



Highlights of [GAO-03-398](#), a report to the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works

## Why GAO Did This Study

Constructing, improving, and repairing roads is fundamental to meeting the nation's mobility needs. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) supplies most of the money (about \$20 billion in fiscal year 2003), and state departments of transportation are primarily responsible for completing projects. Many federal and state agencies (called resource agencies) help ensure that environmental and other concerns are considered. These and other organizations have recognized that the time it takes to complete complex federally funded highway projects is too long—in some cases nearly 20 years.

GAO was asked to report the views of knowledgeable officials on the most promising approaches for reducing completion time for federally funded highway projects. GAO obtained the views of 33 officials from federal, state, and private organizations with interests in federally funded roads.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FHWA consider the benefits of the 13 most promising approaches and take actions needed to foster more widespread adoption of those that appear to be the most cost effective. While not commenting on the recommendation, the Department of Transportation generally agreed that these approaches represent opportunities to reduce project completion time.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-398](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-398).

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or [siggerudk@gao.gov](mailto:siggerudk@gao.gov).

# HIGHWAY INFRASTRUCTURE

## Perceptions of Stakeholders on Approaches to Reduce Highway Project Completion Time

### What GAO Found

Respondents from 33 organizations identified 13 approaches as most promising for reducing the time it takes to plan, design, gain approval for, and build a federally funded highway project. These approaches fell into three areas:

- Improving project management.** Most approaches (8 of 13) focused on state-level activities that could be conducted earlier than customary, with 90 percent of respondents indicating that establishing early partnerships and early coordination among all project stakeholders is highly important to reducing project completion time. Other approaches included added flexibility for states in determining impacts on historic properties and imposing time limits on environmental reviews.
- Delegating environmental review and permitting authority.** Between half and two-thirds of the respondents indicated that utilizing programmatic agreements between transportation and resource agencies to address commonly occurring issues, unifying overall environmental assessments with reviews of project impacts on wetlands, and creating large banks of wetlands to replace those lost at highway project sites offered significant promise for reducing project completion time.
- Improving agency staffing and skills.** Nearly 60 percent of the respondents indicated that using interagency funding agreements in which state departments of transportation can ensure timely attention to environmental reviews of their projects by funding staff at federal or state resource agencies offered significant promise to reduce project completion time. About half of the respondents told us that adequate training of transportation staff on the requirements of all steps in completing a highway project was also a promising approach.

For the most part, the respondents were not able to estimate how much time adopting one or more of these approaches might save. Respondents' views varied both within similar types of organizations (such as state departments of transportation) and across lines of responsibility or interest. Generally, agencies and other organizations with primary responsibilities for or interests in building and funding highways ranked certain approaches higher than did agencies and associations with a primary focus on resource issues, and vice versa. Nonetheless, most of the 13 most promising approaches had widespread support across organizations.

Although some of these approaches are in use across the country, respondents acknowledged that the usefulness of these approaches could vary by the type of project or community values. For example, projects that are not complex or contentious would not necessarily achieve the time savings that these approaches afford for projects with complex characteristics or disagreement among stakeholders.