

# Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group Meeting Summary

Thursday, November 17, 2022, 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

## Attendees

Ron Somerville	Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group
Matt Robus	Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group
Ryan Beason	Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group
Shawn Hooton	Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group
Bob Armstrong	Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group
Frank Rue	Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group
Marie Heidemann	Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
Alec Venechuk	City and Borough of Juneau
Steve Noble, Project Manager	DOWL
Nina Keller, Assistant Project Manager	DOWL
Morgan McCammon, Public Involvement	DOWL
Marella Gungob, Public Involvement	DOWL

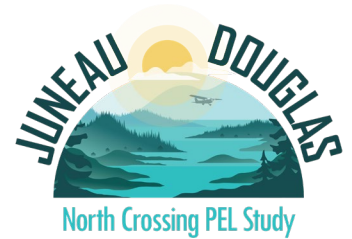
## Summary

The meeting began with introductions and was opened by reviewing the reasons this meeting was requested, namely:

- Wetland impacts
- Concerns that summaries did not include applicable policies and previous work
- Concerns that the project should minimize impact to the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge (Refuge)
- Importance of cost considerations to crossings
- Legal impacts
- Impacts to important wildlife habitat (including bird and fish)

The Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group (Group) shared several reports with habitat and environmental data.

Concerns regarding the project map included underrepresentation of specific important habitat and wetland values. The Group shared that the public would want to know potential effects of a project and confirm that



screening would be based on existing conditions. Nina Keller (DOWL Assistant Project Manager) explained that the memos with maps provided have details particular to the concerns described. A Group member suggested they would have liked to have seen a map that described a more environmental view of the Refuge in this area with the routes circumventing the affected area instead of going straight through it.

A Group member stated that the project makes no mention of hunting impacts. A concern is that any route that bisects the Refuge will remove any firearm discharge use in that area. Another area of concern was that an early summary produced for the PEL Study only referenced deer hunting in the area rather than including waterfowl. Nina responded that she would look more into the hunting mention in the summary.

The group stated that also missing is mention of the Refuge being a globally important migratory bird area. The project would result in a chain of habitats being impacted, particularly that used by birds. It was reiterated that the Refuge is a major bird habitat area. Nina asked what areas were the most critical.

A comment was made regarding the potential impacts to the habitat of Pacific sand lance, a small fish and important food source for birds. The project team asked whether the exact locations of Pacific sand lance habitat are known. A Group member responded that information on the Pacific sand lance areas can be found in publications shared with the study team.

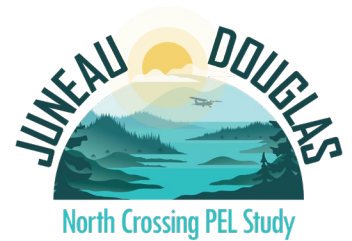
A question was asked on whether the project team is working with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G). Nina clarified that ADF&G would be at today's advisory committee meeting. A member of the Group suggested working with them to gain further insight to what has and has not worked in the past. Steve responded that the project team is not ignoring past information, and that previous sources and studies are being reviewed. He reiterated what the PEL process is, a Purpose and Need Statement is established, and preliminary alternatives are being developed. He explained that one purpose of the PEL study is to discover anything that would be a fatal flaw and to find routes that would work. Likely multiple alternatives will advance to the next stage. The goal for right now is to have enough dialogue to move forward.

A comment was made stating that the Refuge was not specifically mentioned in the Purpose and Need. Marie Heidemann (DOT&PF Project Manager) responded that specific environmental resources could not be named, but identifying general areas of concern, such as to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts to environmental resources could be included as an additional goal.

A comment was made stating that the project team needs to look for an off-Refuge alternative. Marie added clarification by stating that all routes need to be considered at the outset and may be eliminated based on evaluation. Steve reaffirmed that the project team knows the wetlands are a challenge.

A Group member shared that the Territorial Sportsman have not taken a position on this issue yet, trying to be good citizens. They acknowledge the benefits of an additional crossing and want to work with the project team to minimize impacts to the Refuge. Additional wildlife concerns were brought up as an article on the decline of birds world-wide was passed around.

Steve presented the maps showing the study area and ideas heard from the public and advisory committees. He talked about the screening levels, explaining that right now the project team is only conducting the pre-screening. Nina added that public concerns will be included as is providing minimal impacts to the environment. She then walked through a detailed explanation of screening levels and screening criteria, concluding that the more effects a preliminary alternative has on the environment, the lower a ranking that



preliminary alternative would be given. At the end of the study, one or two alternatives, with the best scores based on all the screening criteria will be suggested.

A comment was made about conservation lands owned by the Southeast Alaska Land Trust (SEALT) and that the mitigation costs would be double when crossing at those locations. Steve acknowledged those issues, referencing the Sunny Point route and impacts at Hendrickson Point, an area protected by mitigation efforts related to the airport expansion.

A comment was made expressing concern regarding impacts on hydrological connectivity caused by a crossing.

A comment was made that the public thinks the project team is bypassing the environmental concerns and processes. Steve expressed appreciation for bringing up these concerns and suggested meeting again after the December 12, 2022, Open House.

A question was asked about the furthest north route possible. Nina replied that it was suggested by people who want to avoid the Refuge.

A question was asked if the project team is considering costs. Nina responded affirmatively. Steve noted that the routes furthest west are the longest and most costly. A Group member countered that the routes to the east would mean additional road construction needed to address potential development on West Douglas Island.

Steve discussed bridge height issues and competing interests based on construction costs versus environmental impacts. He noted that the least construction cost may not be environmentally friendly, therefore would not be the best option. He further discussed bridge height requirements based on the Coast Guard potentially dredging the Gastineau Channel again. While this is highly unlikely due to the severe environmental impacts, it is still a possibility to be considered by law.

The project team thanked the Group for taking time to meet and share concerns. The project team planned to review the materials provided and incorporate where applicable.

## Wrap Up/Action Items

### Project team:

- Review material provided by the Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group.
- Reach out to Mendenhall Wetlands Study Group after the December 12, 2022, Open House to check if they would like an additional meeting.