



U.S. Department of Transportation
**Federal Highway
Administration**

Finding of No Significant Impact

SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River

TxDOT CSJ Number(s): 0214-03-035, 0214-03-032, 0214-03-037

LADOTD Project Number: H.000986

LA State Project No. H.000986

Newton County, Texas and Vernon Parish, Louisiana

September 2025

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has determined that the construction on new location of the SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River (Bridge) will not have a significant impact on the human or natural environment. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Preferred Alternative is based on the final Environmental Assessment (EA) for the SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River bridge replacement project in accordance with 23 Code of Federal Register (CFR) §771.119 and §771.121. The draft EA was approved for further processing by FHWA, and subsequently a Notice of Availability and Public Hearing was published in the Leesville Leader on June 23 and July 14, 2023, and East Texas Banner on June 28, July 5, and July 12, 2023. The Public Hearing was held in two locations – one in Louisiana and one in Texas – on July 25 and July 27, 2023, respectively.

Based on the results of the Public Hearing, the draft EA was revised and submitted as a final EA to FHWA with all appropriate response(s) to comments. The final EA was independently evaluated by FHWA and was determined to have accurately discussed the need, purpose, alternatives, environmental issues, impacts of the proposed SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River project, public input and appropriate mitigation measures. These documents provided sufficient evidence and analysis for determining that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required. Finally, the final EA is incorporated by reference into this decisional document.

2.0 PROJECT BACKGROUND

The existing bridge is a two-way bridge with two 11-foot-wide travel lanes and a bridge deck that is 23.7 feet wide. The existing right-of-way (ROW) width varies from 120 to 150 feet on the Texas side (SH 63) and varies from 130 to 180 feet on the Louisiana side (LA 8). The bridge's vertical clearance is 12-feet 3-inches. This clearance height is below the mandatory 14-foot vertical clearance for all bridges in the United States (U.S.) and is also below the 18.5-foot vertical clearance requirements for Texas Highway Freight Network bridges (the bridge is located on the Texas Highway Freight Network). The existing bridge is load posted for a weight limit of 49,000 pounds gross and 29,000 pounds tandem.

The existing SH 63/LA 8 Bridge is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and carries two-way vehicular traffic over the Sabine River via SH 63 in Texas and LA 8 in Louisiana. Since the original construction of the bridge, the river channel has widened through natural migration by approximately 75 feet on the bridge's west side and 60 feet on the east side, with historic evidence indicating that the main channel of the Sabine River will continue to migrate towards the west. The continued migration of the river poses a threat to the bridge's west approach span foundations, which were not designed to be within a waterway.

The proposed project (recommended build alternative) will replace the existing SH 63/LA 8 bridge at the Sabine River through the construction of new approach roadways and a new bridge structure. The proposed approach roadways will include one relief bridge at a crossing of wetlands and low areas in the Sabine River floodplain. The proposed project is approximately 2.9 miles in length. The western limit (in Texas) is approximately 0.88 mile west of the proposed bridge or 0.16 mile west of County Road (CR) 2119. The eastern project limit (in Louisiana) is approximately 1.43 miles east of the proposed bridge or 0.12 mile east of LA 111.

The current existing ROW extends from 120 to 180 feet in width and the existing roadway approach contains two 10.5-foot-wide lanes. The proposed ROW along SH 63/LA 8 will extend 116 to 240 feet in width and will contain two 12-foot-wide lanes, two 10-foot-wide shoulders, and will include 30-foot-wide clear zone on each side of the pavement. Proposed ROW for cross streets and connectors includes 50- to 75-foot-wide ROW with two 12-foot-wide lanes, two 1-foot-wide shoulders, and two 10-foot-wide clear zones. The proposed ROW diverges from the existing ROW near the intersection of SH 63 and CR 2119 in Texas and proceeds on new ROW in both Texas and Louisiana. The proposed bridge will be 46 feet wide with two 12-foot-wide travel lanes and two 10-foot-wide outside shoulders.

Based on the bridge's current condition, dimensions, and location, the project is needed because the bridge has a current sufficiency rating of 45.3 out of 100.

The purpose of the proposed project (Build Alternative) is to provide a structurally sound bridge crossing that allows access for Texas and Louisiana motorists across the Sabine River. The project will focus on providing a bridge at a location with stable riverbanks, where river migration is not anticipated during the service life of the proposed bridge, and with adequate width and height to safely accommodate existing and foreseeable future transportation needs.

The project was developed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, FHWA Environmental Impact and Related Procedures (23 CFR 771), Public Involvement Rules (43 TAC Chapter 2), and other related federal and state requirements.

The final EA was prepared to identify the environmental impacts of this project, and subsequently for FHWA to determine whether an EIS was required or whether the EA was sufficient. After a hard look by an interdisciplinary team, FHWA determined that, under 23 CFR 771.115 (a), this project is not classified as an EIS action that significantly affects the environment.

3.0 REVIEW OF THE EA

As noted above, after the Public Hearing, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LADOTD) updated and finalized the EA for FHWA approval. No major changes or revision were necessitated as a result of public comments. The final EA considered and analyzed the potential community, economic, and environmental impacts related to the proposed improvements. Specifically, the EA studied the potential impacts associated with the Build and No Build Alternatives.

The potential impacts studied included reasonably foreseeable effects that include the direct and indirect impacts of the project. Direct effects are caused by an action and occur at the same time and place. Indirect effects are caused by an action and occur later in time or farther removed in distance but are still reasonably foreseeable and may include growth-inducing effects and other effects related to induced changes in the pattern of land use, population density or growth rate, and related effects on air and water and other natural systems, including ecosystems.

As a result of the analysis process, described in detail in Section 4.0 of the final EA, two alternatives were studied: the Build and No Build Alternatives. The No Build Alternative assumed no improvements to the existing Bridge and did not address the anticipated river migration or substandard sufficiency rating. This alternative did not meet the need and purpose of the proposed project.

The Build Alternative meets the purpose and need of the project, meets current design standards, meets horizontal and vertical clearance needs, provides a stable crossing of the river, and has crash-rated railing. TxDOT and LADOTD, in cooperation with FHWA (both Texas and Louisiana Divisions), have recommended the approval of the Build Alternative, as discussed below.

The Build Alternative will construct a new bridge over the Sabine River with new approach roadways. The new bridge will cross the Sabine River approximately 1,825 feet downstream (south) of the existing river crossing, in an area identified as having stable riverbanks. To accommodate the new bridge location, the proposed approach roadways will diverge south from the existing SH 63 alignment near its intersection with CR 2119 (in Texas) and will re-connect with the existing LA 8 alignment near its intersection with LA 111 (in Louisiana). The proposed bridge and approach roadways will consist of two 12-foot-wide travel lanes (one in each direction) and two 10-foot-wide shoulders with 30-foot-wide clear zones on each side of the road. The proposed ROW along the new SH 63/LA 8 alignment will vary from 116 to 240 feet wide. Both the proposed Sabine River bridge and relief bridge will be designed to meet current American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), TxDOT, and LADOTD criteria. The design life for these structures will be 75 years per AASHTO Load Resistance Factor Design (LRFD) Bridge Design Specifications. Both bridges will have slab and girder superstructures, which have no overhead components, and therefore have no vertical clearance restrictions. The project will require approximately 77 acres of new ROW, much of which will be from timber farms. The total project length is 2.9 miles along the proposed new alignment. The project would acquire approximately 32 acres of new ROW in Texas and 44.11 acres in Louisiana.

The proposed Sabine River bridge will be 8,045 feet long and 46 feet wide, with three main spans at the river crossing and 69 approach spans. For the three main spans, each bent will consist of six 48-inch diameter drilled shafts overlain with a 31-foot by 45-foot concrete seal slab, 21-foot by 35-foot concrete footing, and 4-foot by 18-foot oval concrete column. Each approach span bent will consist of six 24-inch square prestressed concrete piles (to be driven). One relief bridge will be constructed over wetlands and low areas in the Sabine River floodplain west of the proposed Sabine River bridge. The relief bridge will be 896 feet long and 46 feet wide, with eight spans each supported by six 24-inch square prestressed concrete piles (to be driven). No relocations or displacements will occur as a result of the project.

The existing SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River is listed on the NRHP, and the Build Alternative includes the demolition of the NRHP-listed bridge, which is a Section 4(f) property. TxDOT and LADOTD have determined that the Build Alternative will have an adverse effect under Section 106 to the NRHP-listed bridge, and the Texas and Louisiana SHPOs concurred with this determination. As a result, TxDOT and LADOTD were required to complete a Historic Bridge Programmatic Section 4(f) Evaluation. Additionally, as an NRHP-listed bridge, it is a designated historic property that is subject to Chapter 26 of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Code

(PWC), which requires a Public Hearing to be held with certain notification requirements. This requirement was met.

No habitat for threatened or endangered federally listed species was identified within or adjacent to the proposed project area. However, the project area contains suitable habitat for the alligator snapping turtle (AST) (*Macrochelys temminckii*), which is proposed by USFWS to be listed as a federally threatened. A habitat assessment was conducted in July 2023 that determined the proposed project activities will not result in direct AST mortality; therefore, the project does not meet the threshold for conferencing with USFWS. If the AST is listed during the life of this project, the impacts to AST will be reevaluated to determine the appropriate course of action, which may include consultation with USFWS.

One federal candidate species, the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), is found statewide in a variety of habitats including native prairies, pastures, open woodlands and savannas, desert scrub, roadsides, and other habitats with nectar producing plants. Based on aerial imagery and the September 2020 field visit, the vegetation in the project area is described primarily as forested habitat. In addition, non-forested areas of the project area are heavily disturbed by plowing or mowing and contain only short grasses, and no milkweeds were observed. Therefore, it was determined there was not suitable habitat within the project area for the monarch butterfly, and therefore there will be no effect or take.

Suitable habitat for tricolored bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*) is present within the project area, and the project may affect the species. The tricolored bat has been proposed as a federally endangered species and consultation with the USFWS is not required at this time. If the species is listed, consultation with the USFWS will be conducted.

The Texas heelsplitter (*Potamilus amphichaenus*) is proposed as a federally endangered species and Louisiana pigtoe (*Pleurobema riddellii*) is proposed as a federally threatened species. The project area contains suitable habitat for the Texas heelsplitter and Louisiana pigtoe; therefore, the proposed project activities may impact the species. As a result of the potential for impact, a Qualitative Mussel Survey was conducted in July 2023, and results were recorded in a technical memorandum dated December 26, 2023. No mussels, valves, or valve fragments were observed during the site visit. Based on the Qualitative Mussel Survey, TxDOT coordinated with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) in August 2023 to request a waiver for quantitative mussel survey requirements. Through this coordination, TxDOT agreed to perform a quantitative survey in Winter 2024 prior to any construction on the site. A survey was conducted from October 1 through 3, 2024, and no state-listed or federal candidate species were observed or relocated; therefore, no further action is needed. If, during construction, the Texas heelsplitter and/or Louisiana pigtoe are found, a conference opinion with USFWS will be completed.

In addition, Best Management Practices (BMPs) will be implemented to avoid impacts, where possible, including TPWD's Aquatic Amphibian and Reptile, Bat, Bird, Dewatering, Fish, General Design and Construction, Stream Crossing, Terrestrial Amphibian and Reptile, Freshwater Mussel, Vegetation, and Water Quality BMPs. In addition, TxDOT will use barrier Amphibian and Reptile Exclusion Fence (AREF) to direct animal movements away from construction activities and areas of potential wildlife-vehicle collisions in construction areas directly adjacent, or that may directly impact, potential habitat for the target species. All BMPs

will be documented in the detailed design phase as appropriate for compliant implementation. Wildlife BMPs implemented in accordance with the 2021 TxDOT-TPWD Memorandum of Understanding will minimize potential impacts to species in both the Texas and Louisiana portions of the project.

The Build Alternative will involve regulated activity in jurisdictional waters and therefore will require authorization under Section 404. There are potential permanent impacts to waters of the U.S., including approximately 14.21 acres of palustrine forested, scrub-shrub, and emergent wetlands. TxDOT is proposing to compensate for wetland impacts totaling approximately 14.21 acres by securing mitigation bank credits. Since the wetland impacts will occur in Texas and Louisiana, TxDOT is proposing to secure credits from two mitigation banks: TxDOT's Blue Elbow Swamp Mitigation Bank in Texas and the Phillips Creek Mitigation Bank in Louisiana. Due to proposed impacts to jurisdictional waters, the project requires a standard permit under Section 404. An application for a standard permit was submitted to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) on March 14, 2024.

The Sabine River is a navigable waterway and is subject to the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) jurisdiction. Pursuant to compliance with Section 9 of the Rivers and Harbors Act, FHWA initiated coordination on July 24, 2020 with the USCG providing notification of the proposed project. On July 27, 2020, the USCG responded in a letter stating that the project meets the criteria for the Surface Transportation Assistance Act and qualifies for exemption from USCG bridge permit requirements. Further, TxDOT and LADOTD coordinated with the USCG regarding navigational lighting in an August 14, 2020 letter, which the USCG responded to on August 17, 2020. The USCG also determined that the proposed project was exempt from USCG navigational lighting requirements.

More than 1 acre of land will be disturbed during construction of the proposed project; therefore, water quality impacts will be minimized with the use of erosion controls such as silt fences and rock berms. As such, a Notice of Intent (NOI) will be filed and a Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SW3P) will be implemented as part of Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) requirements.

As noted above, the final EA examined the impacts of the project and identified project effects on land use due to the current forecasted pace of development in the area. The EA concluded:

1. The Build Alternative is the recommended Preferred Alternative for the SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River bridge replacement project.
2. The Build Alternative meets the need and purpose of the project with the least amount of impacts to the resource areas.
3. The proposed project will have no significant impacts on the quality of the human or natural environment.
4. TxDOT in cooperation with LADOTD, recommended a FONSI for the Bridge project.

The recommendation for the selection of the Build Alternative resulted from an interdisciplinary process that involved the public and close coordination with various federal, state, and local government agencies.

4.0 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement is an integral and critical component of the NEPA project development process. The public involvement team for the SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River project included representatives from LADOTD, TxDOT, FHWA, and TxDOT consultants. The process included consultation with and the participation and involvement of FHWA, and its cooperating agencies.

4.1 Public Meeting

Due to the rural nature of the project area, TxDOT and LADOTD determined that the use of an online engagement tool, called MetroQuest, was a valuable tool to solicit input from members of the public. From November 2, 2018, to January 4, 2019, TxDOT and LADOTD solicited public input on the Bridge Options and Route Alternatives being considered for the bridge project via MetroQuest. TxDOT and LADOTD notified members of the public about the MetroQuest survey via email blasts, newspaper advertisements, TxDOT's website, and TxDOT's social media accounts (such as Twitter). TxDOT and LADOTD also had an Online Engagement Station at the December 2018 Public Meeting, where attendees could complete the MetroQuest survey with technical assistance from staff. LADOTD also posted about the survey on their website. This outreach effort overlapped with the in-person Public Meeting.

TxDOT, LADOTD, and FHWA held a Public Meeting in Leesville, Louisiana on December 11, 2018 to present the Bridge Options and Route Alternatives. The purpose of this Public Meeting was to solicit public input on the Bridge Options and Route Alternatives. The meeting was held in person to allow the public the opportunity to view the proposed project alternatives, discuss with TxDOT, LADOTD, and FHWA personnel, and provide comments. The public meeting notices were published in English and Korean. Translation services were available upon request.

4.2 Public Hearing

A Notice for Public Hearing was published in the Leesville Leader in Louisiana on June 23 and July 14, 2023, and East Texas Banner on June 28, July 5, and July 12, 2023. The Public Hearing was held in two locations – one in Louisiana and one in Texas – on July 25 and July 27, 2023, respectively. The notices were published in English and Korean. Translation services were available upon request. Both TxDOT and LADOTD responded to public comments. On September 6, 2023, TxDOT signed a Public Hearing Certification. Comments were satisfactorily addressed in the Public Hearing Summary Documentation.

5.0 MITIGATION/COMMITMENTS

The design and construction of the SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River will incorporate measures to avoid, minimize and mitigate harm to the environment, as described below. Please see attached Environmental Permits, Issues, and Commitments (EPIC) Sheet, attached to this document, for further detail.

Water Resources: The proposed project requires compliance with Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) and Sections 9 and 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act (RHA). Based on anticipated impacts, the proposed project requires a Standard Permit from USACE. Compensatory mitigation is proposed. Coordination with USCG for a Section 9 bridge

exemption was completed. Since the project will disturb 1 or more acres of land, a Texas Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (TPDES) permit will be required, along with a NOI to the TCEQ, a Louisiana Pollutant Discharge Elimination Systems (LPDES) Construction General Permit (CGP) from the LDEQ will also be required. The plans and specifications will include an SW3P. BMPs will be incorporated in the construction plans to minimize potential sedimentation effects in the storm water system. These measures will be in place before construction begins and will be inspected on a regular basis.

Additionally, TxDOT will coordinate with the Sabine River Authority (SRA) to provide Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) location coordinates of the new bridge at center channel and to update the sampling station to the new bridge. Additionally, TxDOT will provide SRA with advanced notice regarding any restrictions in accessing the existing bridge and provide construction updates.

TCEQ/LDEQ 401 Certification: The project requires compliance with TCEQ's Water Quality Certification Program for Tier I projects (those that affect less than 1,500 linear feet of stream and/or 3 acres of waters of the U.S.) and LDEQ's requirements as listed in the Water Quality Certification that was issued. This includes incorporating water quality BMPs (erosion, sedimentation, and post-construction total suspended solids) in the project Environmental Permits, Issues and Commitments (EPIC) sheet.

Floodplains: The proposed project includes work within the 100-year floodplain; therefore, coordination with the local floodplain administrator is required.

Biological Resources: TPWD-recommended BMPs that will be applied to this project are provided in Section 8.1 and 8.2 of the EA and will also be included in the EPIC sheet. The project area contains suitable habitat for the AST, which is proposed by USFWS to be listed as a federally threatened. If the AST is listed during the life of this project, the impacts to AST will be reevaluated to determine the appropriate course of action, which may include consultation with USFWS. If, during construction, the Texas heelsplitter and/or Louisiana pigtoe are found, a conference opinion with USFWS will be completed. Suitable habitat for tricolored bat is present within the project area, and the project may affect the species. The tricolored bat has been proposed as a federally endangered species and consultation with the USFWS is not required at this time. If the species is listed, consultation with the USFWS will be conducted.

SW3P: The contractor will comply with final BMPs outlined in the Storm Water Management Program.

Historic Resources: TxDOT and LADOTD have made commitments to complete Section 106 mitigation prior to construction contract close-out. These include:

- Creation and erection of an educational kiosk/signage regarding the bridge and its history at an existing roadside park along SH 63 approximately 2 miles west of the SH 63/LA 8 bridge.
- The Texas State-shaped Centennial Marker would be relocated from its current location at the existing bridge's western approach to the aforementioned roadside park.

- Adjacent to the Centennial Marker at its current location are two Official Texas Historical Markers (OTHMs). TxDOT will complete the THC forms to relocate the OTHMs to the same roadside park.
- TxDOT would work with the Vernon Parish Tourism and Recreation Commission to curate a museum exhibit in Leesville, LA at the Museum of West Louisiana.

Archeological Resources: In the event unanticipated archeological deposits are discovered during construction, work will cease in the immediate area and TXDOT and LADOTD will be contacted to initiate post-review discovery procedures, if required.

Vegetation: BMPs related to vegetation are included in Section 8.2 of the final EA and are also included in the EPIC.

Hazardous Materials: The proposed project includes the potential demolition of a bridge. The structure may contain asbestos containing materials. Asbestos inspections, specifications, notification, license, accreditation, abatement and disposal, as applicable, will comply with the federal and state regulations. Asbestos issues will be addressed during the ROW acquisition process prior to construction. Bridge structures being demolished or renovated are assessed and mitigated for asbestos and lead-containing-paint, as needed, within the construction process. This is according to the following TxDOT policy/guidance:

- Standard Specification Item 6.10 (and applicable Provisions)
- Guidance for Handling Asbestos in Construction Projects (January 2007)
- Hazardous Materials in Project Development (September 2018)

Any unanticipated hazardous material and/or petroleum contamination encountered during construction of the proposed project will be handled in Texas and Louisiana according to applicable federal and state regulations per TxDOT Standard Specifications.

Utilities: Several utilities (including gas pipelines) are located adjacent to the project. Adjustment or relocation of these and other utilities will be necessary and will be handled so that no substantial interruption in service will occur. Additionally, in both Texas and Louisiana, the owner of the utility will be responsible for acquiring any easements outside the highway ROW and for ensuring that the design and construction meet all regulatory and environmental compliance requirements. See 43 Texas Administrative Code (TAC) 21.37(a)(9), (g)(1), and (g)(4); 43 TAC 21.38(e)(2) and Louisiana's Administrative Code: Title 70 – Transportation - Part II - Utilities (§§ II-101 – II-1923).

Other: The Sabine River Authority (SRA) contact for the Clean Rivers Program is Jerry Wiegrefe, jwiegrefe@sratx.org or 409-746-3284. TxDOT will also coordinate regarding access to the water quality sampling station located on SH 63 at the Sabine River. TxDOT will coordinate with SRA to provide GPS location coordinates of the new bridge at center channel and to update the sampling station to the new bridge. Additionally, TxDOT will provide SRA with advanced notice regarding any restrictions in accessing the existing bridge and provide construction updates.

5.1 Monitoring or Enforcement

As to project mitigation, TxDOT and LADOTD are hereby required to ensure completion of all mitigation outlined above and set out specifically in the SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River Final EA. TxDOT and LADOTD are also required to ensure that any and all local, state, or federal permit requirements and conditions are met and otherwise complied with.

All commitments and conditions of approval stated in the final EA (Section 8.0, Post-Environmental Clearance Activities and Contractor Communications) will be communicated with the contractor and monitored by TxDOT/LADOTD and other appropriate state, federal, and local agencies to ensure compliance.

5.2 Re-evaluations and Change Order processing

Re-evaluations and change orders will be jointly reviewed but singularly approved by the FHWA Division Office depending on where the action takes place. Each Division Office will copy the other on approval actions for their files.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The FHWA has reviewed all of the relevant documents and materials and all of the environmental studies and findings. Based upon our own independent review and interdisciplinary analysis we find that the SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River Final EA analyzed and considered all the relevant potential environmental impacts and issues. FHWA agrees with TxDOT and LADOTD recommendations made in the Final EA that:

1. The Build Alternative meets the need and purpose of the project with the least amount of impacts to the resource areas, and
2. The proposed project will have no significant impacts on the quality of the human or natural environment under NEPA.

Based upon our own agency review and consideration of the analysis and evaluation contained in the final EA for this project, and after further careful consideration of all social, economic, and environmental factors, including input from and consideration of comment from the public involvement process, FHWA hereby issues this Finding of No Significant Impact for the SH 63/LA 8 Bridge at the Sabine River project. The Build Alternative best fulfills the need and purpose for the project.

7.0 DETERMINATION

The FHWA has determined that the Build Alternative, which will construct a new bridge crossing south of the existing Bridge, will have no significant impact on the human or natural environment. This FONSI is based on the EA which has been independently evaluated by FHWA and determined to adequately and accurately discuss the need, potential environmental issues and impacts of the proposed project and appropriate mitigation measures. The final EA provides sufficient evidence and analysis for determining that an environmental impact statement is not required.

11-12-2025

For Federal Highway Administration (TX)

Date

For Federal Highway Administration (LA)

Date