

The Western Regional Corridor Study: A History

by Carl Barnett and Michael G. Clayton

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The first article of this series appeared in the August 1991 issue of *Right of Way*. It provided an overview of the Western Regional Corridor Study (WRCS) from early corridor planning efforts in the mid-1970s to the updated study which will be completed in June of 1992. This second article focuses on the regulatory events and industry efforts leading up to the 1980 and 1986 editions of the corridor study. The results of those studies will also be highlighted. Two more articles on the corridor study will appear in future issues of *Right of Way*:

- "The 1990 Western Regional Corridor Study Process," will describe the comprehensive and cooperative efforts that are currently underway to prepare the 1992 report.
- "Key Findings of the 1990 Western Regional Corridor Study," will address the results of the updated study, the anticipated follow-up activities within industry and federal planning agencies, and a proposal to maintain a current corridor study.

CORRIDOR PLANNING IN THE 1970s

Beginning in the mid-1970s, conservation organizations, federal agencies, and the utility industry recognized the need to establish a planned, interconnected, regional corridor

system in the western United States. This need was based on increases in population growth, industrial relocation and the constraints placed on the siting of new energy production facilities. The corridor system would accommodate growth in energy transmission facilities in a planned, efficient manner that would minimize adverse environmental impacts while allowing logical and efficient development of energy transmission systems.

The most definitive publication on corridor planning during this period was the U.S. Department of the Interior's (DOI) "The Need for a National System of Transportation and Utility Corridors." The DOI's report, published July 1, 1975, was completed as directed by Section 28(s) of the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920, and as amended in 1973. Section 28(s) provides:

"In order to minimize adverse environmental impacts and to prevent the proliferation of separate rights of way across federal lands, the Secretary (of the Interior) shall, in consultation with other federal and state agencies, review the need for a national system of transportation and utility corridors across federal lands and submit a report of his findings to Congress and the President by July 1, 1975."

The DOI study focuses on lands west of the 100th meridian and considered two types of corridors:

- Joint-use Corridors—narrow, fixed boundary corridors containing several linear rights of way for different facilities, and
- Planning Corridors—expansive corridors with flexible, undefined boundaries. Unlike joint-use corridors, planning corridors are a product of area or regional land use plans.

The DOI study concluded that:

- Establishment of a national system of joint-use corridors was not feasible. Joint-use corridors were considered too inflexible to accommodate conceptual and long-range planning.
- Establishment of planning corridors, however, was both feasible and would encourage consolidation of separate rights of way lessening overall adverse environmental effects.
- A system of planning corridors could not be implemented at that time (1975) because of insufficient information to make informed decisions on where and how corridors should be designated. DOI made several suggestions:
- Federal agencies should be directed to identify and reserve planning corridors across federal lands. Specific rights of way would be located on a project-specific basis at a later date
- Federal land management agencies should develop a regional environmental data base in cooperation with state agencies, utilities and concerned organizations to evaluate proposed or projected corridor needs.

The DOI study has clear implications for utilities and the utility plan-



ning process. Federal land management agencies expect to be active participants in the utility route selection process. Public participation in decisions affecting route selection also needs to be anticipated. Such public involvement will likely lead to increased project review and approval periods. Although the relocation of existing facilities into corridors was not envisioned, it was believed that the proliferation of separate rights of way should be discouraged. If implemented as policy, corridor designation would encourage utilities to establish new facilities near existing rights of way if the agency opinion determined that environmental and economic costs were competitive with a separate routing.

Congress recognized the findings of the DOI study by incorporating nearly identical language from the Mineral Leasing Act, Section 28(s) into the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA). FLPMA, Section 503, goes beyond the stated goal of preventing "the proliferation of separate rights of way" by encouraging the Secretary (Agriculture and Interior) to "issue regulations containing criteria and procedures for designating (transportation and utility) corridors." Further, Congress conferred necessary authority to the appropriate Secretary to design-

nate existing corridors "without further review." FLPMA's Section 103 and Title II defines rights of way as a "principal or major use" of federal lands, and requires their consideration in the land use planning process. The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 establishes similar requirements for forest plans. As noted in the 1975 DOI study, planning for specific, rigidly defined corridors is infeasible without project specific information. The appropriate tool is the planning corridor, in which several specific, compatible rights of way could be located.

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1977 - THE WESTERN UTILITY GROUP

In 1977, the Western Utility Group (WUG) was formed as an ad hoc organization of representatives from primarily investor-owned electric, gas, water and communication utilities which were based in the western United States and provided for approximately 75 percent of the West's energy and communication needs. The primary focus of WUG is to support federal land use planning efforts and to assist in the development of a constructive approach to energy and telecommunication facility regulation. WUG positions are formulated by consensus, using the "hands on" experience and multidisciplinary composition of its membership. Member companies are not constrained by WUG positions and frequently express individual points of view.

THE 1980 WESTERN REGIONAL CORRIDOR STUDY

By 1979, wilderness study areas and other restrictive land uses were being developed. Also at this time was the advent of the first federal land use plans. Many of the first land use plans did not address the issue of utility corridors as outlined in Section 503 of FLPMA. WUG recognized that these federal land use designations and the lack of utility corridor designation in the federal land planning process could preclude the utility industry's ability to maintain an energy and communication transmission system. WUG approached the DOI and the Forest Service with these concerns. In response, WUG was requested to provide the federal agencies with the necessary data documenting the utility industry's

corridor needs.

In 1980, WUG organized a broader based organization referred to as the Western Regional Corridor Study Committee. Included in the committee were public and private electric utilities, pipeline companies, communication companies and railroads. The purpose of the committee was to coordinate a regional inventory of the corridor needs of over 100 federal right-of-way users. The organizations involved in the study had vital concerns in energy transportation, communications expansion and upgrading, or raw materials and manufactured commodities.

The resulting 1980 Western Regional Corridor Study, as that inventory is known, demonstrated the need to balance competing uses and develop public policy allowing alter-

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natives for uses precluded or foreclosed by statutory constraint, reviewing policy through public disclosure and commentary, and improving land management policy through the land planning process. Corridor users, whether electric lines or gas, coal slurry or oil pipelines, were considered vulnerable to policy differences among planning units and agencies. The most advantageous planning perspective, as the 1980 study reported, was a regional one.

The 1980 report was distributed to virtually all administrative units of the BLM and Forest Service throughout the 11 Western states. The pri-

Specifically, the WUG encouraged joint federal land management agency and industry regional corridor planning to promote inter-jurisdictional corridor continuity.


WUG continued to promote regional corridors as a land use that must be considered in federal land use plans. WUG believed that policies, guidelines, and standards for corridor designation needed to be consistent on a regional basis to successfully implement the FLPMA mandate of encouraging corridors by discouraging the proliferation of separate rights of way.

a multitude of interpretations of Congressional intent, priority and need concerning corridor planning. Within the federal land management agencies, a patchwork of corridor policy had developed, ranging from the designation of corridors to the non-consideration of corridors. The 1986 study reiterated previous industry concerns: "Corridors must be designated on a regional network basis. Management directives assuring this must be established and incorporated in all land use plans."

THE 1990 UPDATE

In mid-1990, it became apparent to WUG that an updated study was necessary. There were many factors influencing this decision. Changes in demographics and new technologies coupled with the loss of potential utility corridors due to legislation, restrictive regulations and federal land management decisions had made the 1986 corridor study obsolete. In addition, the increased planning activities and plan reviews by both the BLM and the Forest Service evidenced the need for an updated corridor study.

PART THREE: THE PROCESS

The third in this series of articles will appear in an upcoming issue of *Right Of Way*. That article will describe the cooperative process used to prepare the 1990 Western Regional Corridor Study. The article will include the schedule for completion and availability of the final report. It will also discuss the program that is being established to maintain a current corridor study as well as provide opportunity for industry and government participation. 

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mary goals of the report were to establish utility and transportation corridors as an issue in federal plans, thereby reaffirming congressional intent and direction, providing base data locating corridors on a regional perspective, and identifying local industry coordinators to contact for further information. The 1980 study provided individual state maps depicting both existing and proposed corridors.

1980 TO 1985

In 1981, then Vice President George Bush requested individuals, organizations and agencies to identify regulations that "could be changed ... to increase benefits or decrease costs ... generating net benefits overall." WUG identified certain regulations and made specific reform suggestions believed to be consistent with legislative direction and the objectives of the president's task force on regulatory relief. One of the issues addressed by WUG was corridor designation. Although WUG filed comments supporting most planning regulation changes, it did recommend certain modifications to allow for future energy resource planning.

THE 1986 WESTERN REGIONAL CORRIDOR STUDY

In 1985, WUG determined that it was necessary to provide a status report on corridor planning efforts, to refine and restate the corridor concept, to update the 1980 corridor network data, and to place more emphasis on the regional aspects of utility corridors. The result was entitled the 1986 Western Regional Corridor Study.

The 1986 study depicted the regional network of occupied and unoccupied corridors on individual state maps. A federal agency plan status was also included to demonstrate the differing corridor policies and lack of corridor designation in federal land management agency land use and resource management planning documents.

The 1986 study illustrated problems that were encountered on the way to implementing the regional corridor infrastructure envisioned by the 1975 DOI report and required by Congress. This infrastructure was fully supported by WUG and other federal land users. Delegation and dispersal of responsibility had led to