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Latest ALDOT study of Northern Beltline misses the mark, environmentalists say in court papers

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Birmingham, AL—Black Warrior Riverkeeper and the Southern Environmental Law Center today ask the court for permission to amend their year-old lawsuit against the Alabama Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration, saying the agencies' recent re-evaluation of the proposed Northern Beltline continues a pattern of failing to account for significant changes in the project and surrounding environment dating back to 1997. The groups are asking the court to require a thorough "supplemental environmental impact statement" as required under the National Environmental Policy Act.

"ALDOT's so-called re-evaluation is more of a meaningless re-hash of information and does not meet legal requirements to fully assess the impacts this massive highway would have," said Gil Rogers, SELC senior attorney. "For this study, ALDOT overlooked huge changes in the environment and the economic landscape, including whether this project makes sense in light of its escalating costs and the Jefferson County bankruptcy."

Rogers said that other important changes, like the completion of I-22 and the project's impacts on endangered species and critical habitat are similarly ignored.

"In filing our lawsuit last year, we called on ALDOT to take a meaningful look at the Northern Beltline's direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on the environment, including the region's water resources," said Black Warrior Riverkeeper Nelson Brooke. "ALDOT's re-evaluation merely props up the agency's first faulty study and fails to consider Jefferson County's significant and failing sewer infrastructure, which cannot handle any additional loading at this time."

The Northern Beltline remains one of the central controversies in the state. Despite the pending lawsuit and an Army Corps of Engineers permit that must be obtained, ALDOT continues to insist that it will break ground on the Northern Beltline by year's end. The cost of the 52-mile highway ballooned last year to \$4.7 billion, making it what would be one of the most expensive highways in history. In a surprise move last month, U.S. Rep. Jared Polis (CO) made the highway an election year example of wasteful government spending, labeling it an unnecessary pork project.

Black Warrior Riverkeeper (www.blackwarriorriver.org) is a citizen-based nonprofit environmental advocacy organization whose mission is to protect and restore the Black Warrior River and its tributaries. A member of Waterkeeper Alliance, Black Warrior Riverkeeper was the Alabama Environmental Council's 2007 Conservation Organization of the Year and the American Canoe

Association's 2008 Green Paddle Award winner. Nelson Brooke, Riverkeeper, won the Alabama Rivers Alliance's 2010 River Hero Award.

WEB: www.blackwarriorriver.org

FACEBOOK: <http://www.facebook.com/BlackWarriorRiverkeeper>

TWITTER: <http://twitter.com/#!/BWRiverkeeper>

The Southern Environmental Law Center is a regional conservation organization using the power of the law to protect the health and environment of the Southeast (Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama). Founded in 1986, SELC's team of 40 legal experts represent more than 100 partner groups on issues of climate change and energy, air and water quality, forests, the coast and wetlands, transportation, and land use.

WEB: www.SouthernEnvironment.org

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