



REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT
Rebuilding America's Infrastructure:
Cutting Timelines and Improving Outcomes for
Federal Permitting and Review of Infrastructure Projects

MAY 2013





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Executive Summary

Building 21st Century resilient infrastructure is vital to American competitiveness, regional economic growth and development, and local jobs. Accordingly, you made a commitment in your 2012 State of the Union Address to “cut the red tape that can slow down construction” of infrastructure projects. To fulfill this commitment, you signed Executive Order 13604, *Improving Performance of Federal Permitting and Review of Infrastructure Projects*, on March 22, 2012. This launched a Government-wide initiative to cut review and permit decision-making timelines, while improving outcomes for communities and the environment.

Efforts to implement EO 13604 are led by the office of the Chief Performance Officer (CPO), working closely with the Chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and an interagency Steering Committee comprised of Deputy Secretaries or their equivalent from the 12 Federal agencies with major permitting and review responsibilities.

Since we launched this comprehensive effort, agencies have expedited the review and permitting of 50 major infrastructure projects, including bridges, transit projects, railways, waterways, roads, and renewable energy generation projects, with time savings ranging from several months to several years. These include 14 priority projects that were identified per your memorandum of August 31, 2011 (*Speeding Infrastructure Development through More Efficient and Effective Permitting and Environmental Review*), and an additional 36 projects of National or Regional significance, identified in line with EO 13604.

Agencies now track progress of these projects using an online dashboard that facilitates transparency and accountability to the public, as well as interagency collaboration. As of the date of this report, the Federal permitting and review processes for more than 40 percent of these projects were complete.

Agencies have also identified a set of best practices that should become the standard for how the Federal Government conducts infrastructure permitting and review. This report describes those best practices, which range from expansion of IT tools to strategies for improving collaboration and integrating processes across Federal agencies. The report also presents case studies that show how different federal agencies successfully employed best practices.

Building on these results, in February, you announced a new goal of cutting timelines in half for major infrastructure projects, such as highways, bridges, railways, ports, waterways, pipelines and renewable energy, by modernizing and improving the efficiency of the Federal permitting process. By cutting through the red tape, we will more efficiently get projects through the Federal permit decision-making and review process, while creating new incentives for better outcomes for communities and the environment.

State, local, and tribal governments are critical partners in the effort to address our Nation’s infrastructure needs and reach these goals. Close collaboration with states is essential because major infrastructure projects often involve both Federal and state agency permits. To strengthen Federal collaboration with States, municipalities, and Tribes, you recently announced a set of regional pilot teams focused on specific regional infrastructure priorities, including passenger rail, renewable energy, electricity transmission, oil and gas production, and drought mitigation.

Background

Implementation of EO 13604 has focused on major infrastructure projects such as roads and bridges, ports and other water resources projects, ecosystem restoration, rail and transit, pipelines, renewable energy generation, and aviation. The Federal Government has a variety of review and permitting responsibilities with respect to these projects, including protecting the quality of America's natural resources and environment, our national security, the health and safety of local communities, and the rights of citizens to engage in the permitting and review process. States, municipalities, and Tribes, as well as other stakeholders and members of the public, also frequently have permitting and review roles in large infrastructure projects.

Major infrastructure projects typically involve multi-year design, development, and construction timelines with complex approval processes that involve multiple jurisdictions and governmental agencies. The potential number and type of permits and reviews required varies depending on the nature of the project. Oftentimes, a project applicant may be required to obtain permits and approvals from multiple agencies with different statutory jurisdictions and processes, with no single organization in charge. Lack of coordination, as well as other inefficiencies—for example, some agencies' permitting processes are still paper-based—can be frustrating, time-consuming, and costly for the federal government, project developers, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, inefficiencies can divert attention from making improvements that can lead to better outcomes for communities and the environment.

Your initiative to improve the permitting and review process for Federal infrastructure projects has sought to improve coordination and cooperation—building on recommendations from your Council on Jobs and Competitiveness, as well as sector-specific initiatives launched at federal agencies, such as the Department of the Interior. Key steps in this effort have included:

- creating a Federal Infrastructure Permitting and Review Process Improvement Steering Committee (Steering Committee) chaired by the CPO;
- charging the Steering Committee with developing a concrete Federal Action Plan to coordinate, implement, and institutionalize improvements Government-wide;
- expanding the online Federal Infrastructure Permitting Dashboard to enhance transparency, accountability, and coordination;
- selecting Nationally and Regionally Significant Projects to demonstrate best practices;
- developing IT tools to modernize the Federal permitting and review process; and
- directing the CPO to develop metrics, track implementation, and issue an annual report on the results.

In June 2012, the Steering Committee completed a Federal Action Plan to improve the permitting and review process of major infrastructure projects. Grounded in a series of successful sector-specific and pilot efforts, the Federal Action Plan committed the Federal Government to across-the-board implementation of a series of best practices and called member agencies to develop their own plans to better track, measure and improve performance of its major infrastructure permitting and review processes.

Key Results

The Federal Action Plan included four core deliverables for achieving smart, on-time, and more efficient permitting and review decisions with better outcomes for communities and the environment:

1. identify and expedite a set of Nationally or Regionally Significant Projects;
2. publish these projects on an enhanced Federal Infrastructure Permitting Dashboard;
3. develop and track performance metrics to improve accountability and outcomes; and
4. publish agency-specific plans to improve internal processes.

The Federal Action Plan also requested that the Udall Foundation complete an initial qualitative assessment identifying ways in which more efficient, expedited permitting and review processes can support better outcomes for local communities and the environment.

Nationally and Regionally Significant Projects: Time Savings and On-Time Completion

Federal agencies have expedited a total of 50 major infrastructure projects pursuant to EO 13604. These include ports and waterways, large-scale renewable energy developments, oil and gas pipelines, railways, roadways, transit, aviation, and ecosystem restoration. Each project has an expedited schedule with clear project milestones, a designated coordinating agency, and is tracked on the public Federal Infrastructure Permitting Dashboard. Overall, 22 of the projects had completed the Federal permitting and review process as of the date of this report (21 were approved and one was denied).

Anticipated time savings for these projects range from several months to several years, depending on the project scale, complexity, and stage of Federal review. For example, transforming the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Civil Works (Corps) project planning process is expected to reduce the average timeline for projects such as the Central Everglades Planning Project from ten years to three years or less. Similarly, close collaboration with State and local governments helped to reduce the timeline for the Tappan Zee Bridge by two to three years. Concurrent reviews on projects such as the Southwest Light Rail Transit project in Minneapolis and the Central Valley segment of the California High Speed Rail are expected to reduce project timelines by up to 30 percent.

Improving Collaboration through IT Tools

The Federal Infrastructure Permitting Dashboard, which was initially launched pursuant to your memorandum of August 31, 2011, has been expanded to include an internal IT platform to enable more effective Government-wide collaboration while continuing to provide public transparency through published project milestones and schedules. This IT platform enables project team members across Federal agencies to develop collaborative schedules, share project documents, and quickly communicate with each other. For example, a project manager from the DOI's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in New Mexico can immediately identify a colleague at the Corps in a different state who may be responsible for assessing the aquatic resources impacts of the thousand-mile-long transmission line they are both working on.

The Dashboard is essential to institutionalizing best practices, improving accountability, and expanding the effort into regional operations. The Department of Transportation (DOT) has assumed a leadership role by hosting the public Dashboard, funding the interagency IT platform, and stewarding the ongoing technical maintenance and improvement of the system. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) convenes an interagency Dashboard implementation team, together with the DOT, that meets weekly to monitor project schedules and overall Dashboard management, including usage policies and training.

The Dashboard tracks progress, supports accountability and identifies practices that work well and improve the review process. The accurate snapshot it provides of activities, project status, and goals has helped develop a more modern and efficient process, with benefits and lessons learned transferable to future projects facing similar permitting and review challenges. The goal is for the use of the Dashboard to become the norm for infrastructure project management.

Standardizing Use of the Dashboard

Some agencies are already standardizing the use of similar tracking systems and moving aggressively in this direction. For example, the Department of Energy (DOE) is extending the use of the Dashboard's collaboration platform to additional infrastructure projects that would benefit from enhanced interagency coordination and project scheduling tools. DOE is also working with DOT to move its eTrans system for managing transmission project timelines to the interagency IT platform.

Improving Transparency and Predictability: Tracking Agency Permit and Review Timelines

At the outset of this initiative, there was no comprehensive inventory of all major Federal agency permit and review responsibilities and associated decision-making timelines. Pursuant to the Federal Action Plan, each Federal agency has now identified its major permit and review responsibilities, and provided estimated timelines and a succinct description of the permit's purpose and applicable authorities. This inventory is publically available online on the Dashboard and searchable by infrastructure sector and agency. This accessible and transparent tool is critical to addressing private sector concerns regarding the transparency and predictability of infrastructure project timelines. The Dashboard helps project developers and other stakeholders quickly identify the permits, responsible agencies, review processes, and associated approximate timelines that may be applicable to a project.

Going forward, for the first time, all agencies with permitting and review responsibilities will implement electronic systems to track their performance on permits and reviews, managing and improving performance from year to year. Half of these agencies already have tracking systems in place, and the remaining agencies will implement electronic tracking systems no later than June 2013.

The Coast Guard is developing a performance management system that will track project status for activities such as bridge permit applications, drawbridge regulations, civil penalties, and construction monitoring. This IT system will allow Coast Guard bridge offices nationwide to use real-time project data, improving their ability to measure project status against performance targets and milestones.

Agency Plans

Each Member Agency of the Steering Committee has submitted a detailed plan identifying how it will implement the Federal Action Plan and improve its internal permitting and review processes to reduce the aggregate time required to make permitting and review decisions while improving outcomes for communities and the environment. The implementation of agency plans is on track, with 89 percent of the action items and planned improvements identified by federal agencies completed on time as of January 1, 2013. The remaining agency actions are in progress, with current projected dates for completion outlined in published agency plans.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) collected information from headquarters and all regional offices regarding regulations, policy, guidance, and practices for Endangered Species Act, Magnuson Stevens Act, National Marine Sanctuaries Act, and Marine Mammal Protection Act consultations and permitting. This inventory located many formal and informal agreements and guidance documents for a range of infrastructure projects, including transportation projects and hydropower licensing projects. Some of these documents address issues which are national in scope, while others include specific procedures for commonly occurring consultations in particular regions. The policy documents address a number of specific infrastructure sectors and identify other Federal agency and state partners.

The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) and CEQ are developing a handbook to promote the integration of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review processes. Agencies will be able to use the handbook to inform efforts to integrate the NEPA and the NHPA Section 106 processes for projects that are time-sensitive and involve consultation with diverse stakeholders. This effort will expedite reviews by avoiding duplication of effort and allow for better outcomes by ensuring that the NEPA process included comprehensive consideration of historic properties in the early stages of project planning. The handbook will be finalized and available in the first quarter of 2013.

Improving Outcomes for Communities and the Environment

Improved coordination, concurrent review and decision-making processes, and greater transparency and predictability can not only create faster timelines, but also lead to better outcomes for communities and the environment. To identify methods for measuring these results, the Federal Action Plan required the development of a qualitative approach for assessing the effectiveness of integrated planning and early engagement. The Udall Foundation conducted telephone interviews of Dashboard project participants, with the goal of understanding how better coordination can create environmental and community benefits.

The results show that environmental and community benefits for each project will be unique, and must be assessed and documented on a case-by-case basis. Accordingly, the Udall Foundation will continue to develop brief case histories for each Dashboard project that completes the Federal review and permitting process, so as to identify environmental and community benefits that resulted from best practices. Examples of these innovations include green infrastructure, such as using porous pavement, employing green roofs and stormwater collection systems, restoring creeks and wetlands, and increasing the capacity of urban areas to absorb rainwater rather than discharge it into sewer systems.

Best Practices & Lessons Learned

Through the implementation of the Federal Action Plan, the development of agency plans, the work of coordinating the major infrastructure projects on the Dashboard, and the experiences gained from prior pilot and sector-specific efforts, OMB and Member Agencies have identified a series of best practices and lessons learned that, once institutionalized Government-wide, will lead to greater efficiency, shorter timelines, and enhanced outcomes for communities and the environment. These best practices include:

1. Expanding the use of IT tools
2. Assigning a “coordinating agency” to coordinate multiple agency reviews of a given project
3. Establishing timelines through integrated project planning
4. Implementing integrated and concurrent, rather than consecutive, agency reviews
5. Improving Federal interagency collaboration at every level
6. Creating application toolkits
7. Measuring results
8. Improving coordination with state, municipal, and tribal governments
9. Linking planning with permitting
10. Instituting a landscape- and watershed-level approach to mitigation

Expanding the Use of IT Tools

Expanding the use of IT tools to improve project management and support effective decision-making is essential to modernizing Federal permitting. Following the tenets of the *OpenGov* initiative, which requires Federal agencies to take steps to enhance transparency, collaboration using IT tools can make infrastructure project management more effective and efficient. These tools can make scientific data and other information more readily accessible and replace time-intensive and redundant processes, in turn reducing project timelines by months while equipping project teams with accurate, timely information to support sound permitting decisions.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is developing an Information, Planning, and Conservation IT system that enables users to identify species of concern, complete effects analyses, expedite environmental review and approval processes, and aid in coordinating conservation efforts across the landscape. By making this comprehensive set of data available early in the process, this tool will facilitate better siting and mitigation decisions, as well as speed up the decision-making process by months.

The Forest Service and Rural Utility Service are partnering with the Federal Geographic Data Committee and *OpenGov* Working Groups to explore ways to make geospatial data publicly available to inform and facilitate project siting and guidance. Land parcel information is the data needed to make land management decisions across all Federal lands. Once this process is developed and a site is created to publish land parcel data, other significant, standardized data sets could be added to the site.

The Forest Service, working closely with CEQ, developed *eMNEPA* (the electronic Modernization of NEPA), a modernized electronic platform for managing the often resource-intensive process of conducting environmental reviews under NEPA. The Forest Service saves approximately \$8 million per year by not having to prepare, publish, mail, and file NEPA documents manually and by electronically responding to field data calls using this system. For example, one of the most resource-intensive processes has historically been collecting and responding to public comments—which often number in the thousands. *eMNEPA* includes a tool designed to manage the analysis of these comments, allowing the agency to respond more quickly to public input and allocate its scarce resources to the core work of analyzing project impacts.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released the *NEPAssist* public view, a web-based GIS application that facilitates more efficient and effective environmental reviews and project planning. *NEPAssist* draws information from publicly available Federal, state, and local datasets, allowing NEPA practitioners, stakeholders, and the public to view information about environmental conditions within the area of a proposed project quickly and easily. It can be used by Federal agencies to identify alternative project locations, to avoid and minimize impacts, and to identify potential mitigation areas. *NEPAssist* also responds to the needs of the general public for user-friendly web tools to access environmental data and to engage more effectively in the NEPA environmental review process, and to assist project developers' efforts to design projects that can avoid and minimize environmental impacts.

Assigning a Coordinating Agency

Every project on the Dashboard has a coordinating agency responsible for setting and managing the schedule for the project's permitting and review process. Having a single point of contact promotes accountability, improves communication and coordination, and provides all stakeholders with a primary resource for information about project progress.

The Department of Transportation (DOT) serves as the coordinating agency on two bridge projects of differing scope and scale on either side of the country:

DOT coordinated a project team with multiple Federal and state permitting and review agencies while expediting the Whittier Bridge Replacement Project in Massachusetts. DOT led the development of a schedule that coordinated concurrent Federal and state reviews, reducing the timeline to complete the permitting and review process by months. DOT, in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, convened weekly calls with the project team to ensure the expedited schedule was maintained and obstacles were identified and overcome. Strong interagency coordination enabled the Coast Guard to issue the final bridge permit within weeks of the original target.

DOT also worked in close coordination with its state, local, and other Federal partners in the development of the schedule for the Columbia River Crossing project, connecting Vancouver, WA to Portland, OR. DOT (Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration) worked closely with Coast Guard, Army Corps of Engineers, as well as relevant states and regional offices to establish a Statement of Protocols which identified main points of contact, defined roles, established review timeframes, and detailed processes for dispute resolution. This high-level coordination resulted in a clear path forward on a major project that previously had been stalled.

Establishing Timelines through Integrated Project Planning

Public timelines give project developers the transparency and predictability they need to support business decisions, and give clarity to stakeholders about opportunities for public involvement. These timelines also promote accountability among the Federal agency teams responsible for managing the project's permitting and review process, encouraging them to quickly spot issues that could impact the overall project schedule so that they can be promptly resolved without confusion.

Integrated Project Plan

Per the Federal Action Plan, OMB developed Integrated Project Plan (IPP) guidance to provide a framework for establishing a comprehensive schedule for the permitting and review of complex projects based on early coordination and collaboration among Federal agencies and project sponsors/applicants. The guidance will enable project applicants to successfully design, develop, and deliver large, complex infrastructure projects with substantial interagency components, as well as to promote efficient, effective inter-agency coordination among Federal, state, tribal, and local agencies reviewing such projects. The IPP is being designed to set out the roles and responsibilities of agencies involved in reviewing proposed infrastructure projects, so as to identify opportunities for collaboration, concurrent reviews, and more efficient information collection. Investing this time at the beginning of a project, before fully committing to a particular course of action, facilitates more informed decision-making during project design and the permitting and review phases.

Integrated and Concurrent, rather than Consecutive, Reviews

Up-front identification of each of the permits and reviews required for a given infrastructure project enables the coordinating agency to work with other agency colleagues and the project developer to plan an integrated, concurrent review process. By identifying requirements early in the process, performing reviews concurrently, and ensuring that all requirements of the review and permitting process are addressed holistically, Federal agencies can reduce decision-making timelines by months or even years, depending on the complexity of the project, while further reducing the costs and duplication resulting from incomplete assessments of requirements or consecutive reviews.

The Transportation Rapid Response Team recently completed a preliminary study on the use of synchronized decision-making tools under NEPA and Section 404 of the Clean Water Act and Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act. For over twenty years the DOT and Army Corps of Engineers have had an agreement to align the NEPA and Department of Army permit decision-making processes, which has had promising results when deployed. The recent study sought to understand the extent to which such synchronized processes are used, identify opportunities to expand the use of synchronization tools, and potentially broaden the scope to include other environmental reviews such as Endangered Species Act consultation with the Fish & Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries Service, and consultations under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

The Army Corps of Engineers has vastly improved the performance of its Civil Works Planning Program through a number of efforts, including modernizing the planning process. Over the last year, the Corps has deployed a new planning process referred to as “SMART Planning”. The goal under SMART planning is to complete most feasibility-level studies within 3 years for \$3 million dollars or less. The end product is a decision document that has been fully coordinated by three levels of the organization (Corps headquarters, the Corps division office, and the Corps district office) from study inception to completion. SMART Planning is risk-informed, decision focused planning that utilizes a six-step planning process to focus decision-making and scoping analyses on the information necessary for decisions. This collaborative approach is being used to shape two nationally and regionally significant Corps projects—the Central Everglades Planning Project and Charleston Harbor.

Improving Federal Interagency Collaboration at Every Level

Most permitting and review decisions are made at the regional or local level rather than at Federal agency headquarters. Accordingly, applying IT tools and best practices at the regional level is critical to effective and efficient permitting and review processes.

Weekly Tracking Call

OMB and DOT convene a weekly tracking call on which a representative from every agency with project milestones on the Dashboard reports on completed, delayed, missed and upcoming milestones. This pacing call supports improved coordination at both agency headquarters and at regional offices, while providing an early warning system that enables agency teams to proactively identify and correct delays that may arise. Agency participants on this call are also tasked with expanding and improving the project collaboration tool, including developing guidance and training materials to facilitate implementation and institutionalization throughout the Federal Government.

Creating Application Toolkits

Application toolkits include all necessary information about requirements, timelines, and application forms, and deliver greater clarity and predictability, lead to more comprehensive and informed applications, and enable Federal agencies to complete the permitting and review process faster with fewer delays.

Application Toolkit

Pursuant to the Federal Plan, the Rapid Response Team for Transmission (RRTT) and the Rapid Response Team for Renewable Energy (RE-RRT) are developing an Application Toolkit work plan and development schedule. These toolkits for electric transmission and renewable energy projects will be provided as an online public resource to provide information on siting and permitting renewable energy and electric transmission line projects to a broad stakeholder audience, including Federal, tribal, state, and local government agencies, project developers, and non-governmental organizations. Once completed, these application toolkits will provide a centralized location for stakeholders to access renewable energy and transmission line application processes, best practices, tools for outreach and engagement, and general information regarding natural, cultural, and visual resources, including assessment approaches and mitigation policies and practices. The toolkits give project sponsors clarity and predictability about the information required for, and timeframes associated with, Federal permitting and review decisions, and provide educational and training resources for Federal agency staff and external stakeholders.

Open Energy Information

Geothermal industry stakeholders identified the permitting process as one of the most significant barriers to geothermal power project development in the United States. Reducing the permitting time can significantly decrease total project costs, as well as investor risk and uncertainties. To solve this barrier, DOE's Geothermal Technologies Office developed an Open Energy Information (OpenEI) based tool. Available at <http://en.openei.org/wiki/GRR>, the tool outlines the permitting process for geothermal power projects on public, private and state-owned lands. The tool provides Federal, state, and local regulations, geothermal regulatory roadmap documents, and process flowcharts. By providing this information to the public, the tool enhances transparency and understanding for stakeholders involved in the geothermal permitting process, facilitates dialogue between agencies and stakeholders, and sets up a model for states that have not developed permitting regulations. DOE can also use the tool as a model to develop application toolkits focused on other industry sectors.

Measuring Results

Implementing tracking processes provides project developers and stakeholders with greater transparency and predictability, equips agency management with key information to identify and enhance processes, and allows agencies to better allocate resources.

The Department of Defense (DOD) has created a Siting Clearinghouse and published a new rule to expedite the review of infrastructure projects for impact to the military mission. This review affects the regulatory processes of other agencies, such as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and major land holding agencies, such as Bureau of Land Management (BLM). A majority of projects submitted were wind turbine projects and associated energy infrastructure projects, including bulk power transmission lines. During calendar year 2012, 97 percent (1730 projects) were cleared as having no mission impact. Forty-three projects were identified as potentially affecting critical national security testing, training, or operational missions. To resolve these issues, DOD established four mitigation response teams, and opened discussions with developers on potential mitigation opportunities. DOD has also established an informal review process under which developers can request a preliminary review of mission compatibility issues.

Improving Coordination with State, Municipal, and Tribal Governments

The bulk of Federal review and permitting responsibilities are handled at regional offices rather than agency headquarters, and it is important for regional leadership to replicate the strategic collaboration that leadership at Federal agency headquarters have developed in implementing Executive Order 13604. In addition, effective collaboration between Federal agency regional leadership and the State, tribal, and local governments that share permitting and review responsibilities for infrastructure projects is essential to moving a project quickly and efficiently from planning to review and permitting process.

DOI's California Renewable Energy Policy Group

A successful model of Federal-state coordination is DOI's California Renewable Energy Policy Group (REPG). Jointly established by the Secretary of the Interior and Governor of California, the team includes representatives from Federal and state agencies with responsibilities for permitting renewable energy and transmission projects, including BLM, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the California Energy Commission, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the California Independent Systems Operator, the California Public Utilities Commission, and the California State Lands Commission.

The Policy Group and REPG meet regularly to jointly review a common set of project applications, identifying and resolving issues early in the process; develop joint project permitting milestones which align Federal and state permitting processes; establish "Best Management Practices" for renewable energy development for project developers; and provide a venue for renewable energy stakeholders to speak directly to Federal and state policy leaders. The team has also created an innovative mitigation program with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to enable renewable energy project developers to address mitigation requirements through the use of a deposit account, leading to an increase in the transparency of project mitigation and allowing REPG to pool funds to acquire contiguous blocks of quality wildlife habitat.

Building on the success of the team's project-specific reviews, DOI and California also undertook a joint Federal-state long-term planning process to develop the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, which is expected to facilitate the review and approval of renewable energy projects, including solar thermal, utility-scale solar photovoltaic, wind, and other forms of renewable energy and associated infrastructure such as electric transmission lines necessary for renewable energy development, within about 22.5 million acres of the Colorado and Mojave deserts in California.

Linking Planning with Permitting

Federal agencies are developing innovative, science-based roadmaps designed to facilitate the review and permitting of major infrastructure projects and form a sound foundation for responsible infrastructure development on public lands. These roadmaps, which help to identify optimal locations for different types of infrastructure project development, as well as landscape and watershed-level mitigation opportunities, equip product developers to make better siting decisions, enable Federal agencies to make quick decisions, and create the opportunity to engage the appropriate stakeholders and enhance environmental outcomes.

Western Solar Plan

DOI recently completed a Western Solar Plan that provides a blueprint for utility-scale solar energy permitting in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah. The plan establishes solar energy zones with access to existing or planned transmission lines, incentives for development within those zones, and a process through which to consider additional zones and solar projects. DOI undertook joint efforts with the states of California and Arizona to identify areas best suitable for the development of renewable energy in these states. On January 18, 2013, DOI announced the final decision for the Arizona Restoration Design Energy Project, while the California Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan is ongoing. These and other similar efforts will steer project applicants to the best location for siting projects and minimize multiple use conflicts and environmental impacts.

Landscape- and Watershed-Level Mitigation

Programmatic planning efforts like the Western Solar Plan can also allow for the more effective mitigation of the environmental impacts of major infrastructure projects. Because such projects can have a significant footprint, identifying appropriate environmental mitigation requirements upfront using a landscape or watershed level view of where a project is sited can lead to better outcomes for the environment and efficiencies in the mitigation process. To that end, resource management agencies are taking steps to move towards a holistic, watershed- or ecosystem-level approach that would allow project applicants to identify the most ecologically-effective mitigation measures in the project-planning phase.

Conservation Banking

Agencies like the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) are using conservation banking, an approach that permanently conserves habitat in a given area, to offset adverse impacts to species and habitats. In addition, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is implementing a Greater Sage-grouse Habitat Conservation Planning Strategy. This framework will allow BLM to incorporate science-based conservation measures for the Greater Sage grouse into agency resource management plans, and, in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and state fish and wildlife agencies in the West, to give appropriate considerations to the principal threats to the sage-grouse identified by the FWS.

Going Forward

In February, you announced a new goal of cutting timelines in half for major infrastructure projects, such as highways, bridges, railways, ports, waterways, pipelines and renewable energy by modernizing Federal permitting and review regulations, policies, and procedures. By cutting through the red tape, we will more efficiently get projects through the Federal permit decision-making and review process, while creating new incentives for better outcomes for communities and the environment.

Advancing these efforts will also involve outreach to stakeholders in the environmental, community, and private sectors to further our commitment to collaboration and inform our best practices. These steps will enhance overall efficiencies and encourage transparency and predictability in infrastructure project management.

To institutionalize and expand best practices in agency regulations, policies, and procedures, OMB and CEQ will continue to work with Federal agencies to undertake a comprehensive review and modernization effort to bring the Federal permitting and review process into the 21st Century. This effort will include the development of a fast track procedure for infrastructure projects that can demonstrate how they will meet key permitting and review requirements early in the process. Fundamental to this effort will be the expansion of IT tools like geospatial systems that improve and streamline the planning process and replace burdensome paperwork.

State, local, and tribal governments are critical partners in the effort to address our Nation's infrastructure needs and reach these goals. To strengthen Federal collaboration with States, municipalities, and Tribes, you recently announced a set of regional pilot teams focused on specific regional infrastructure priorities. In the Pacific Northwest, DOI is leading a partnership with states to move faster on renewable energy, transmission and other infrastructure projects. DOT is working with other regional partners in the Northeast to develop passenger rail service in the Northeast Corridor. In the central U.S., USDA is leading an interagency team to work on projects that will help local communities deal with worsening drought. DOI will work in North Dakota and Montana to improve oil and gas production. Finally, DOI is developing a cross-discipline team to facilitate the development of electrical transmission in the West. These teams will strengthen collaboration, cut red tape, and reduce permitting timelines. These pilot teams will also serve as laboratories for further innovations.