

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Study Purpose

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 the US 93 Polson Pre-National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)/Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Corridor Study near Polson, Montana, to identify and analyze alternate route options for US 93. The US 93 Polson Corridor Study begins at Reference Post (RP) 56.5 and extends approximately 6.5 miles north 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.

The US 93 Polson Corridor Study area boundary was developed to accommodate the alignments that were initially brought forth in the 1996 FEIS and to assess the feasibility of an alternate route to US Highway 93 (US 93) through the Polson community. The subject corridor study contains a high level analysis of the US 93 corridor through the City of Polson.

In the corridor study area, US 93 carries a diverse mix of traffic including trucks, recreational vehicles, passenger vehicles, and non-motorized uses. During the peak summer tourism season, traffic volumes elevate in numbers, causing perceived congestion and delays on the roadway and adjacent intersections. This study was initiated to address both MDT's concerns to enhance traffic flow and the local governments' desire to enhance livability and connectivity within their community. Figure 1-1 shows the corridor study area.

1.2 Corridor Study Process

MDT has established the corridor planning process in order to link the current transportation planning processes and the NEPA/MEPA. The NEPA/MEPA environmental review process is an approach to balance transportation decision making that takes into account the impacts on the human and natural environment with the need for safe and efficient transportation. The Corridor Planning Study is a pre-NEPA/MEPA process that allows for earlier planning-level coordination with the community, resource agencies, and other entities. Through the corridor study process, data and analyses are developed that can be used in the environmental review process if a project (or projects) are forwarded from the study. The NEPA/MEPA process discloses the environmental, social, and economic impacts, identifies potential mitigations measures that can be implemented, and documents the information for the community and decision makers before decisions are made and carried forward.

This Corridor Planning Study is developed strictly as a planning study to determine the feasibility of an alternate route to the existing US 93 and does not include project level design. The results of the study may be used to assist in determining the level and scope of environmental review required if a project is forwarded into project development.

This report identifies both the technical and known environmental conditions and issues that exist within the corridor, and identifies reasonable and feasible alignment options to increase safety and efficiency for the traveling public. Additionally it defines potential impacts to the surrounding environment resulting from the alignment options.

Figure 1-1 Study Area Boundary

