

Try to imagine life without interstate highways. Cities would be grossly overcrowded, the burden of transporting goods would create higher prices, and cross-country road trips would be much more expensive and time consuming. Fortunately, we don't have these worries today. Well, maybe cities are overpopulated (or overcrowded) and the cost of just about everything seems unreasonably high, but at least you can get in your car and drive from Maine to California, assuming you've taken out a second mortgage to cover gas costs.

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Interstate highways have significantly impacted the quality of life for people in the United States; and this year, they turn the big 5-0.

In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act (also known as the National Interstate and Defense Highway Act), establishing a formal interstate highway system. In addition to enhancing national security, President Eisenhower hoped the Act would create new jobs and other opportunities for economic development. The Act did just that, and more. Today, interstate highways are connecting communities and giving people access to occupational, commercial, and recreational opportunities that were not realized 50 years ago.

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Although the conveniences provided by interstate highways are undeniable, an increasing number of community members are opposing interstate construction projects. The reasons for this opposition vary, but a primary concern is the impact interstate projects have on the environment. The most obvious impacts are those with immediate effects, including impacts to cultural and natural resources as well as air, water, and noise pollution. One of the more significant long-term impacts that is difficult to resolve results from vehicle-wildlife collisions. These events not only take a significant toll on wildlife, but they also incur a large number of insurance claims and the loss of human life. As linear disturbances in the landscape, highways can also significantly disrupt surface and groundwater hydrology, impacting wetlands, degrading water quality, and increasing the scouring of stream channels.

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Unfortunately, the population continues to rise, and there are no signs that the demand for the speedy transit that interstate highways provide will stop any time soon. For years now, it has been necessary for planners to address environmental concerns while exploring ways to build highways in the most environmentally responsible way possible. Over 35 years ago, specific legislation was passed to minimize the adverse impacts of transportation and other projects in the United States. In 1969, Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which requires those involved in federally sponsored projects to: 1) consider the environmental ramifications of their proposed actions and alternatives to those actions, 2) integrate those considerations into their decision making processes, and 3) prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) for every action that would significantly impact the human environment. In addition to NEPA, transportation project managers may find their projects subject to a wide range of other environmental regulations, such as the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Compliance with these regulations is essential for successful project planning and implementation.

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