

Leaders approve Northern I-73 Environmental Impact Statement

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By Morning News Staff Reports
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S.C. Secretary of Transportation H.B. "Buck" Limehouse Jr. and Federal Highway Administration Division Administrator Bob Lee signed the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Northern I-73 Project today.

"The signing of the FEIS represents over three years of work to identify the best overall route for I-73 through this region," Limehouse said in a press release. "We have reached an important milestone and look forward to seeking sources of funding, both public and private, so that I-73 may become reality."

The Northern I-73 Project is 36 miles long and extends from I-95 in South Carolina to I-73/I74 in the Rockingham/Hamlet, N.C., area. The project crosses Marlboro and Dillon Counties in South Carolina and Richmond and Scotland Counties in North Carolina.

The FEIS represents the completion of a cooperative effort between SCDOT and NCDOT to develop a comprehensive assessment of impact to relevant human and natural features within the project study area.

"Excellent communication and partnering are two factors that made this project a success," Lee said in the release. "For example, we have been actively engaged with FHWA in North Carolina since Day 1. The result is a completed Environmental Impact Statement in about 36 months as compared to the national average of 68 months."

The Environmental Impact Statement related to the building of the southern portion of Interstate 73 was finalized Nov. 29 by state and federal officials. Finalizing the Environmental Impact Statement allowed for the process of acquiring right-of-ways to begin. The southern portion of I-73 would run from Interstate 95 in Dillon County through Marion County to S.C. 22 (Veterans Highway) in Horry County.

The next milestone is the upcoming Record of Decision (ROD), which is anticipated in October. Once the ROD is issued, it is anticipated that the right-of-way acquisition will proceed for tracts that would be totally taken by the right of way footprint for the interstate.

A draft environmental impact statement for the Northern I-73 Project was approved in July 2007.

The recommended preferred alternative for the northern portion of Interstate 73 in South Carolina was announced July 19, 2007. It begins south of Hamlet in Richmond County,

N.C., and travels southeast toward the Carolinas' state line, parallel with S.C. 38 into Dillon County, where it connects with the southern portion west of Latta at Interstate 95.

I-73 ultimately will run from Myrtle Beach to Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

The interstate, if completed, will cost close to \$2 billion for the South Carolina portion.

In all, it will cross six states — Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia and the Carolinas — and traverse 60 miles in four Pee Dee counties.

The interstate is likely to take at least 10 years to complete, provided the money to construct it is obtained.