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INTERSTATE 73 STUDY AREA NARROWED DOWN

Zane Wilson The Sun News

COLUMBIA The study area for the route of Interstate 73 shrank by more than half Thursday to avoid major environmental resources such as the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge.

The change was prompted by concerns about the refuge and other river floodplains expressed by federal agencies and organizations such as the Coastal Conservation League.

John Walsh, S.C. Department of Transportation's project manager for I-73, said taking those areas out of consideration removes the threat of holding up the project and allows the agency and its consultants to work faster in a smaller area.

The environmental studies and proposed route for I-73 are projected for completion in three years, with construction to begin as soon afterward as possible.

I-73 is planned to connect Detroit and Myrtle Beach, with a 90-mile leg in South Carolina that will cost about \$2 billion.

"We feel this is a step in the right direction," said Nancy Cave, the Charleston-based conservation league's north coast field representative. "This is much better news than what it might have been."

The conservation league said a year ago, after a feasibility study on I-73 was released, that the wildlife refuge and other sensitive areas along the Great Pee Dee River basin should be left out of the equation.

David Farren, an attorney with the Chapel Hill, N.C.-based Southern Environmental Law Center, also praised the move.

"I think that they made a very important, positive step, but we're not out of the woods yet," Farren said.

Walsh said the change was proposed after Bob Lee, the Federal Highway Administration's S.C. manager, and S.C. DOT Director Betty Mabry met with federal agency officials in Atlanta last month.

Those groups included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Agency, which manages national wildlife refuges and did not want to see Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge disturbed if it could be avoided.

“It was one of their concerns, and we were trying to alleviate those concerns,” Lee said.

The proposed study area always starts out larger than it finishes, Lee said.

Walsh said the DOT picked the study area because the agency thought it best matched the congressional order on where the road should be.

He said he welcomes the smaller area because “the limited resources we have will be more focused.”

The DOT is spending \$3 million on the study, which is being conducted by consultants led by LPA Group of Columbia.

The group also did the environmental studies for Carolina Bays Parkway.

Cave and Farren said their organizations will continue to monitor the road planning to ensure it is environmentally sensitive.

“The feasibility study was quite alarming,” Farren said, because of suggested routes through the refuge, as well as one that came to an end without connecting with any existing roads.

The conservation groups say such a route, to the south of U.S. 501, would create the need for another new road that would cross the Waccamaw River. The Coastal Conservation League and Southern Environmental Law Center want I-73 to connect with S.C. 22, also known as the Conway Bypass.

That would save taxpayers money, as well as time, in getting environmental permits, Farren said.

Walsh said the next step for the road project is publishing an official notice in the Federal Register of intent to study the route.

That should happen within the month and, in about two months, meetings are expected to begin that will consider agency and resident comments about what should be included in the study.

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