



NINEPIPE CORRIDOR  **FEASIBILITY STUDY**

Public and Agency Involvement Plan

Technical Memorandum

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Prepared for:
Montana Department of Transportation



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Public and Agency Involvement Plan (PAIP)

1.0. INTRODUCTION

The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) is developing a feasibility study of the Ninepipe segment of US Highway 93 (US 93) between Reference Point (RP) 40.0 and RP 44.5. The existing road is narrow, lacks shoulders, is experiencing increasing traffic volumes, and has a history of severe crashes. Reconstruction of the corridor is needed to improve traffic operations, multimodal accommodations, system linkage, and safety of the transportation system.

The intent of the *US 93 Ninepipe Corridor Feasibility Study* is to analyze the feasibility of the preferred alternative previously identified in the 2008 *Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS)*¹. The study will be a collaborative process between MDT, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) Tribal council, resource agencies, and the public to identify potential constraints and determine the viability of the preferred alternative as outlined in the SEIS.

Early and sustained communication with the public and resource agencies will be important to share updates about the study, understand resource issues and constraints, discuss mitigation opportunities, and arrive at a determination of feasibility that is supported by the Tribal community and jurisdictional authorities. For this study, we propose multiple engagement strategies designed to reach a broad audience and elicit meaningful participation while minimizing cost and adhering to appropriate health and safety guidelines. The PAIP aligns with MDT's established processes as outlined in its *Public Involvement Plan*².

1.1. Purpose of the PAIP

The purpose of this PAIP is to outline ongoing opportunities for involvement by the public, stakeholders, and resource agency representatives throughout the feasibility study process. Providing accurate information, timely notices, and opportunities to comment, as well as ensuring full access to key decisions, will help achieve this goal. The planning team will provide information to the public and interested parties and will seek their input throughout the process. All materials will be approved for distribution by the Advisory Committee (AC), the group of key stakeholders guiding the study.

1.1.1. Study Area

The study area for the feasibility study includes the section of US 93 between Gunlock Road and Brooke Lane which is referred to as the Ninepipe corridor. US 93 is a National Highway System route that spans across Montana from the Idaho border to the Canadian border. The Ninepipe corridor of US 93 is located between St Ignatius and Ronan. The study area is shown in **Figure 1**.

¹ Montana Department of Transportation, *Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement and Section 4(f) Evaluation*, 2008, available at: https://www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/docs/eis_ea/eis_ninepipe.pdf/

² Montana Department of Transportation, *Public Involvement Plan*, available at: <https://www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/docs/manuals/pubinvhb.pdf>

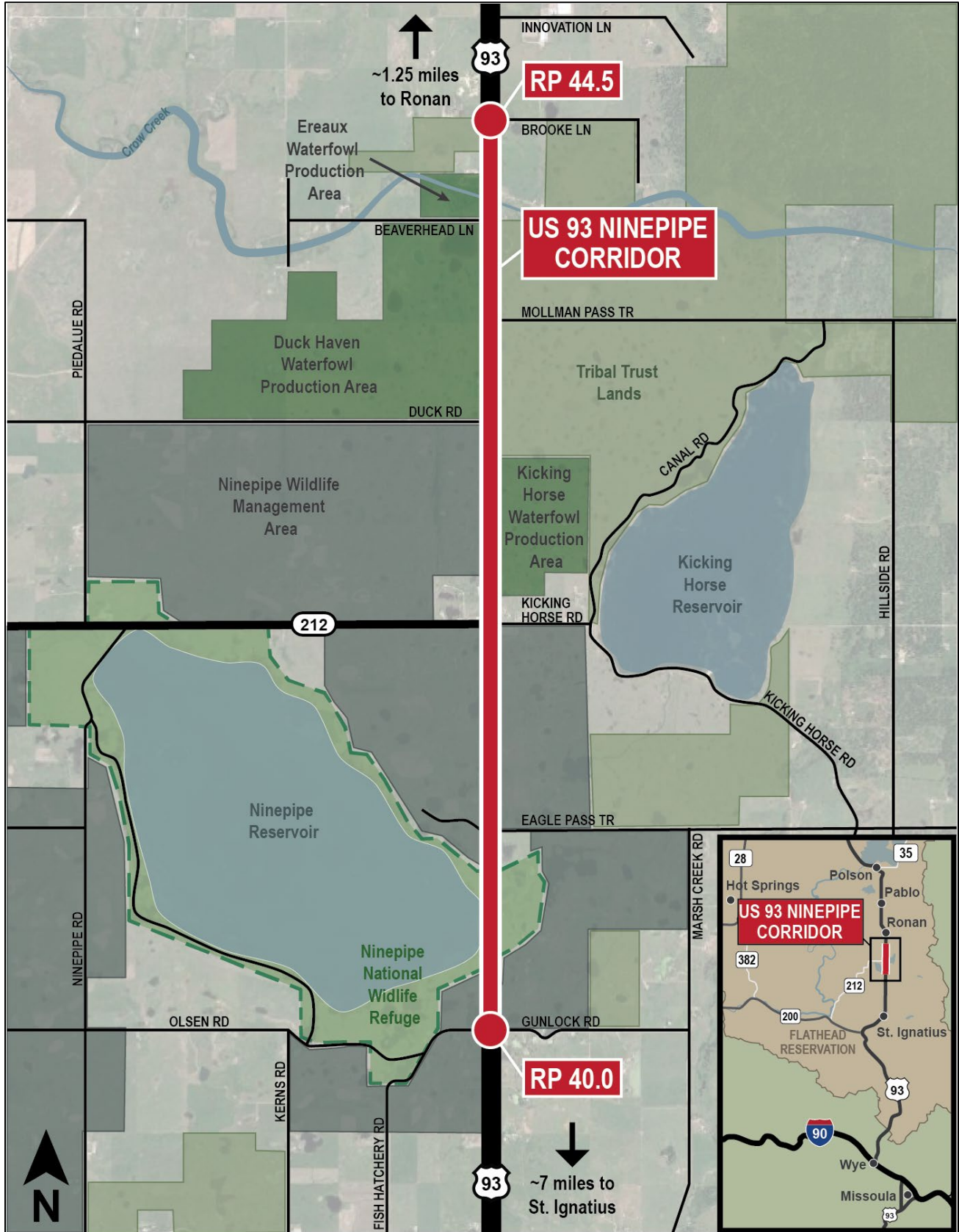


Figure 1: Study Area

2.0. AUDIENCES AND PARTICIPATION PROCEDURES

Active participation and input will be encouraged at every stage of the planning process. Key audiences include both internal and external stakeholders. The AC will be tasked with providing direction and making decisions to guide the planning process. Stakeholders include everyone with interest or expertise related to the feasibility study. The following sections discuss the primary contacts for the study, anticipated key stakeholders, and other interested parties to be included in the planning process.

2.1. Study Contacts

Contact information for the MDT and Consultant project managers will be provided in all published information. These individuals will serve as primary points of contact for the study.

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2.2. Advisory Committee (AC)

An AC will be established to guide the study process and review deliverables produced by the planning team. Approximately nine AC meetings will be scheduled over the 18-month study period in coordination with planned deliverables. The meetings will track progress and address study development issues and questions. The meetings are important for the exchange of technical information and ideas during the development of the study.

RPA's project manager and other key team members will attend the AC meetings to make regular presentations covering the current work effort. During these meetings, issues, problems, and possible solutions will be identified and discussed. These meetings will provide the planning team with essential feedback and guidance and will also provide the AC with opportunities to guide the development of the study. The following topics are anticipated to be discussed at the AC meetings.

- **AC Meeting 1** (June 2021): Kickoff, Work Tasks, Schedule
- **AC Meeting 2** (August 2021): Public & Agency Involvement Plan, Outreach #1 Preparation
- **AC Meeting 3** (October 2021): Initial Conditions Analysis, Outreach #1 Summary
- **AC Meeting 4** (December 2021): Draft Relevant Conditions Memo, Outreach #2 Preparation
- **AC Meeting 5** (February 2022): Final Relevant Conditions Memo, Outreach #2 Summary
- **AC Meeting 6** (April 2022): Initial Feasibility Evaluation, Outreach #3 Preparation
- **AC Meeting 7** (June 2022): Screening Matrix, Outreach #3 Summary
- **AC Meeting 8** (August 2022): Draft Feasibility Report, Public Review Period
- **AC Meeting 9** (October 2022): Public Comments, Final Feasibility Report

2.3. Tribal Council

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CKST) are governed by an elected Tribal Council and Tribal Chairperson. The Council is comprised of 10 members representing 8 districts of the Flathead Reservation. Each member is elected for a four-year staggered term. The Chair serves as the Chief

Executive Officer of the Tribes. MDT regularly meets with the Tribal Council to discuss transportation matters and ongoing projects within the Flathead Reservation. The planning process will build upon this longstanding relationship between MDT and the CSKT Tribal Council to facilitate productive discussions and build support for the feasibility study.

2.4. Resource Agencies

The planning team will coordinate with study team members, the AC, and MDT to develop a list of key resource agency contacts for this study. We anticipate involvement from state, federal and Tribal agencies such as DEQ, FWP, USACE, USFWS, the CSKT THPO, and CSKT Natural Resources Department. We will ask these agencies to help us confirm resources within the study corridor, define mitigation requirements, and identify opportunities to avoid or offset potential project impacts.

2.5. Other Stakeholders

A stakeholder contact list will be developed to include individuals or groups with interest in the study. Input from a diverse range of stakeholders is important to the planning process. Areas of concern will be identified through stakeholder outreach and may include safety, access, wetland and wildlife impacts, cultural resources, multimodal accommodations, right-of-way encroachment, and alignment with Tribal planning efforts. Specific stakeholder representatives will be identified in coordination with study team members, the AC, and MDT. Stakeholders may include Tribal community members and residents, Tribal government entities, local business owners, adjacent landowners, wildlife and conservation organizations, trucking and freight representatives, utilities, recreational groups, and other interested and knowledgeable individuals.

2.6. Public Comments and Input

Public comments and input will be collected and considered throughout the planning process. All comments and concerns received at meetings and through individual discussions will be considered by the AC throughout the planning process and comment themes will help establish critical areas of concern and consideration. Additionally, an official comment period will be provided after the release of the draft *US 93 Ninepipe Corridor Feasibility Study*. All comments received during the official comment period will be included as an appendix to the final study.

3.0. OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Outreach strategies are intended to share information about the planning process, offer opportunities for dialogue, obtain meaningful input, and identify barriers and constraints that may influence the feasibility determination. The goal is to engage a diverse cross section of interests and perspectives. The following sections discuss anticipated outreach strategies.

3.1. Electronic Engagement

The study team recognizes that people lead increasingly busy lives. Allowing the public to access information and provide input on their own schedules has proven to increase the quantity, quality, and diversity of input. Electronic engagement allows expansive, on-demand outreach allowing the public to participate at their convenience to encourage meaningful feedback. Multiple electronic public engagement strategies will be used to solicit input and provide information, including a study webpage and monthly progress updates via email.

STUDY WEBSITE

A study website will be used to encourage public and agency participation and to provide study information. The website will be hosted by MDT and updated throughout the study process. Informational material to be posted to the website will include a description of the study, background information about previous planning efforts, study contact information, meeting announcements, and study materials available for public and agency review.

EMAIL UPDATES

RPA will provide informal monthly progress updates via email blasts to study contacts and stakeholders throughout the study duration. Interested parties can join the email list by contacting either the RPA or MDT project manager. These updates will be an easy way to maintain communication and keep interested parties aware of progress and key milestones throughout the study process.

3.2. Targeted Outreach and Meetings

Targeted outreach is intended to obtain meaningful input and dialogue about the study and share information during specific scheduled events. The goal will be to reach a diverse a cross section of interests. The following sections discuss the anticipated targeted outreach events and strategies.

INFORMATIONAL MEETINGS

Depending on health and safety considerations, the study team will host either in-person meetings or virtual meetings using a platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Meeting announcements will be developed and advertised at least two weeks prior to informational meetings. The ads will announce the meeting location, time, and date; the format and purpose of the meeting; and the locations where documents may be reviewed (if applicable). The Char-Koosta News, Valley Journal, and Lake County Leader may carry the display ads. Meetings may also be announced on local radio and/or television stations, by email to the study contact list, and by mail to adjacent landowners.

In-person meetings would follow an open house format, enabling the public to drop in at their convenience to view exhibits and speak with study representatives. The study team would offer extended hours to facilitate access and to encourage higher attendance. Alternatively, virtual meetings would be held at mid-day and evening times to reach a broad audience and would involve a PowerPoint presentation, scripting, and a question-and-answer forum to address comments. Both live formats would enable participants to learn about the study, ask questions, and receive responses from the study team in real time. Participants unable to join at the scheduled time could view either a recording or informational summary posted to the website. For those without access to the internet, alternative access would be provided through mailed copies of printed materials and telephone accommodations.

Public informational meetings will take place at two key points during the planning study. The first informational meeting will be used to discuss the purpose of the study and to review initial findings and changed conditions. The purpose of this meeting will be to discuss the study process, share preliminary issues and concerns within the study area, and explain how to stay involved. The meeting will allow members of the public to provide information about constraints and challenges within the corridor that may affect the feasibility determination.

The second informational meeting will focus on the feasibility evaluation, including screening criteria for constructability, cost, and impact considerations. Members of the public will be encouraged to provide feedback on the screening criteria and study findings.

A newsletter/flyer will be developed before each informational meeting. The newsletters will describe work in progress, preliminary findings and recommendations, and other relevant topics. Each newsletter/flyer will be delivered to Tribal representatives and select stakeholders for distribution and posting to their respective websites. Printed copies of newsletters will be available at in-person informational meetings.

RESOURCE AGENCY MEETINGS

Resource agency participation is vital to the success of the feasibility study. In addition to regular email communication, up to three (3) virtual resource agency meetings will be held using a platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The purpose of the meetings will be to present initial findings on changed resource conditions within the corridor, identify resource areas of particular concern, and discuss mitigation needs, opportunities, and costs. We anticipate heightened resource agency interest given the sensitive resources in the US 93 corridor, the need for specific mitigation discussions, and the potential for a future project to advance.

CSKT TRIBAL COUNCIL PRESENTATIONS

Keeping the CSKT Tribal Council apprised will be important to secure support for study findings and recommendations. The study team will provide up to three (3) presentations to the CSKT Tribal Council. The first presentation will be used to discuss the purpose of the study and the areas of focus. This will serve as a kickoff to announce our efforts and outline the anticipated schedule and study tasks. The second presentation will review initial findings based on our research and field reviews. We will highlight areas of changed conditions in comparison to the 2008 SEIS documentation. The third presentation will focus on the feasibility evaluation, including screening criteria for constructability, cost, and impact considerations. MDT participation in these presentations will be important to facilitate government-to-government communication.

CSKT HIGHWAY TEAM MEETINGS

The planning team will attend monthly meetings with the CSKT Highway Team to provide updates on the study process. It is anticipated that these meetings will be attended virtually.

TECHNICAL DESIGN COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The planning team will attend up to four (4) meetings with the Technical Design Committee at key milestones. It is anticipated that these meetings will be held in-person as health guidelines allow.

THPO/CULTURE COMMITTEE COORDINATION

As the planning team conducts research and investigations to confirm cultural resources within the study corridor, ongoing and frequent coordination with the THPO Salish-Pend d'Oreille and Kootenai Culture Committees and Tribal elders will be important to understand important cultural and historic resources, identify potential impacts, and define avoidance or mitigation measures to eliminate or lessen potential project impacts.

This coordination will be critical to arrive at a feasibility determination for the study. Depending on health and safety requirements, coordination may involve telephone calls, emails, in-person meetings, and site visits to discuss resource concerns. MDT will participate in this coordination to facilitate government-to-government communication.

VIRTUAL STAKEHOLDER CONVERSATIONS

To improve outreach and input, the study team will target key stakeholder groups who are familiar with the land uses and resources in the corridor. Before the first round of informational meetings, the planning team will reach out to interested stakeholders to schedule informal telephone/video calls. The purpose of these conversations will be collaborative and interactive to identify issues and concerns

within the corridor. The information gathered from the conversations will help the study team identify areas for special consideration throughout the planning process. At the time of the second informational meeting, the planning team will contact stakeholders to discuss screening criteria and the feasibility determination and encourage participant feedback.

PUBLIC AND AGENCY REVIEW PERIOD

The planning team will facilitate a public and agency review period for the draft *Ninepipe Corridor Feasibility Study* to obtain input and feedback. This will be an important opportunity to demonstrate how the study incorporates background research and considers public and resource agency input to date to arrive at the study findings and determinations. Targeted emails will announce availability of the draft study, within specific focus on identified stakeholders and resource agencies to request their review and comment on the draft feasibility study.

3.3. Access and Visibility

The planning team will be available to all interested parties for the purposes of receiving comments and answering questions. All information published regarding the feasibility study will provide contact information for the project managers. Comments can be submitted throughout the planning process via the website.

INFORMATION AVAILABILITY

Technical and planning-level information related to the data or content used in the development of the study will be available in memorandums, study updates, graphics, and other miscellaneous materials. The materials will be made available on the study website.

CONSIDERATION OF PUBLIC INPUT

Input and comments from stakeholders and the public will be considered by the AC throughout the planning process. Public comments received on the draft report will be documented and included as an appendix.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TRADITIONALLY UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS

Additional efforts are necessary to involve traditionally underserved segments of the population, including disabled, minority, and low-income individuals, with specific focus on CSKT Tribal members and Flathead Reservation residents. The following steps will help with these efforts:

- Provide appropriate accommodations: Appropriate non-discrimination statements and alternative accommodation contacts will be provided on all printed materials. Accessibility accommodations will be offered for all public outreach activities, including virtual meetings. Upon request, alternative participation methods and materials will be made available.
- Seek help from community leaders and organizations: To facilitate involvement of traditionally underserved populations, consultation with Tribal community leaders will be used to determine the most effective times and ways to reach the Tribal community population.
- Be sensitive to diverse audiences: At meetings and in printed materials, the study team will attempt to communicate clearly and understandably and be sensitive to Tribal cultural concerns. Printed materials will be developed using easy-to-understand language.

4.0. OUTREACH SUMMARY AND SCHEDULE

This PAIP establishes guidelines and procedures for encouraging public and stakeholder participation. The following strategies will be used to share information and seek input.

- A study website will be developed to provide information about the planning process.
- A mailing list will be developed to contact interested stakeholders and members of the public.
- Newsletters and media announcements will be developed in advance of public informational meetings.
- Two public informational meetings will be held to learn about issues and concerns and to share study findings.
- Targeted outreach will occur with resource agencies, the Tribal council, CSKT Highway Team, TDC, and stakeholders.
- Public comments and input will be collected and considered throughout the study.
- Published materials will be sensitive to diverse audiences.

The anticipated schedule follows an 18-month time frame. A public draft of the *Ninepipe Corridor Feasibility Study* is anticipated by August 31st, 2022. Following a 30-day public review and comment period, all work is anticipated to be completed by November 2022. **Figure 2** illustrates the anticipated schedule.

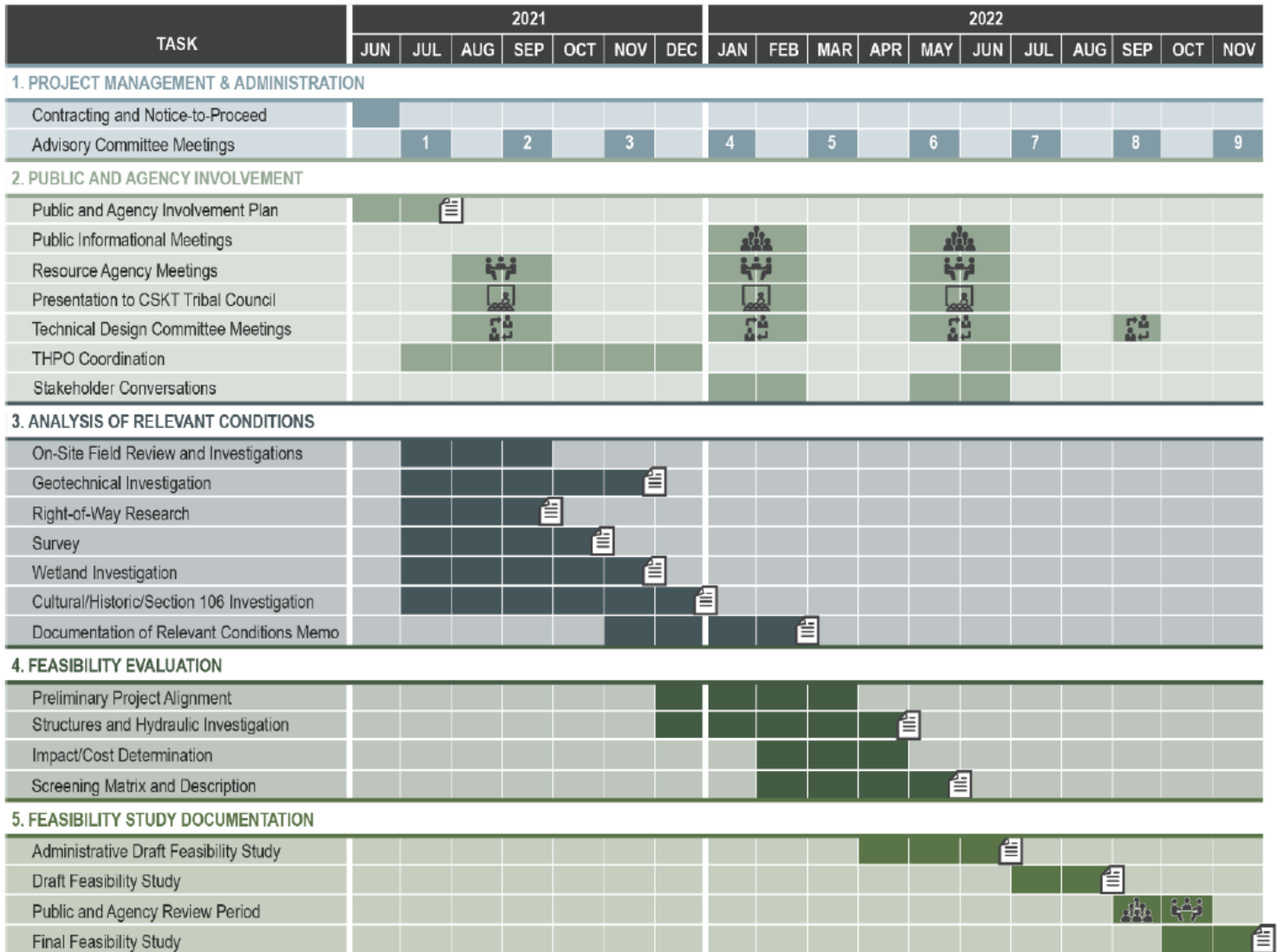


Figure 2: Study Schedule

Alternative accessible formats of this document will be provided on request. Persons who need an alternative format should contact the Human Resources and Occupational Safety Division, Department of Transportation, 2701 Prospect Avenue., PO Box 201001, Helena, MT 59620. Telephone 406-444-9229. Those using a TTY may call 1(800)335-7592 or through the Montana Relay Service at 711.

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