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Statement

Walter J. Hickel, Secretary of the Interior

As a nation we enjoy the benefits of one of the most efficient surface transportation networks in the world—our highway system. In a land mass so vast, and so topographically diverse, our highways are essential to security and commerce. They have served to link together communities that might otherwise exist in semi-isolation; and, indeed, new communities have been spawned along transportation routes.

When the road network was first commenced, little forethought was given to the eventual effects that ribbons of concrete might have upon the natural landscape, wildlife, or even people who lived along the main routes. Regard for urban problems created by our surface transportation systems usually lagged far behind our desire to build more efficient highways. Thus, some cities that flourished because of their highway accesses are now becoming clogged with increasing traffic that is channeled through them.

By the early 1960's, considerable concern began to develop that the highway system was intruding in detrimental ways upon the total environment—and consequently, upon the amenities of life for many people. The need to improve highway planning to include aesthetic and social considerations was recognized and reflected in the legislation establishing a Department of Transportation. That legislation promised “special effort would be made to preserve the natural beauty of the countryside and public park and recreation lands, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and historic sites,” and provided that the Secretary of Transportation should consult with the Secretary of the Interior, as well as other federal and state agencies, to develop transportation programs that “maintain or enhance the natural beauty of the lands traversed.”

As a result, the Department of the Interior has been able to exert its influence upon transportation planning programs to avoid damage to natural resources, to preserve scenic beauty, and to assure that a harmonious environment be maintained on transportation routes. This goal is furthered by the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 which clearly recognizes the need for maintaining a healthful and harmonious total environment in the face of America's changing economy and growing population.

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Environmental legislation currently in effect and administrative regulations designed to implement the law require highway officials to examine the effects of air, water, and noise pollution in planning proposed freeways. Minimum standards, however, are nowhere prescribed for the information to be assembled to guide planner, plaintiff, or judge in evaluating environmental effects. The authors argue that in most cases the record that paves the way to route location is seriously deficient in scientific data on pollutants. They challenge the popular belief that carbon monoxide alone poisons the road and that high-speed freeways considerably reduce carbon monoxide pollution. They then suggest some minimum planning and procedural standards for developing a record on the environmental effects of a proposed freeway.