



Module 4: Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact

- 1 Define the term, *Environmental Assessment* (EA)
- 2 List the key components of an EA
- 3 Outline the procedures for preparing an EA, including public involvement and agency coordination
- 4 Summarize how to appropriately revise an EA
- 5 Define the terms, *Finding of No Significant Impact* (FONSI) and *Notice of Availability* (NOA)
- 6 Identify the key steps in DOT&PF's review and approval process for an EA and a FONSI



Length of training module: Approximately 25 minutes.



The topics of Environmental Assessment, or EA, and Finding of No Significant Impact, or FONSI, are part of a course covering the requirements for preparing and processing environmental documentation under the Alaska DOT&PF NEPA Assignment Program. Keep in mind that the information presented here is intended to be used in conjunction with the *Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities Environmental Procedures Manual*, which serves as a reference and the source material for the classroom version.

This module will provide you with an overview of the DOT&PF's process for preparing an Environmental Assessment and a Finding of No Significant Impact.

By the end of this module, you should be able to:

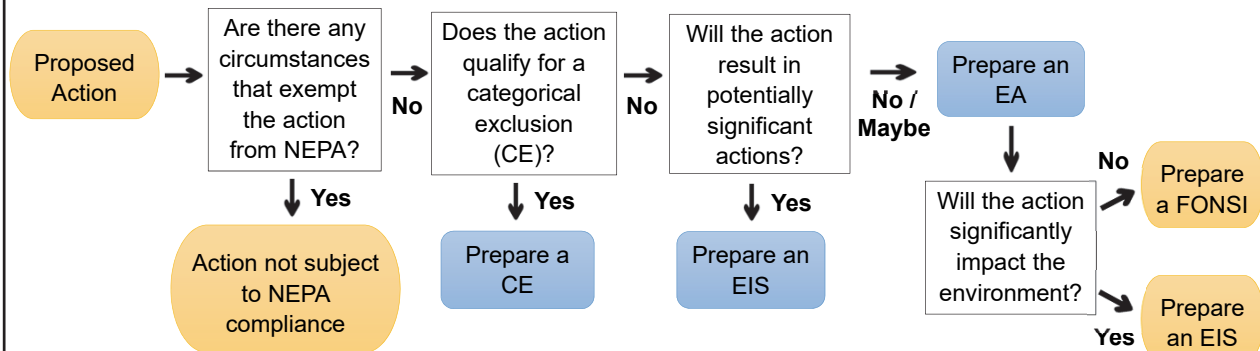
- Define the term *Environmental Assessment* (EA).
- List the key components of an EA.
- Outline the procedures for preparing an EA, including public involvement and agency coordination.
- Summarize how to appropriately revise an EA.
- Define the terms *Finding of No Significant Impact*, or FONSI, and *Notice of Availability*, or NOA; and
- Identify the key steps in DOT&PF's review and approval process for an EA and a FONSI.

Okay, now let's get started on the next slide by defining what an EA is.



What Is an Environmental Assessment?

Role of the EA in the NEPA Process



An EA is a concise public document prepared by an agency when a proposed action is not covered by a categorical exclusion or otherwise exempt from NEPA, and when it is unclear whether the action could result in significant impacts. The role of an EA is to determine if a proposed action has the potential to cause significant environmental impacts. If it is determined through preparation of an EA that the proposed action will significantly impact the environment, then the agency must prepare an Environmental Impact Statement, or EIS. If it is determined that the proposed action will not significantly impact the environment, then the agency must prepare a FONSI.



EA: Key Components



Don't forget to account for cumulative impacts associated with other past, present, or reasonably foreseeable projects in the Affected Environment section.

1	Cover Page
2	Purpose and Need
3	Alternatives
4	Affected Environment
5	Environmental Consequences
6	Comments and Coordination
7	Section 4(f) Evaluation
8	Appendices

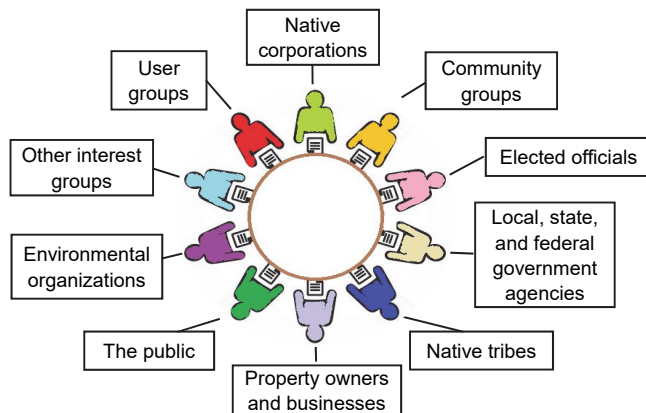


Now that you understand what an EA is, let's review what you need to include:

- First, an EA must have a cover page, which must include the NEPA Assignment MOU disclosure statement in a manner that is conspicuous to the reader.
- Second, there needs to be a section describing the purpose and need for the proposed action.
- Third, every EA must include an Alternatives section which describes the proposed action, alternative action(s) if applicable, and the no build alternative. If more than one build alternative is evaluated in the EA, a preferred alternative should be identified.
- Next, the EA must include an Affected Environment section, which discusses the existing conditions of the site.
- The fifth component of an EA is the Environmental Consequences section which covers the potential direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts that each alternative would have on social, economic, and natural resources, and the measures that would be taken to avoid, minimize, or mitigate such impacts. The EA should disclose any primary and/or ancillary project connections. The cumulative impacts associated with connected projects shall be described and any previously approved environmental documents for the connected projects should be referenced.
- Additionally, during the preparation of the EA, agency and public comments and DOT&PF responses, as well as documentation of coordination efforts, are to be maintained in the region's project file. The comments and responses are to be summarized in the EA Comments and Coordination chapter of the EA and attached in an appendix.
- Lastly, if applicable, the EA must also include a Section 4(f) evaluation. The Section 4(f) evaluation requires DOT&PF to consider any potential impacts on park and recreational lands, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and historic sites during transportation project development.
- Any supporting information, such as scoping reports or Section 6(f) analyses, should be attached to the EA in the form of appendices.



Public Involvement and Agency Coordination



DOT&PF generally conducts the following public involvement and agency outreach procedures for an EA:

- Notice to Begin Engineering and Environmental Studies
- Public Involvement Plan
- Scoping
- Notice of Availability (NOA)
- Public Meeting(s)/Hearing(s)



[Chapter 7: Public and Agency Involvement](#)



When considering the project area and proposed action, an initial list of stakeholders who may have an interest in the project or may be affected by the project should be developed. Groups to consider including are shown on the slide. When considering the proposed action, issues that may be important to the potentially affected population and relevant agencies need to be identified as well. For each issue and potential stakeholder, DOT&PF should consider the level of interest or controversy to help develop the scope of an outreach program in order to offer the appropriate level of engagement.

For EAs, DOT&PF generally conducts the following public involvement and agency outreach procedures:

- The issuance of a Notice to Begin Engineering and Environmental Studies to inform the public and agencies of DOT&PF's intent to begin environmental review of a project.
- The development of a Public Involvement Plan, which serves as an analysis of the potentially affected population, the issues that may be important to the potentially affected population, and the level of interest or controversy for each issue and potential stakeholder.
- Scoping activities that engage agencies and the public early in the environmental process to determine the scope of environmental issues to be addressed, identifying the alternatives and measures that may mitigate adverse environmental impacts, and identifying other environmental requirements that should be performed concurrently with the EA.

- The issuance of a Notice of Availability, or NOA, which will be covered more thoroughly on the next slide.
- And Public Meetings and/or Hearings. At a minimum, DOT&PF will provide the opportunity for a public hearing during the project development process. If a public hearing is not requested, public meetings or other means of involvement may be used throughout the project development process.

All public notices and outreach materials must include the NEPA Assignment MOU disclosure statement in a manner that is conspicuous to the reader.



For additional detail on these public involvement and agency outreach procedures, visit the resource at the bottom of this slide for Chapter 7 of the DOT&PF's *Environmental Procedures Manual*: <http://dot.alaska.gov/stwddes/desenviron/assets/pdf/manual/epm18/ch7.pdf>



Notice of Availability (NOA)

The Notice of Availability (NOA) for a Draft EA should briefly describe the project and its impacts, specify the locations where the Draft EA can be reviewed, and the procedures and timeline for submitting comments.

DOT&PF will issue a public NOA once the Statewide Environmental Office (SEO) has approved the Draft EA for distribution. The region will publish the NOA and make the Draft EA available for public and agency review through:



Mail or email



**Community
Centers**



**Alaska Online
Public Notices**



**DOT&PF Region
and SEO Offices**



**Local
Newspapers**



Local Libraries



As introduced on the previous slide, one of the common procedures used for public involvement and agency outreach for an EA is the Notice of Availability, or NOA. The Notice of Availability briefly describes the project and its impacts, specifies the locations where the Draft EA can be reviewed, and the procedures and timeline for submitting comments. The NOA is only issued once the Statewide Environmental Office, or SEO, has approved the Draft EA for distribution. Once the Draft EA is approved, the Regional Environmental Manager, or REM, is responsible for transmitting the draft NOA text to the SEO for review and approval for publishing. Then the region publishes the NOA and makes the approved EA available through one or more of the methods shown on the slide.

It is recommended that public and agency review occur concurrently. A 30-day review period is standard but may be reduced or increased in rare circumstances with SEO approval.

If the project has potential impacts to floodplains, wetlands, Section 4(f) properties, and/or Section 106 properties, appropriate language should be incorporated into the NOA to cover public notification requirements for these topics.

At the conclusion of the public and agency review period, a summary of the comments received and a response to each substantive comment or category of comments is prepared. Then it is time for the EA to be revised.



Final EA

A Final EA must:

- Include a new cover page
- Identify the preferred alternative if not previously identified, or if changed since public and agency review of the Draft EA
- Include changes in the Purpose and Need, Alternatives, and/or Affected Environment sections
- Discuss comments received and responses provided
- Include a new signature sheet



Following the public and agency review period, the REM consults with the SEO to determine the appropriate method of revision for the EA. The Final EA will:

- Include a new cover page, which must include the NEPA Assignment MOU disclosure statement in a manner that is conspicuous to the reader.
- Identify the preferred alternative if not previously identified, or if changed since the EA public and agency review period. Note that this may require additional public involvement.
- Include changes in the Purpose and Need, Alternatives, and/or Affected Environment sections, including changes to: the proposed action, impacts, mitigation measures, findings, agreements and commitments, determinations, and laws or regulations.
- Discuss comments received during the EA public and agency review period, and responses provided, including any changes made to the project or the EA in response to comments.
- Include a new signature sheet.

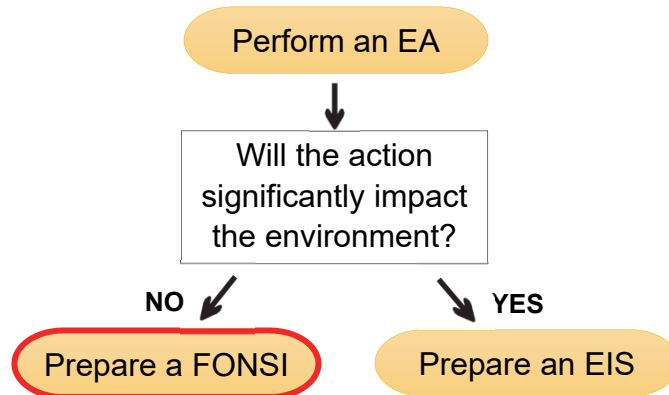
The format for the Final EA may be either:

- An updated version of the EA with strike-outs of revised text, and comments and responses included as an appendix; or
- Errata sheets attached to the EA with the comments and responses included with the errata sheets

Once the 30-day Draft EA public review period is complete and if the SEO determines that no significant impacts will result from the proposed action, then a FONSI may also be prepared along with the Final EA.



Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)



As discussed previously, the role of the EA in the NEPA Process is to determine whether the proposed action will significantly impact the environment or not. If the proposed action will significantly impact the environment, then DOT&PF must prepare an EIS. However, if the proposed action will not significantly impact the environment, then DOT&PF must prepare a FONSI.

A FONSI is both the determination by the SEO that the project will have no significant impacts on the environment, and the documentation of the decision. The Draft EA, Final EA, and any other applicable environmental documents are referenced as the basis for this determination. A FONSI is prepared after the 30-day public and agency review of the Draft EA is complete and the SEO determines that no significant environmental impacts will result from the proposed action. The FONSI is a standalone document, which requires independent approval. That said, the FONSI may be bound to and submitted with the Final EA for concurrent SEO approval.



Components of a FONSI

The FONSI determination is made by the Statewide Environmental Program Manager and may be delegated to the NEPA Program Manager.

A FONSI must include:

- A cover page
- A description of the selected alternative
- A summary of the environmental impacts, commitments, and mitigation measures
- Public and agency comments on the Draft EA and DOT&PF responses
- Any changes to the proposed action in response to the comments received



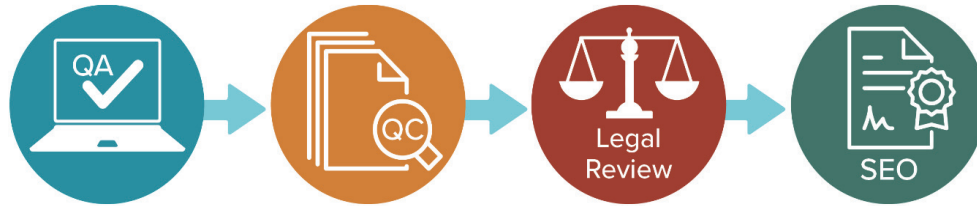
The FONSI determination is made by the Statewide Environmental Program Manager and may be delegated to the NEPA Program Manager. A FONSI will include the following:

- A cover page, which must include the NEPA Assignment MOU disclosure statement in a manner that is conspicuous to the reader,
- A description of the selected alternative,
- A summary of environmental impacts, commitments, and mitigation measures,
- Public and agency comments on the Draft EA and DOT&PF responses, and
- Any changes to the proposed action in response to the comments received.

Upon completion, the FONSI must go through the review and approval process shown on the following slide.



DOT&PF Review and Approval Process



[Chapter 11: Quality Assurance and Quality Control](#)



The DOT&PF review and approval process applies to the Draft EA, Final EA, FONSI and any supplemental EA. The review process begins with Quality Assurance, or QA, which is performed by the project development team during development of the EA through collaboration, project meetings, and intradepartmental review of the document. Then, the region and SEO will perform separate Quality Control, or QC, reviews to produce a quality finished product through identifying and correcting any errors and omissions. After the QC reviews are complete, a legal review of the environmental document is required. If the Alaska Department of Law deems the document to be legally sufficient, then the EA can be passed along to SEO for final approval.



For additional detail on these review processes, visit the resource at the bottom of this slide for Chapter 11 of the DOT&PF's Environmental Procedures Manual:

<http://dot.alaska.gov/stwddes/desenviron/assets/pdf/manual/epm18/ch11.pdf>



Module Review

Module 4: What You've Learned...



- The definition of an EA and its key components
- Procedures for preparing an EA, including public involvement and agency coordination
- Appropriate methods for revising an EA
- The definitions of a FONSI and NOA
- The DOT&PF review and approval process for an EA and FONSI



This concludes Module 4.

We'll now take the module quiz to complete the requirements for this training course.