Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Where is the Twin Tunnels project located, and what does the project include?

The Twin Tunnels are located on Interstate 70 (I-70) on the east side of Idaho Springs in Clear Creek County, Colorado. They are a key feature of the I-70 Mountain Corridor between Glenwood Springs and the Denver metropolitan area, and serve as a visual gateway to Idaho Springs and Clear Creek County. **Figure 1-1** illustrates the I-70 Mountain Corridor and the Twin Tunnels project location. **Figure 1-2** presents the context statement and core values developed for this project.

The Twin Tunnels project will add an additional lane of highway capacity and improve roadway geometry for approximately 3 miles of eastbound I-70 from the East Idaho Springs Interchange, through the Twin Tunnels, to the base of Floyd Hill where the project ties into an existing three-lane section. The eastbound bore of the Twin Tunnels will be expanded to accommodate the widened roadway section.

1.2 What is the purpose of this document?

This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) completes the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process for the Twin Tunnels Environmental Assessment (EA). It conveys the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) decision to implement the Proposed Action for the Twin Tunnels project. It also describes the final decisions about the roadway width, alignment, and operating scenario for the Proposed Action. The FONSI commits to mitigation measures that will be included in implementation of the Proposed Action; clarifies and updates the EA and Section 4(f) conclusions, as necessary; and responds to questions and comments raised by agencies, organizations, and the public during the public comment and review period.

CDOT initiated the Twin Tunnels EA in September 2011 and held agency and public scoping meetings on September 26 and September 27, 2011, respectively. Various project teams, including stakeholder teams, met throughout the EA process to develop and refine the Proposed Action, evaluate impacts, and recommend mitigation measures. The EA was released for public and agency review in July 2012. A public hearing was held on July 25, 2012, and the formal comment period ran from July 5 to August 4, 2012. Chapter 5 of the FONSI elaborates on the public and agency input to the EA and includes responses to all comments received.

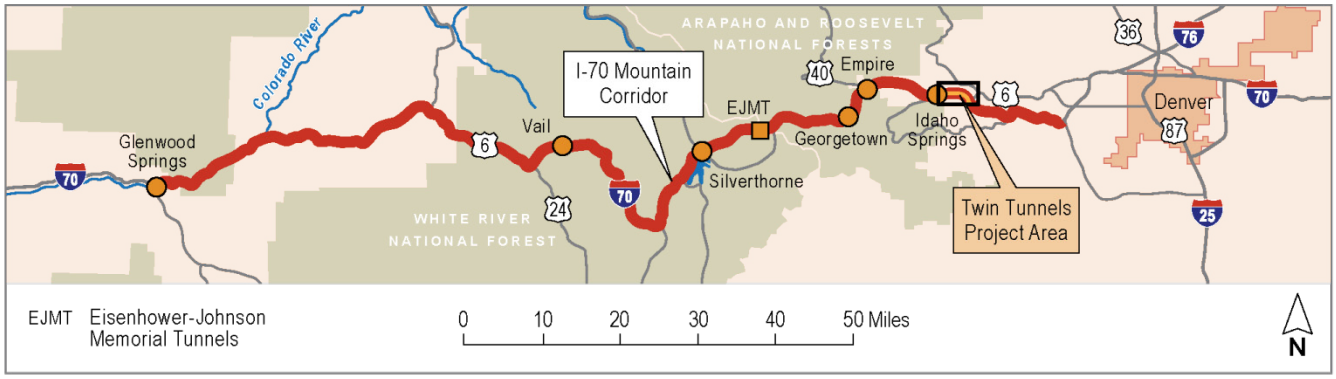
The decision to implement the Proposed Action is based on the analysis of social and environmental impacts presented in the attached EA and summarized in Chapter 3 of this document, and the consideration of public and agency input received throughout the NEPA process and during the formal EA comment period. This FONSI concludes that, based upon the impacts presented in the EA and considering the project's environmental benefits and committed mitigation measures, no significant environmental or social impact would result from the Twin Tunnels project given the project's context and the intensity of those impacts.

1.3 What is the I-70 Mountain Corridor Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, and how does it relate to the Twin Tunnels project?

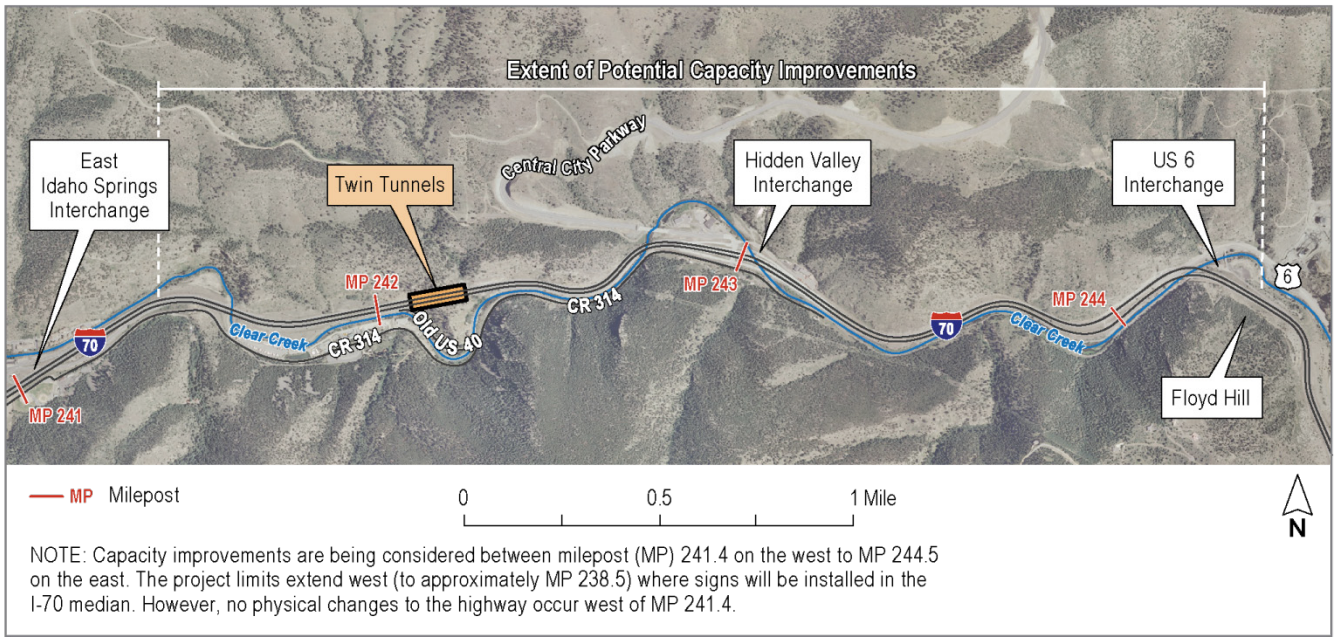
The I-70 Mountain Corridor Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (I-70 PEIS) was completed in June 2011. It laid out a plan for the general location, travel mode, and capacity for transportation improvements along 144 miles of I-70 between Glenwood Springs and the western edge of the Denver metropolitan area, including the Twin Tunnels area. The I-70 PEIS did not authorize any construction but rather presented a framework for subsequent Tier 2 NEPA processes to be completed so that specific projects consistent with the Tier 1 decision can be developed and implemented. The Twin Tunnels EA is a Tier 2 NEPA process.

Figure 1-1. I-70 Mountain Corridor and Twin Tunnels Project Location Maps

I-70 Mountain Corridor



I-70 Twin Tunnels Project



NOTE: Capacity improvements are being considered between milepost (MP) 241.4 on the west to MP 244.5 on the east. The project limits extend west (to approximately MP 238.5) where signs will be installed in the I-70 median. However, no physical changes to the highway occur west of MP 241.4.

The Twin Tunnels project focuses attention on one of the I-70 Mountain Corridor's most problematic areas—the Twin Tunnels. The Proposed Action supports a portion of the highway capacity needs approved by the I-70 PEIS and provides immediate safety improvements and congestion relief for I-70 Mountain Corridor travelers. While it concentrates on eastbound I-70 improvements, the Proposed Action is consistent with and does not preclude other transportation improvements identified in the I-70 PEIS in this location, such as westbound highway improvements, addition of an Advanced Guideway System (AGS) transit system through the area, or realignment of the highway to support a higher design speed. The eastbound lane widening in the Proposed Action has been designed carefully to maximize options for vertical and horizontal alignments for future highway

improvements and future AGS while minimizing work that may need to be redone as part of these future projects. Expansion of the tunnel was planned to fit future transportation facilities that may require expansion of the westbound bore and/or a third bore through the mountain.

Figure 1-2. Twin Tunnels Project Context Statement and Core Values

Context Statement

I-70 is Colorado's only east-west Interstate, providing a link over the Continental Divide, interstate commerce, and mountain access.

Blasted through a geological feature and contained within a narrow canyon, the Twin Tunnels symbolize Colorado's historic endeavors to improve access to and from the mountains. Currently occupying this canyon are Clear Creek, the Frontage Road (CR 314), and I-70. The vision for the future includes an Advance Guideway System with existing transportation facilities.

The Twin Tunnels are a gateway for arriving and departing the mountains, provide a natural crossing for wildlife, and connect local communities to national and regional services. Parallel to I-70 is Clear Creek, a natural and recreational resource. The tunnels now are a constriction to travel and create a safety problem.

Core Values

The Twin Tunnels Project acknowledges core values for the area:

Wildlife

Wildlife, wildlife habitat, migration routes, and access to Clear Creek.

Community

Tourist destinations and community facilities, including the Scott Lancaster Trail and Bridge, the wastewater treatment plant, the planned Clear Creek Greenway, the frontage road, and Clear Creek.

Mobility

Mobility through safe and reliable transportation facilities.

Safety

Safe travel for people and goods.
Safety for emergency responders and maintenance workers.
A **safe** crossing for wildlife.

Gateway

A primary access and visual **gateway** to the Mountain Mineral Belt, historic Idaho Springs, and Front Range communities.

History

History as a defining element of Clear Creek County. Celebrating the cultural resources associated with mining and mining towns, and the first successful tunneling operation as part of the construction of I-70 west through Colorado's mountains.

Clear Creek

Clear Creek, as a clean, high-quality water resource, a recreational asset, an aquatic resource with sustainable fisheries' habitat, a drinking water source, and a defining natural feature of the corridor.

1.4 How did the Twin Tunnels Environmental Assessment use the I-70 Mountain Corridor Context Sensitive Solutions process?

A key commitment of the I-70 PEIS was that all projects on the I-70 Mountain Corridor will use the principles of context sensitive solutions (CSS) and follow the I-70 Mountain Corridor CSS process as described in Appendix A of the I-70 PEIS. The I-70 Mountain Corridor CSS process consists of guidance developed specifically for the Corridor in collaboration with stakeholders. The guidance includes a 6-Step Decision Process, Design Criteria and Aesthetic Guidance, and a Context Statement and Core Values for the I-70 Mountain Corridor.

The Twin Tunnels EA applied the CSS guidance and principles. The Twin Tunnels EA established a Project Leadership Team, developed a Context Statement and Core Values specific to the project, and followed the 6-Step Decision Process. A project Technical Team and several Issue Task Forces were established to provide guidance and expertise in developing and refining the Proposed Action, developing methodologies for data collection and analyses, and providing input into impact evaluation and mitigation recommendations. Project teams dedicated substantial energy and time collaborating with CDOT and FHWA, and their input shaped the Proposed Action so that it reflects the core values identified for the project. Chapter 5 provides more information on these teams and their input to the EA. Appendix C of the EA (included on the attached CD) summarizes how the I-70 Mountain Corridor CSS process was used during this Tier 2 NEPA process to achieve a context sensitive solution in the Proposed Action.

1.5 Why is this project needed?

The purpose of the Twin Tunnels project is to improve eastbound highway safety and mobility in the Twin Tunnels area of the I-70 Mountain Corridor. The project is needed to address safety concerns and mobility challenges due to high traffic volumes and geometric conditions (narrow tunnel, sharp roadway curves) that result in inconsistent and slow travel times through and west of the project area.

When compared to similar Colorado interstate highways, the 3-mile segment of I-70 in the Twin Tunnels area experiences a high number of crashes, registering a total of 625 crashes between 2006 and 2010. The majority (65 percent) of crashes occur in the eastbound direction, where heavy congestion, tight curves, and drivers traveling too fast for conditions (either weather or curves) are the primary contributing factors. Most crashes occur around the horizontal curves, particularly the sharpest curve near Hidden Valley, which is the highest crash location in the project area.

Mobility through the project area is hampered by traffic congestion, most prominently in the eastbound direction on Sunday afternoons, as recreational travelers make their way back from mountain communities to the Denver metropolitan area. The Twin Tunnels are a primary choke point for traffic on I-70. Eastbound traffic on winter and summer Sunday afternoons is often slowed from 65 miles per hour (mph) to less than 30 mph for 4 to 8 hours, with backups extending past Georgetown and sometimes reaching the Eisenhower-Johnson Memorial Tunnels, nearly 30 miles away. By 2035, extreme congestion (travel speeds averaging less than 20 mph) extending from the Twin Tunnels west to Georgetown is projected to occur 75 percent of the time between 9 a.m. and 11 p.m. on Sundays.

Additional information about the purpose and need for the Twin Tunnels project is included in Chapter 1 of the EA.