

2/6/07

DT5-011-01

SR 40 PD&E Study – Wildlife Crossings Meeting No. 4 Summary

Mtg. Date: February 6, 2007
Time: 10:00 am
Location: US Forest Service Lake George Ranger Station Conference Room
Project: SR 40 PD&E Study
From Silver Springs to US 17 in Marion, Lake and Volusia Counties

Attendees:

Bill Walsh – FDOT	Ray Emmett – EMS
Steve Tonjes – FDOT	Carrie Sekerak – USFS
George Borchik – FDOT	Sandy Jacobson – USFS Pacific Southwest Research Station
Vicki Sharpe – FDOT	Walt McCown – FWC
Alex Hull – Inwood	Terry Gilbert – URS/FWC
Mandy Rankin – Inwood	Rick Lint – USFS
Tom Roberts – EMS	Pat Tooley – USFS
Ray Emmett – EMS	Laura Lowery – USFS
Cathy Lowenstein - DOF	Gordon Horsley - USFS
Mickey Thomason – DEP/OGT	
Todd Mecklenborg - USFWS	

Bill Walsh with the Florida Department of Transportation opened the meeting with welcoming statements and introductions. Bill mentioned that while the work and recommendations of the wildlife crossings committee is being evaluated and taken in to consideration, it is important to keep in mind that nothing that is discussed is set in stone. Bill further mentioned that the cost of the project must be considered throughout the evaluation process, otherwise the project will be too expensive to build. Vicki Sharpe with the Florida Department of Transportation added that the evaluation must balance out all of the elements, including cost, in order to come up with the most appropriate recommendation.

Sandy Jacobson with the United States Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station was introduced to the group. She has an extensive background in wildlife crossings and has been asked by Rick Lint with the United States Forest Service to provide her expertise and knowledge to the project.

Alex gave an overview of the purpose of the meeting. He explained that the meeting is being held to further identify and revise the proposed wildlife crossing locations that have been recommended by the wildlife crossings committee. Alex mentioned that it is important for the group to identify what everyone thinks is appropriate and the right thing to do based on the biology, research and professional judgment brought forth by the group. He stated that the key issues that need to be discussed are the locations, type, fencing, access management and aesthetics of structures and locations. Alex explained that land acquisition, as an additional

form of mitigation, has not yet been addressed by the group and should be considered. He also indicated that an ongoing evaluation process needs to be thought of in order to measure the effectiveness of the crossings. Alex added that cost and timing are important issues to keep in mind.

Next, Alex mentioned that the wildlife crossing meetings have been posted on the SR 40 PD&E Study website and are open to the public. Bill further indicated that all of the SR 40 PD&E Study meetings are open to the public and posted on the website. The group discussed the protocol for having the public at the wildlife crossings meetings. It was suggested by the group that the public can attend the meetings as observers.

Carrie Sekerak of the United States Forest Service commented that, just as they have been doing in the past wildlife crossings meetings, it is important to not worry about the budget when coming up with what is needed. She indicated that it would be good to plan for what is needed, prioritize and have it go through NEPA. Terry Gilbert with URS added that a draft plan is good to have and then things can be prioritized and weeded out.

Alex had the group look at the recommended wildlife crossings in the handouts and on the map. He gave a brief overview of the proposed structures locations and lengths and opened the topic up for discussion.

Steve Tonjes with the Florida Department of Transportation asked about the potential to save money by reducing the 100 foot crossings to 50 foot crossings. He referred to SR 46 and stated that the 50 foot crossings used in that project could be a good indicator as to whether or not crossings of that size work well. Vicki added that Alligator Alley may be another project to look at.

The discussion returned to whether or not there needed to be any modifications to the recommended wildlife crossings.

Sandy indicated that the best way to look at the issue of cost is to base it on cost effectiveness with each crossing type. Carrie added that the group should utilize Sandy's experience and knowledge to find the most cost-effective ways to mitigate for this project.

Sandy discussed the possibility of utilizing small, dry culverts rather than larger crossings in some areas in order to get the slower moving animals across. She indicated that the smaller culverts should be used when the targeted species in the area is a small and slow moving animal and that this would be a more cost effective way to mitigate for those species. Sandy's suggestion led to a group discussion on the possibility of this using the small culverts in some areas of the project. It was mentioned that this could potentially eliminate some fencing and access management issues.

The group next discussed the difference between crossings that have slopes where the animals cross versus flat openings. Sandy indicated that the acoustics are different in the two

types of crossing designs. The sloped design has less noise impact than the flat design. The group also discussed the impact of vegetation and sunlight on different species underneath the crossings.

Alex mentioned that the details of crossing design is important and will be discussed at a later time. He explained that it is important for the group to step back and focus on refining and nailing down the recommended locations of the crossings.

Cathy Lowenstein with the Lake George State Forest brought forth her request that a crossing, labeled K on the map, in the Lake George State Forest area be reconsidered. She passed out a memorandum, from herself as well as Dennis Hardin of the Forest Management Bureau, that gives a justification for why the area needs a crossing. Cathy directed the group's attention to the maps attached to the memo. She indicated that maintaining connectivity is vital to that area due to the East/West corridor near Lake George, which is a significant flat woods corridor, as well as the significance of the North/South conservation lands. Carrie added that it may be good to be proactive in keeping continuity and protecting the flat woods because of its value in water recharge and the species that may be on the T & E lists in the next 10 to 20 years.

This led to an open group discussion on whether or not to add crossing K back to the recommendation. Alex reminded the group that it is important for everyone, not from a funding standpoint but rather from a biological and wildlife standpoint, to voice their honest opinion on what should be done. Connectivity and bear population were reasons discussed by the group as to why the area needs a crossing.

Alex asked for a motion to add crossing K back to the list of recommended crossings. Tom Roberts seconded the motion.

Steve indicated that there will have to be justification for how that particular area is affected by the project and therefore needs to be mitigated for. This led to a discussion on how the cumulative impacts of the project's build area could be reason for the need to mitigate in the Lake George State Forest area. The group discussed why the crossing fell off the list of recommended crossings. It was suggested that the crossing was left off because it was so far from the build area and priority of the project. Also, DOF representatives were not present at the first evaluation meetings to present their issues.

Alex pointed out that an argument could be made to put the crossing in because of the cumulative impacts resulting from the build area. He added that the science of calculating those impacts is based on the judgments of professionals because there isn't a formula.

Todd Mecklenborg with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service brought the discussion back to the issue of justifying crossings outside of the action area. He mentioned that the group may want to consider having two approaches, a corridor approach and master corridor vision. He explained that the corridor approach would focus on and prioritize mitigation for the build area. The master corridor vision would have the crossings that are not directly impacted by the

widening documented for future studies and projects.

Carrie voiced her confusion on whether or not the crossings proposed outside of the build area are suggested because of safety issues or wildlife issues. Tom Roberts with the Environmental Consulting firm, EMS, explained that the crossings were proposed with a dual purpose in mind of both safety issues from bear kills as well as mitigation for the wildlife. He mentioned that the crossing K should be on the map because there could be potential impacts if the safety improvements are made in that area.

Carrie suggested that someone look at the other projects that are going on in the area near the Lake George State Forest to see what is being done for those. Bill Walsh added that the study on US 17 south of SR 40 does have plans for a wildlife crossing.

Alex concurred with Tom's conclusion that a crossing in area K should be back in the recommendation. He proposed a 50 foot crossing rather than a 100 foot crossing and that it be tied into the mitigation for the potential 3 lane safety improvement in Astor. Cathy expressed concern for tying the crossing into the 3 lane safety improvements and proposed that it be part of the indirect cumulative impacts of the build area in the project. Alex withdrew his earlier statement and agreed that the crossing will be tied to the build area indirect cumulative impacts.

The group had a general discussion on crossing K and came to the consensus that the crossing is as important as the other crossings outside of the build area.

George Borchik with the FDOT pulled everyone's attention towards the summary from the last wildlife crossings meeting where it was mentioned that the crossings outside of the build area are for safety issues. Tom reiterated that the crossings are to address safety issues as well as indirect cumulative impacts.

Alex stated that the meetings minutes from the previous meetings attempt to capture the discussion but that Tom and Ray Emmett with EMS will write a biological assessment report of the crossings and will properly address all aspects from the evaluation process for the proposed recommendations.

Carrie asked the group to take a look at location H and why it was removed from the recommended crossings.

The group took a 10 minute break.

The group reconvened and revisited Carrie's question about crossing H. Ray commented that the fencing would funnel animals in towards SR 19.

Sandy asked if the bear population is distributed evenly. Walt stated that the bears cross everywhere. Terry added that in the 4 year study they found that there were hundreds of successful crossings. Sandy commented that the even distribution of bears makes for a good

argument that the crossings need to be distributed evenly throughout the project.

Alex asked for clarification on how traffic volumes affect the bear population. He asked if it is true that not having any crossings through the heart of the forest would not negatively effect the bear population. Walt agreed with Alex's statement. Carrie suggested that smaller box culverts may be an alternative to larger crossings in order to cater to the animals that are more affected by the road. She added that the small culverts could save money. Alex summarized from the discussion that there may be more appropriate types of structures for the crossings outside of the build area if the bear is not the primary species of concern. Sandy agreed and stated that there are more options that will require creativity.

Terry indicated that the road kill study should include a record of the type of habitat where roadkills are occurring. This information could be used to justify construction of wildlife connectivity structures outside of the widening area in order to maintain genetic connectivity.

Alex stated that not all of the wildlife crossings and connectivity structures will be built at the same time. The initial structures to be built should be determined and could include some of the smaller structures. These could be monitored to determine their effectiveness.

There was more discussion regarding the smaller crossings and Sandy stated that the smaller structures should be placed at periodic increments, with site specific placement, to serve all species.

Tom recommended a meeting with SJRWMD to talk about land acquisition and what is being looked at and what is available.

There was discussion on when and if Sandy will travel to Ocala as a part of the SR 40 project in the future.

Meeting Adjourned at approximately 4:15 pm.

cc: File, All Attendees (via e-mail)

Note: The above reflects the writer's understanding of the contents of the meeting. If any misinterpretations or inaccuracies are included, please contact Mandy Rankin at (407) 971-8850 as soon as possible for resolution and revisions if necessary.