

DOT&PF Tribal
Transportation
Training
(Alaska's Legal
Framework)

Consultation in
Alaska
transportation
projects

Training Purpose

- Understand Tribal consultation requirements for Alaska DOT&PF transportation projects
- Understand DOT&PF's role in federally funded project consultation
- Identify DOT&PF actions that may affect Tribal interests
- Recognize the importance of early engagement in project compliance and successful community collaboration

Why This Matters

Transportation projects frequently trigger federal law

Tribal consultation is a legal requirement

Failures cause delays, funding risk, litigation, and judicial review

Alaska is Legally & Culturally Unique

- Federally recognized Tribes are sovereign governments. Alaska is home to 229 (nearly 40% of all U.S. Tribes)
- ANCSA corporations own land and have the right to consult on the same basis as Tribes.
- ANCSA affected land ownership but did not diminish Tribal sovereignty or alter Tribal status
- Alaska transportation projects often involve both Tribes & ANCs

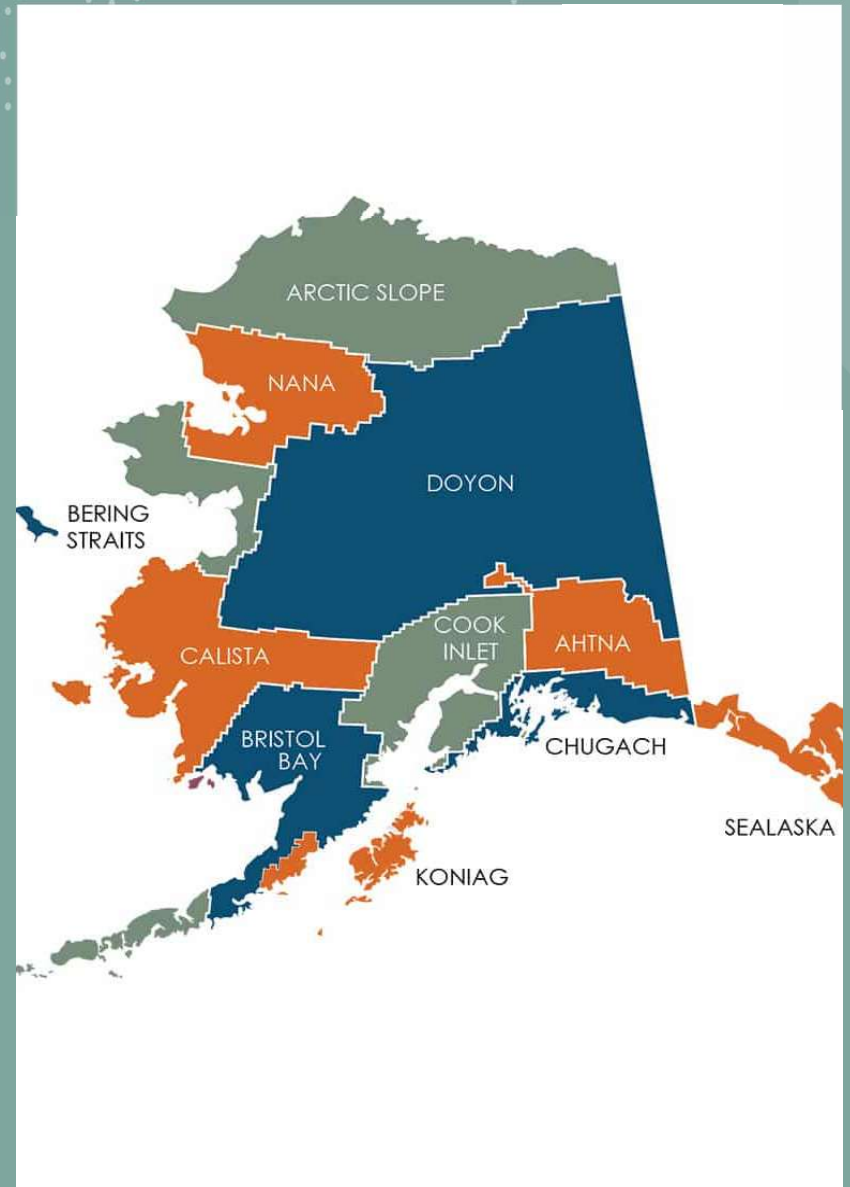
Structure of ANCSA

Land Allocation:

Alaska was divided into **12 regions** for the creation of regional corporations, each representing a different geographic area.

Over **200 village corporations** were also established, each representing individual Native communities.

Ownership: Both regional and village corporations are owned by enrolled shareholders.



Foundational Principles

Tribal sovereignty is inherent and pre-dates the United States. Consultation with Federally recognized Tribes is conducted on a G2G basis.

Federal obligations arise from federal actions that may affect Tribal interests, not from land ownership.

Federal Trust Responsibility

Governs federal actions that may affect Tribal interests. Federal agencies carry out the trust responsibility.

Delegation allows DOT&PF to carry out certain actions, but FHWA's trust responsibility is non-delegable.

Federal and State Roles

FHWA is federal decision-maker for federally funded transportation projects. DOT&PF serves as the project sponsor & implementing agency

DOT&PF actions may give rise to federal consultation obligations. Early coordination protects both agencies

Federal Laws Commonly Triggered

- NEPA – environmental analysis and informed decision-making
- NHPA Section 106 – historic properties and Tribal consultation
- ESA – protection of listed species and habitat
- Clean Water Act – protection of waters and wetlands
- Section 4(f) – protection of public lands

How These Laws Work Together

NEPA

Statutes apply concurrently to the same project.

Legal rule: Agencies may not take actions that would prejudice the NEPA decision before environmental review is complete.

NHPA Section 106

Each Statute imposes independent legal requirements.

Legal rule: No effect-causing activity may proceed until Section 106 consultation is complete.

US DOT Act Section 4(f)

Compliance with one law does not satisfy the others.

Legal rule: Avoidance analysis must precede approval of a use.

Role of ANCSA Corporations

- ANCSA Corporations hold land and property interests, grant ROWs
- Early coordination supports access and design decisions
- Parallel engagement benefits all parties

ANCSA Common Misconceptions Clarified

ANCSA
did not
terminate
Tribes

ANCs are not
Tribal
governments

ANC
consultation
alone does not
satisfy G2G
consultation
requirements

Land
ownership
does not
diminish
consultation
obligations

Core Legal Principles

- **NEPA:** Prohibits actions that would limit reasonable alternatives before completing environmental review.
- **NHPA Section 106:** Consultation must occur before actions that may affect historic properties
- **ESA:** No irreversible resource commitments before completing consultation.
- **Clean Water Act:** Activities affecting waters of the United States require authorization

Effect- Causing Activities

Legal Constraints

An effect-causing activity is anything that changes a resource, its setting, or locks in project choices before federal review and consultation are complete. Early actions that are “preparatory” or limit options are not exempt if it has real impacts.

Effect-Causing Project Activities That May Affect Tribal Interests

- **Land or vegetation** removal or disturbance
(tree clearing, brushing)
- **Temporary or permanent** access
(winter trails, detours)
- **Material sourcing, staging**
(gravel pits, landing zones)
- **Survey, geotechnical activities**
(staking, drilling, test pits)
- **ROW or access decisions**
(easements, alignment, access)

Documentation and the Administrative Record

Federal law requires documentation of consultation and decision-making (e.g., NHPA Section 106, NEPA, ESA)

- The Administrative Record is the basis for legal and judicial review
- Only documented consultation and analysis are recognized in the record
- Clear documentation supports accountability and defensible decisions
- Transparent communication supports meaningful consultation and trust

Documentation Judicial Review

- Courts apply a unifying legal standard
- Across NHPA Section 106, NEPA, ESA (procedural duties), and APA review (formal review standards), courts essentially ask:
 - What did the agency do?
 - What information did the agency consider?
 - Why did it make its decision?
- If the record does not show this → the actions are vulnerable as legally inadequate (arbitrary & capricious, abuse of discretion, illegal)

Documentation Requirements

- Under the APA Courts review the administrative record, not intent.
- NHPA Section 106 – Agencies must document identification, evaluation, consultation, and resolution of effects. (36 CFR Part 800)
- NEPA – Agencies must create an administrative record showing how impacts, alternatives, and input were considered.
- ESA - consultation outcomes and supporting information must be documented

Legally Sufficient Documentation

Legally sufficient documentation:
(*Consideration & Response Standard:
Who, When, What, How*)

- Identifies who was consulted & when
- Summarizes the substance of input
- Shows how the agency considered and responded to input
- Shows how input informed decisions
- Allows reviewer to trace input to decision

Documentation Deficiencies

Common legally deficient characteristics

- States consultation occurred without describing “how”
- Relies on conclusions instead of facts
- Omits or minimizes Tribal concerns
- Fails to connect Tribal input to decision-making
- Uses boilerplate or recycled language
- Prevents reviewer from tracing recorded reasoning

Tracing Agency Reasoning in the Administrative Record

Legally sufficient documentation allows a reviewer to follow a clear sequence

- Information provided to agency (studies, data, input)
- Issues, concerns identified during consultation
- Agency analysis of options, alternatives, responses
- Explanation of how concerns informed the final decision
- Final decision supported by record

What to Avoid in Practices

- Assuming activities are minor without consultation
- Moving forward before meaningful engagement
- Reducing consultation to a box checking exercise
- Relying on fixes after impacts occur

Raising Concerns and Asking Questions

- Pause if uncertainties arise
- Share concerns with leads
- Seek guidance early
- Document conversations respectfully
- Consultation will continue through construction / implementation
- Reinitiate when new effects or other triggering conditions arise

Key Takeaways

1

Consultation
is legally
required.

2

Engage with
Tribes directly
& consistently
& begin early.

3

Documentation &
timing are critical.
Track across all
project phases.

Key Takeaways

4

Alaska land status does not diminish legal obligations.

5

Early consultation & respectful engagement leads to better outcomes, supports compliance, mitigates risk & strengthens trust.



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Presenter Script - DOT&PF Tribal Transportation Law (Alaska Legal Framework)

(Approx. 60 minutes)

Contents

- Purpose
 - Alaska context
 - Sovereignty / trust responsibility
 - Federal–state roles
 - Statutory frameworks
 - Timing rules
-

Slide 1 – Title: DOT&PF Tribal Transportation Training (Alaska’s Legal Framework)

Good morning. Thank you for joining us today for the **first of three trainings sessions** that together will cover Alaska’s legal framework for:

- Tribal consultation, cultural awareness, and consultation best practices.

Each session will last about an hour and will also be available to be viewed online at a later time.

I want to acknowledge the Alaska DOT&PF for taking on this work. Updating a statewide consultation policy and building a framework centered on partnership with Tribal communities is not a small or routine task. It reflects a commitment to developing state infrastructure in a way that respects Tribal governments, incorporates traditional knowledge, and meets legal responsibilities.

Be aware, this training will **only scratch the surface**. It will not cover every statute, every scenario, or every procedural step. What it is meant to do is establish a **foundation**, a shared starting point for understanding how Tribal consultation law actually functions in Alaska.

At its core, this training is about **respect, partnership, and shared responsibility**. Consultation is not just about compliance. It works best when it happens early and consistently, to improve project design, reflect Tribal knowledge, and move forward efficiently and successfully.

Slide 2 – Training Purpose

The purpose of this session is focused on Alaska’s unique **legal framework**. The purpose is to help you understand **why** federal Tribal consultation law works the way it does in Alaska, so you can recognize legal obligations early, before decisions are made that limit options later. If you walk away with one takeaway today, it’s this: Most consultation problems are not caused by bad

intent. They are caused by misunderstandings about **timing, attribution, and how federal law attaches to state actions.**

The law rarely fails because someone didn't know a statute existed. It fails because someone didn't recognize that a particular action, often an early one, had legal consequences.

Slide 3 – Why This Matters

At its core, federal consultation involves 3 things: timing, decision-making, and documentation.

Once a project has crossed certain decision points, alignment locked, access chosen, staging areas selected, the law doesn't bend just because the schedule is tight.

Most of the problems agencies face are not because consultation didn't happen, but because it happened *after* decisions were effectively made.

Slide 4 – Alaska Is Legally & Culturally Unique

Alaska's legal landscape is fundamentally different from the Lower 48, and much of the confusion we see comes from importing assumptions that simply don't apply here.

We have 229 federally recognized Tribes. They are each a sovereign government. That status does not depend on land ownership.

ANCSA corporations own land and hold property rights, but they are not sovereign governments. ANCSA affected land ownership. It did not terminate Tribes, and it did not diminish Tribal sovereignty.

Slide 5 – Structure of ANCSA

Slide 6 – Foundational Legal Principles

Tribal sovereignty is inherent. Consultation is government-to-government. And federal obligations arise from *federal action*. Everything else in this training flows from these principles.

Consultation is not a responsibility simply because an agency wants to be respectful. It's a duty owed because federal law requires it when federal action may affect Tribal interests.

Again, federal consultation obligations arise from *federal action*. That action can take the form of funding, approvals, permits, or federal control over decision-making. What matters legally is

not who owns the land, not the size of the project, and not whether the state or federal government is physically doing the work.

This is why state actions can still give rise to federal obligations. When DOT&PF is carrying out a project with a federal nexus, those actions are legally part of the federal decision-making process.

In brief, the federal nexus arises from federal control, funding, approval, or permitting, not from land ownership, project size, or intent. This federal nexus doctrine is what ties state actions to federal legal obligations.

That's the connective tissue across multiple statutes (NEPA, NHPA, ESA, the Clean Water Act, and Section 4(f)). If you understand the foundation that consultation obligations flow from federal action and the trust relationship, not land ownership, you will understand why Alaska projects are often misunderstood and why early decisions matter so much.

Slide 7 – Federal Trust Responsibility

The federal trust responsibility is often misunderstood. It is not something that turns on or off, and it is not “triggered” by a specific event. It is an **ongoing legal doctrine** that governs how federal agencies carry out actions that may affect Tribal interests.

The trust responsibility does not dictate specific outcomes or require agencies to reach a particular decision. Instead, it **constrains how federal discretion is exercised**. It requires agencies to act with a heightened degree of care, good faith, and attention when implementing statutes, making decisions, and weighing impacts that affect Tribes.

In practice, the trust responsibility influences:

- How statutes like NEPA, NHPA, and the ESA are interpreted and applied
- How agencies evaluate impacts to Tribal interests
- How consultation is conducted and documented, and
- How agency discretion is justified in the administrative record

Courts often look to the trust responsibility when assessing whether a federal agency acted reasonably, took Tribal concerns seriously, and meaningfully considered impacts, **not whether it agreed with Tribes**, but whether it fulfilled its fiduciary obligations in the decision-making process.

The key takeaway is this: The trust responsibility shapes the process, not the outcome, but it meaningfully raises the standard for how federal decisions affecting Tribes must be made.

Slide 8 – Federal and State Roles

DOT&PF is not a federal agency, but its actions can still have federal legal consequences. When a project has a federal nexus, such as federal funding, permits, or approvals, DOT&PF actions become part of the federal decision-making process. That is why early coordination matters legally, not just administratively, and why timing and sequencing matter even before FHWA signs anything. **The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is an operating administration within the U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT).**

Delegation is often misunderstood. FHWA may delegate certain procedural and administrative tasks to DOT&PF, but delegation does not transfer federal authority or federal legal accountability. The obligation remains federal.

In practice, DOT&PF may carry out the work, preparing studies, drafting NEPA documents, conducting surveys, coordinating consultations, compiling comments, developing alternatives, and maintaining the administrative record. DOT&PF may also implement decisions after federal approvals are complete.

What cannot be delegated is equally important. FHWA retains federal decision-making authority, compliance responsibility under NEPA, Section 106, Section 4(f), and other applicable federal laws, as well as the federal trust responsibility, APA accountability, and final approval authority unless specifically assigned by statute.

The simplest way to think about this is: FHWA can delegate the work, but it cannot delegate its responsibilities.

This matters in Alaska because delegation does not sever the federal nexus. Actions taken by DOT&PF under delegated authority can still trigger federal consultation obligations, which is why timing, early coordination, and documentation all matter.

If you remember one line from this slide: Delegable: analysis, documentation, procedural steps. Not delegable: federal authority, trust responsibility, or legal accountability.

Slide 9 – Federal Laws Commonly Triggered

These are just a few of the laws you may see in your work. Statutes are often treated as separate silos, but in practice they apply at the same time to the same project. Each statute has its own purpose, its own trigger, and its own timing rules. None of them substitute for the others.

- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) enacted 1969
- National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) enacted 1966
- Endangered Species Act (ESA) enacted 1973
- Clean Water Act (CWA) enacted 1972
- Section 4(f) of the U.S. Department of Transportation Act enacted 1966

Slide 10 – How These Laws Work Together

This is one of the most important legal points in this entire training: compliance with one federal law does not satisfy the requirements of another.

NEPA does not ‘cover’ NHPA, nor does it replace NHPA. Section 4(f) is not optional because NEPA was done well. They all operate independently.

Slide 11 – Role of ANCSA Corporations

ANCSA corporations enter this framework in a different way. The corporations are landowners, ROW grantors, and holders of legally protected property interests. Engagement with ANCSA corporations may be legally required in some contexts and strongly advisable in others, but it is not a substitute for Tribal consultation, and Tribal consultation is not optional because land is privately held.

Slide 12 – ANCSA Common Misconceptions

Many Alaska consultation errors stem from a category mistake: assuming that because ANCSA transferred land to Alaska Native Corporations, consultation obligations either disappeared or became purely “landowner outreach.” That is incorrect.

Tribal consultation obligations are driven by federal action that may affect Tribal interests, land ownership is not the trigger.

In addition, consultation with ANCSA corporations is required by law through a federal appropriations directives and is also strongly supported as best practice because ANCs are landowners, right-of-way grantors, and directly impacted regional institutions owned by Native Shareholders.

Consultation with ANCSA corporations is mandated through federal appropriations acts, beginning with the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2004, and reaffirmed in subsequent appropriations laws. The law directs all federal agencies to consult with Alaska Native Corporations *on the same basis as Tribes* in Alaska.

Slide 13 – Core Legal Principles

Across statutes, you’ll notice a common theme: timing.

NEPA prevents prejudgment. Prohibits actions that would limit reasonable alternatives before completing environmental review.

NHPA requires consultation before effects occur. Consultation must occur before actions that may affect historic properties. And so forth.

Different statutes, same warning: don't lock in decisions too early and pay attention to Tribes.

Although these statutes serve different purposes, they share a common timing principle. Across federal law, agencies are prohibited from taking actions that foreclose alternatives, commit resources irreversibly, or approve use of protected resources *before* required review and consultation are complete.

Different language, same legal warning: do not make decisions first and analyze later.

When projects run into trouble, it is almost always because this timing principle was violated, not because the agency failed to analyze impacts altogether.

Slide 14 – Effect-Causing Activities

Changes a resource - means changing the resource itself, physically altering or damaging a thing that is protected or valued.

Changes its setting - means changing the surroundings that give it meaning or altering the surrounding environment in a way that affects how the resource is experienced or understood.

Locks in choices - means taking actions that limit future choices, making certain alternatives or protections no longer realistic, or that later options are made unavailable.

Slide 15 – Effect-Causing Project Activities That May Affect Tribal Interests

You'll notice the phrase 'may affect' appears repeatedly across these statutes. That wording is intentional, and it's one of the most misunderstood parts of federal consultation law. This is where timing becomes important. Effect-causing activities are not just construction. They include clearing, access decisions, surveys, staging, and ROW actions. Temporary does not mean insignificant. Early does not mean exempt.

'May affect' is a deliberately low threshold. It does not require proof of impact. It does not require certainty. It exists to force early consideration, not late justification. You are not being asked to prove an effect, only to recognize when one may occur.

Waiting until an effect is confirmed is often too late from a legal standpoint. The statutes are designed to bring Tribes into the conversation early while options are still open, not after decisions have been made and locked in. You can remember it this way: 'may affect' is about precaution and timing, not evidence and certainty.

Another point that often gets overlooked is that consultation is not a one-time event. Federal consultation obligations continue as projects evolve. When new information arises, when project design changes, or when new effects become apparent, consultation must be reinitiated or expanded as appropriate. Silence doesn't equal closure, and the passage of time does not extinguish the consultation obligation.

This is especially important in Alaska, where phased work, seasonal access, and evolving project footprints are common. Legally, consultation follows the effects, not the schedule. If effects change, consultation must respond.

Slide 16 – Documentation and the Administrative Record

Now we shift from substance to review. Federal agencies are judged entirely on what is in the administrative record. *It's important to understand the administrative record not just as a documentation requirement, but as a legal constraint on agency authority.*

The Administrative Procedure Act, or APA, is the law that governs how federal agencies make decisions and how courts **review** those decisions. It doesn't tell agencies what outcome to reach, but it requires decisions to be reasoned, documented, and based on the information before the agency at the time.

Courts reviewing agency actions will ask whether the agency followed procedures, considered relevant information, and explained its reasoning - *or* whether the decision was arbitrary or capricious. This is why documentation is critical: if it isn't in the administrative record, it does not exist for legal review.

Only documented consultation and analysis are recognized in the record. Once a decision is challenged, courts look exclusively at the record. They do not consider explanations offered later, and they do not credit intentions that are not documented.

This means the record defines what the agency is legally allowed to defend. Again, if reasoning, consideration of Tribal input, or analysis is not in the record, it effectively does not exist for legal purposes.

Documentation is not about volume. It is about capturing the reasoning process while decisions are still being made.

Slide 17 – Documentation and Judicial Review

In summary, Courts do not ask whether the agency meant well. They ask three questions: what did you do, what did you consider, and why did you decide as you did. If the record doesn't answer those questions, the agency loses, even if consultation actually happened.

Slide 18 – Documentation Requirements

Documentation is not optional or discretionary. It is required by statute and enforced through judicial review. This is why post-hoc explanations don't work. They're not part of the record.

Slide 19 – Legally Sufficient Documentation

Sufficiency is about traceability. A reviewer must be able to follow the logic from Tribal input to agency decision.

Slide 20 – Documentation Deficiencies

Courts repeatedly reject vague summaries, boilerplate language, and records that omit Tribal concerns. Saying consultation 'occurred' is not documentation. In essence, it prevents a reviewer from tracing recorded reasoning.

Slide 21 – Tracing Agency Reasoning

To summarize, a defensible record tells a coherent story: information received, concerns raised, analysis conducted, decision made. Final decision supported by record

Slide 22 – What to Avoid

Most of these pitfalls come from treating consultation as a formality rather than a substantive legal requirement.

If this framework feels demanding, that is intentional. Federal consultation law is designed to force careful, early decision-making in a legally complex environment. It is meant to slow things down at the front end, so agencies do not lock in decisions, foreclose alternatives, or create legal risk later.

The takeaway is that effective consultation is not about avoiding delay, it is about **avoiding rework, conflict, and legal vulnerability** by engaging early and meaningfully.

Slide 23 – Raising Concerns

If something feels unclear, that's often a signal, not a delay. Consultation continues through project development and is **not a one-time event** and **must be reinitiated** when conditions

change, such as new effects, new information, or when project changes legally require re-initiation. Silence or passage of time does not diminish the obligation.

Slide 24 & 25 – Key Takeaways

Federal Tribal consultation law is not about slowing projects down. It's about making decisions that hold up over time, legally, institutionally, and in relationship with tribal communities.

Early engagement, correct timing, and clear documentation are what make projects durable.

I want to close by bringing us back to first principles. Federal Tribal consultation law is not an add-on to transportation projects, and it is not a courtesy extended at the end of a process. It is a structural part of how federal decisions are made when Tribal interests may be affected.

In Alaska, where land ownership and sovereignty do not align in the way they do in the Lower-48, that structure can feel counterintuitive. But the framework exists precisely because of that complexity. It is designed to force early attention, careful sequencing, and transparent decision-making, before options are foreclosed.

Federal law generally requires *meaningful consultation*. It does not, as a default rule, require agreement or concurrence. Final outcomes remain agency decisions unless a statute or agreement says otherwise. Consultation means listening, considering, and responding in good faith. It means Tribal input is seriously and reflected in decision-making.

This distinction matters in both directions. Agencies should not treat consultation as symbolic, but Tribes are also not being asked to approve every outcome. The law is designed to ensure informed decision-making, not to transfer decision authority wholesale. Understanding this boundary is critical to setting lawful expectations and documenting consultation accurately.

Most consultation failures do not come from bad intent. They come from decisions made too early, assumptions carried over from other contexts, or documentation that does not capture the agency's reasoning in real time. If you recognize when federal obligations attach, respect timing across statutes, and ensure consultation and analysis are documented as decisions are being made, you are doing what the law requires. That is how projects move forward in a way that is lawful, durable, and credible, to Tribes, to partner agencies, and to the public.

Slide 16 - Closing

Thank you for staying engaged through what is, by necessity, a dense legal framework. This material isn't light, but it matters, and the fact that you've stayed with it speaks to the seriousness with which DOT&PF approaches its responsibilities. I appreciate the time and attention today, and I'm always happy to stay in contact to answer questions or talk through how this framework might show up in real projects. Thank you.