

## Nominees

### **Chesapeake Bay Field Office – U.S. 301 Waldorf Area Transportation Project**

The U.S. 301 Waldorf Area Improvement Study represents the first ever Green Infrastructure approach to highway planning. The Green Infrastructure concept links land use planning, natural resource conservation, and development across multiple landscapes and multiple scales. Under the direction of Raja Veeramachaneni, the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) agreed to utilize and fund a Green Infrastructure study to examine three controlled access highway alternatives between Prince George's County and Charles County, Maryland and identify a wide range of environmental stewardship and mitigation opportunities in several major watersheds of both counties. SHA contracted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Chesapeake Bay Field Office, The Conservation Fund, and Maryland Department of Natural Resources to conduct this study. These agencies reviewed publications on area resources; conducted field assessments of identified sites; met with local agencies, politicians, and environmental groups to identify their priorities; and developed a ranking system for evaluating stewardship opportunities. An Interagency Workgroup representing 16 Federal, State, and local agencies was also created to promote this environmental stewardship and streamlining process. The Green Infrastructure study applied to the U.S. 301 Waldorf Area project sets a new standard for integrating highway planning with environmental, historic, and cultural enhancement.

### **Washington Fish and Wildlife Office – I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East Project**

The Interstate-90 (I-90) Snoqualmie Pass East Project successfully integrates the needs of multiple stakeholders by proposing a project that improves safety and mobility while conserving a diversity of species and habitats. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) proposed a project to improve 15 miles of I-90 near Snoqualmie Pass in the Cascade Mountains of Washington. The project area was identified as a barrier to wildlife movement, and regional land management plans identified the need to increase ecological permeability. In response, the project included improved ecological connectivity as a project need, along with reducing road closures from avalanches, stabilizing slopes, repairing pavement, and addressing capacity issues. FHWA and WSDOT developed partnerships with a variety of State and Federal agencies, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Washington Fish and Wildlife Office, private landowners, and citizen groups to reduce potential conflicts early in the project planning. Innovative partnerships were created with The Western Transportation Institute, universities, and conservation groups to design a wildlife monitoring program, for the project currently proposes to construct wildlife passage and hydrologic connectivity structures at 14 connectivity emphasis areas. Partnerships to conserve private land in locations that could enhance the performance of these wildlife crossing structures evolved through the effective interagency and community involvement process. In partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, \$26 million in grants was funded for land acquisition in the project vicinity. The I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East Project will improve the safety of the travelling public and will benefit the American people by protecting and enhancing critical ecosystem functions that help conserve a wide variety of important species.

### **Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office – Elkhorn Slough Early Mitigation Partnership**

The Elkhorn Slough Early Mitigation Partnership (ESEMP) promotes environmental streamlining and stewardship by developing partnerships, conservation agreements, and funding strategies to provide advanced regional-scale compensatory mitigation for future transportation projects proposed within the Elkhorn Slough watershed north of Monterey, California. The Elkhorn Slough watershed harbors the largest tract of tidal salt marsh in California outside of San Francisco Bay. This ecologically rich area provides much needed habitat for hundreds of plants and animals, including federally listed species and more than 340 species of birds. For over two years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office has been an integral partner on the ESEMP multi-agency working group to develop an advanced mitigation strategy for future State and local transportation projects in the Elkhorn Slough watershed. The ESEMP recently finalized a Memorandum of Understanding that promotes the integration of regional ecosystem-based conservation strategies into early mitigation planning and transportation decision-making. Signatories to the MOU include: California Coastal Commission; California Department of Fish and Game, Region 4; California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Central Coast Region; California Department of Transportation, District 5; County of Monterey; Transportation Agency of Monterey County; Elkhorn Slough Foundation; Federal Highway Administration, California Division; National Marine Fisheries Service, Southwest Region; U. S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 9; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office.

### **Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office – State Route 79 Realignment Project**

The State Route 79 (SR-79) Realignment Project will result in the realignment of a four lane highway along a 19-mile stretch in Riverside County, California. At the beginning of the planning process, the locally preferred project alternative (i.e. Central Alignment) would have resulted in severe impacts to the Salt Creek Seasonally Flooded Alkali Vernal Plain (Salt Creek Plain). The Salt Creek Plain is arguably the most significant remaining vernal pool area in Riverside County due to its high diversity, large size, and abundance of rare and endemic species, including five federally listed species. The Central Alignment would have bisected the Salt Creek Plain, altering the hydrologic regime upon which the vernal pool habitat depends. Through the NEPA/404 MOU coordination process, the signatory agencies (Federal Highway Administration, California Department of Transportation, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office)) along with representatives from the Riverside County Transportation Commission, their consultant CH2M HILL, and the City of Hemet (Resource Agency Group) worked together early in the permitting process to identify an alternate road alignment that avoids the ecologically significant Salt Creek Plain, satisfies the transportation need, and facilitates the identification of the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative for the purposes of NEPA and Clean Water Act permitting. The project has been largely moved out of sensitive habitat areas but will cross wildlife movement corridors at Salt Creek and in the vicinity of the Hemet Hills and Lakeview Mountains. Yet, recently submitted draft environmental technical reports thoroughly address wildlife connectivity issues in an effort to protect critical ecosystem

functions. Four new bridge undercrossings and six new culverts have been incorporated into the project to facilitate wildlife movement in these areas. With this innovative approach, cumulative effects to wildlife movement have been taken into account and connectivity resources that facilitate critical ecosystem functions will be protected. This project is nearing completion of the planning phase, with public circulation of the draft EIR / EIS scheduled for late summer/early fall 2010.

### **West Virginia Field Office – “No Effect” Project Screening Tool for Endangered and Threatened Species**

Traditionally, the West Virginia Division of Highways (WVDOH) coordinated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service West Virginia Field Office on every project, including maintenance activities, for potential impacts to federally protected species. The majority of these projects were very small in scale and/or in areas that were not likely to affect listed species. This process, although routine, was very time consuming and inefficient. In the fall of 2004 the WVDOH, West Virginia Field Office, and West Virginia Division of Natural Resources worked cooperatively to develop a GIS screening tool to assess projects for potential impacts to federally protected species. This tool identifies proposed projects within certain counties that will have no effect on federally listed species, provided certain criteria are met. As such, these qualified projects require no further review by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (under Section 7 of the ESA). The screening tool also identifies areas in which proposed activities may affect federally listed species, and thus further coordination with the West Virginia Field Office is needed. The GIS screening tool reduced the area of the state for which projects required coordination with West Virginia Field Office from 100 percent to 8 percent. After several months of drafts and negotiations, the first “*No Effect*” *Blanket Approval for Endangered and Threatened Species* letter agreement was signed on March 15, 2005. The letter agreement has enabled the WVDOH to clear over 80 percent of their projects without additional coordination with the West Virginia Field Office. The agreement has also directly led to the streamlining of nearly 700 projects since March of 2007. By identifying areas in which proposed projects require further coordination with the West Virginia Field Office, the tool has indirectly allowed the agencies to focus their efforts on more complex projects and species conservation. The creation of buffer zones and best management practices has furthered the protection of species by reducing the probability of secondary impacts. The success of this tool has led WVDOH to inquire about obtaining similar agreements with other natural and cultural resource agencies. This agreement has greatly enhanced the working relationship between WVDOH, the Federal Highway Administration, and State and Federal resource agencies responsible for the protection of natural resources.

### **Chesapeake Bay Field Office – Intercounty Connector Project**

The Intercounty Connector (ICC) is one of the original 13 transportation projects that were listed under Executive Order 13274 in 2002. The ICC is a six lane, eighteen mile long highway constructed on new alignment, located north of Washington, D.C. between I-270 and I-95/US 1 in Prince George’s and Montgomery Counties. The Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) displayed environmental stewardship by writing a Purpose and Need statement for the ICC that stated, “Help restore the natural, human and

cultural environments from past development impacts in the project area.” Twenty-four people representing 16 Federal, State, county and regional planning organizations formed an Interagency Working Group (IWG) to determine the environmental data needs of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and to review the list of proposed stewardship and mitigation projects. Bill Schultz with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Chesapeake Bay Field Office is a member of the IWG and has been working on this project since 1988. He championed the inclusion of two Northwest Branch stream restoration projects onto the mitigation and stewardship lists. These are the two largest stream restoration projects undertaken in Maryland to date. The streamlining process took less than three years from the initiation of project planning to FHWA’s signing of the Record of Decision. SHA committed 340 million dollars in funding for environmental avoidance, minimization, and mitigation to support environmental, human and cultural enhancements. This represents over 13% of the estimated 2.6 billion dollar cost for the project. This project is currently under construction and the IWG is evaluating the mitigation and streamlining projects. The streamlining process was a success due to the outstanding leadership of Neil Pederson and Raja Veeramachaneni with the SHA, Bill Schultz with the Chesapeake Bay Field Office, John Parsons of the National Park Service, and Paul Wettlaufer with the Army Corps of Engineers.

#### **Emily Teachout – Improving the Section 7 Consultation Process and Conservation Outcomes in Washington State**

Emily Teachout, as the Washington State Department of Transportation liaison with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Washington Fish and Wildlife Office has taken a leadership role in improving the ESA Section 7 process, both procedurally and in conservation outcomes. Many transportation issues associated with the ESA created a difficult and contentious environment for completing ESA Section 7 consultations in the State of Washington. As a result, managers with the associated agencies directed the development of agreements on a variety of issues, including early coordination, indirect effects, underwater sound, and stormwater. Emily Teachout was instrumental in the completion of such agreements and the development of Interagency Guidance and Standards for Section 7 Consultation Issues with the Federal Highways Administration, Washington Department of Transportation, National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The outcome of these agreements improved relationships, consultation timelines, and resulted in better conservation outcomes. All of these efforts have been group accomplishments with a variety of staff from the transportation agencies and National Marine Fisheries Service. However, Emily has consistently played a leadership role in bring them to completion and implementation, and in representing U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service interests. Her communication skills and ability to work with a variety of partners have also been instrumental in her success.

#### **Steve Kirkland – Caltrans Liaison/Project Coordinator**

Steve Kirkland has been the Caltrans transportation liaison for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office since December 2005. Steve has worked closely with environmental staff in Caltrans District 5 to prioritize project reviews and eliminate the backlog of ESA Section 7 consultations. Under Steve's management, most Section 7 consultations are now completed within the regulatory timeframes and high

priority projects are expedited to meet critical project schedules. Steve's efforts have been critical to the delivery of several high profile transportation projects that promote streamlining and environmental stewardship. Such projects include: development of a programmatic biological opinion to streamline the consultation process for transportation projects impacting the federally threatened California red-legged frog; development of avoidance and minimization measures for emergency consultation on red-legged frogs likely to be adversely affected by repairs to the San Julian Bridge; early coordination on the design of amphibian undercrossings to reduce the impact of constructing dual passing lanes that would be a migration barrier to the federally endangered California tiger salamander and red legged-frog; assistance with emergency response projects related to the Basin Complex Fire to minimize damage to the transportation facility and natural resources of the Big Sur area, and participation in the Elkhorn Slough Early Mitigation Partnership (ESEMP) working to develop an advanced mitigation strategy on a regional or watershed level. His participation in this multi-year effort to facilitate transportation and conservation planning through the ESEMP has been a key component to its success. Steve has also been part of a collaborative environmental process recognized statewide by Caltrans and shared as an example of best practices with other States and FHWA.