria, to the extent practicable.

Need Number 4: Safety

*Improve the safety of US 93. **

Objectives

- Provide adequate clear zones along US 93 by identifying and removing obstacles, upgrading shoulder widths, and providing urban roadway features in accordance with MDT design criteria, to the extent practicable.
- Manage community access points and private approaches by providing appropriate features commensurate with the types and volumes of traffic encountered at each approach, and/or by consolidating or closing approaches, to the extent practicable.

Need Number 5: Livability and Connectivity

Reduce conflicts by enhancing connectivity and minimizing impacts within the US 93 corridor.

Objectives

- Minimize impacts to existing neighborhoods. *
- Minimize impacts to environmental, sensitive and recreational resources, including trails. *
- Be responsive to land use plans and future transportation needs. *

Need Number 6: Truck Traffic

Minimize the impacts of US 93 thru truck traffic.

Objectives

- Provide appropriate signage to direct thru truck traffic.
- Minimize the number of vertical grade changes for thru truck traffic.
- Provide acceptable travel times with minimal delay for thru truck traffic.

Other

The following are potential objectives that do not correlate to any of the five needs described above.

- Be responsive to long-term maintenance requirements. *
- Limit construction disruption as much as practicable. *
- Community preference.

ES.3 Improvement Options

Potential alternate routes for US 93 were evaluated by reviewing existing engineering and known environmental resource information and soliciting input from the community, stakeholders, and resource agencies. Eleven (11) potential alignments were established to address the needs and objectives for the US 93 corridor. The 11 alignments are various alternate routes that have the potential to be developed to satisfy the long-term needs of US 93. The development and locations of the potential alignments are considered in terms of general corridor "swaths". Exact centerline locations are not developed at this time, so "swaths" represent approximate locations of potential alignment options. Exact alignment would be determined in the project development phase, if a project is forwarded on from this study, and additional avoidance and minimization measures would be implemented.

Screening criteria were developed to evaluate the 11 potential alignments of US 93 between RP 56.5 and RP 63.0. Screening criteria provide a means of reducing the number of potential alignments for consideration by comparing them both quantitatively and qualitatively with a set of specific measures. The screening process was a high level evaluation that was utilized to identify alignment options that satisfied the needs and objectives identified for this corridor, and which could be carried forward for further consideration if a project moves forward.

ES.4 Conclusion

The corridor study recommends two alignment options be considered for any future project development process as these two alignments best met the identified needs and objectives. These alignments include the northern bridge crossing hybrid alignment and the southern bridge crossing hybrid alignment. Both routes satisfy the needs and objectives for the US 93 corridor. Because the pre-NEPA/MEPA study process is a high level planning study, design activities were not initiated, nor are exact future route configurations developed.

Information contained in this corridor study can be used to document why the other alignments were removed from further consideration. Potential improvements to the existing US 93, if necessary, will be identified in the Polson Area Transportation Plan. Either the northern or southern routes may be recommended. To continue the development of these alignments as alternate route(s), the following steps will be needed:

- Identify and secure a funding source (or sources), and
- Preserve the corridor surrounding the route(s).

Note: Although local government can begin preserving right-of-way along either of the two recommended alignments, project-level environmental documentation will still need to consider the two alignments, along with improvements to the existing US 93, as part of the NEPA/MEPA process.