

State, federal officials sign off on I-73 construction

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CHARLESTON, S.C. — State and federal officials on Thursday signed off on plans to build Interstate 73 in South Carolina, a \$2 billion expressway that will link Myrtle Beach to Interstate 95.

Plans are for I-73 to one day connect Michigan to the South Carolina beach, the heart of South Carolina's \$16 billion tourism industry.

State Transportation Secretary Buck Limehouse and Bob Lee of the Federal Highway Administration signed the environmental impact statement, which looks at how the expressway will affect people and the environment.

The approval means the state can now start buying land to build the 90-mile road, expected to take about 10 years once construction begins.

Officials praised how quickly they were able to sign off on the plans.

Limehouse, whose agency has made I-73 a top priority, said it was "the culmination of three years work and represents the most significant milestone achieved to date for I-73."

Lee said the study was completed in about half the time that such studies typically require.

The Transportation Department, for the first time, used a streamlined approach for the study, working with government agencies who issue permits for the project.

In the past, impact statements were compiled first, then reviewed by the permitting agencies, which may have other worries that may need more study, slowing the process.

State lawmakers have approved using tolls to help pay for I-73 and the federal government approved the idea earlier this year.

A second section of the expressway will continue northwest from I-95 into North Carolina. A final impact statement on that section is expected next year.