Mr. Jim Doolin (ALDOT) welcomed attendees to the third and final FAC meeting for the Statewide Freight Plan development effort. The final plan is expected to be loaded to ALDOT’s website by early March. He stated that ALDOT and the consultant team appreciate the time offered by the FAC members to help in preparing this plan. Because ALDOT hopes the FAC members will continue to participate in other efforts, the FAC members will receive emails in future on how things are progressing and other opportunities for involvement.

Mr. Rod Wilburn (J. R. Wilburn and Associates, Inc.) noted that the project has been going for almost a year. The completion deadline was extended into the new year to allow for extra review time by staff and stakeholders. The handout materials provided to attendees when they signed in include copies of the presentation and the draft Plan Summary document. These documents will be posted on ALDOT’s Freight Planning website along with the others from the study within a few days. Mr. Wilburn requested that attendees provide any follow up questions or guidance within the next few weeks so that the team can respond prior to finalization of the documents and study completion.

As indicated on the Overview slide, Mr. Wilburn reiterated that this effort updates the freight plan that ALDOT has had in place for several years. By continuing the planning effort every few years, ALDOT will get a better sense of the freight movements in order to try to program improvements and be aware of bottlenecks that constrain movements, particularly for roadway related movements (trucks, at the Port, and at rail-to-truck connections). In addition, federal funding requires a plan be in place and analysis have been undertaken.

In referring to the Key Components slide, Mr. Wilburn noted the importance of remembering that this effort will not result in the development of a Freight Plan specific list of project needs through 2040. The plan will identify changes projected to occur and whether projects that could help are already planned. It serves to make DOT aware of the needs and to consider projects as funding becomes available.

A key point related to the Consistency with Federal Policy slide noted that a statewide freight plan is required for federal funding assistance, the same as regional plans are required for MPOs. The consultant team paid attention to the federal requirements throughout plan development, and the plan is compliant with the regulations. The Freight Plan document includes a table that cross-references the plan’s content with the federal requirements to demonstrate the connection. In addition, DOT will continue using the process to remain compliant.

The FAC committee and key regional stakeholders were helpful in developing the plan, particularly given each person’s unique perspective by geography and/or mode. FAC and stakeholder comments and observations were important consideration as the study progressed, and the FAC provided good feedback and guidance. Planning out to a 2040 horizon year is difficult, but at the statewide level is even more so. Two rounds of regional meetings were held across the state at the MPOs. As a statewide plan, it was not developed at the same degree of specificity as an MPO plan would be; it covered a more macro level and different kinds of data were used at different levels.
Dr. Michael Anderson explained the Commodity Flow Highlights slide. The assessment process is explained briefly in the plan document, with more detail available in the appendices. The assessment starts with generic data—tons moved. The assessment relied on USDOT data sources and projections; the consultant team used those projections for the analyses but did not make them. As noted on the slide, overall commodity flow is projected to increase by 40% by 2040, with trucks carrying 80% of all freight in Alabama. That percentage continues in the future for truck movements, just with larger total total freight volumes. Rail is projected at 11%.

With regard to the coal issue raised at previous meetings, the consultant team ran scenarios without including any coal movements. The results showed those potential changes in coal will not impact these projects. Importantly, future changes in coal do not distract from or change the overall findings.

Looking at the Projected Freight Flows by Truck, there is no shift in WHERE trucks are expected to be by 2040. No “new” locations with high volumes are projected. Several maps from the presentation and report were displayed on boards in the back of the meeting room for attendees to look over and ask any questions.

One question that was raised during the regional meetings was why the volumes seen along I-10 are so small. In looking deeper into that issue, the DOT data indicated that most freight originating out of Florida is northbound, not westbound towards Louisiana and Texas. The likely reason is that freight destined to those areas is likely to be shipped via boat past Florida to those western ports because it is cheaper (albeit somewhat slower) than arriving in Florida and having to transfer to rail or truck for longer distance journeys.

The Projected 2040 Volumes and Bottlenecks slide map really “tells the story.” The green indicates roadways with high truck volumes (15,000 per day and up). Blue shows locations where trucks account for more than 25% of total traffic, either because there are lots of trucks or that the traffic is mostly trucks). The yellow and red show congestion—high volume to capacity (V/C) locations, with yellow indicating volumes exceed capacity and red where it is much more in excess. Birmingham in particular shows lots of yellow and red. It experiences a lot of congestion AND a lot of trucks. The trucks do not cause the congestion, but they are stuck in it. Freight mobility is impacted because the trucks cannot move, but the trucks are not the cause of the congestion. There a number of other yellow spots around the state, which are mostly cars causing congestion.

In response to a question, Dr. Anderson indicated that the 2040 projections used FAF data from version 3.5. The data provides commodity flow in kilotons, indicating what is moving; it does not provide specific vehicles. That next step was done by the consultant team. Commodity flows by kilotons were assigned (calculated) to a certain number of truck/rail loads onto the system to then result in the number of trucks on the network. It is important to remember that the FAF data does not capture short trips or empty trucks. Dr. Anderson also explained that the FAF data can be “verified” (“validation” is too strong a word for this) by looking at the ALDOT truck counts/percent truck data. This “verification” exercise indicated that the flow data is below the truck counts, although it generally held true, along
with the growth in flows. Also, the V/C assigned for “congested” was 1.5. Given the origin of the truck calculations, that is more toward a level of service (LOS) of D or E (regardless of source).

It was noted that the consultant team will be preparing an MPO White Paper to provide the MPOs with guidance on what this study’s data can and can’t be used for. As a reminder, this is a statewide analysis; local (regional) planning and modeling analysis utilizes shorter links and more detailed geography. On balance, the analysis indicated no surprises as to where the flows will increase and where they are going.

In response to several questions, the discussion reiterated that the FAF data does not account for alternate routing to avoid congestion (as is a key part of regional MPO travel demand models). This is an important part of the reason this study does not result in a detailed project list, because it lacks the “rigor” necessary for that at the local level. The analysis does identify locations for more detailed analysis, which can then be looked at in a finer grain by the regional MPO models. The FAF data is at a national level and includes only three zones for Alabama (Birmingham, Mobile, and the rest of the state). That data is then disaggregated across the state and for the adjacent states as well. Additional information about the disaggregation process and the resulting geographies is available in the interim summary reports as well as the final report appendices.

Wade Carroll began the discussion on the Statewide Primary Freight Network. The starting point was the national network, with some additional criteria established for the selection of additional links. The resulting Statewide Primary Freight Network (PFN), shown on the map, indicates that 3% of the PFN is currently congested and projected to increase to 35% in future.

As previously indicated, the Freight Improvement Strategy is not a prioritized list of projects. Through a review of ALDOT’s CPMS, a number of projects already planned/programmed through 2030 across the state were identified as offering potential freight mobility benefit by addressing the bottlenecks and maintaining the network. Even more projects were identified in “visionary” lists for implementation after 2030. Of the 170 improvements identified, 27 are capacity projects and 143 maintenance and operations (responding to federal guidance on the state of good repair). A very limited number of representative projects were selected for the slides on improvements through 2030 in the CPMS and visionary improvements in 2040 MPO LRTPs. They include many important projects that will also address freight mobility.

At this point, performance measures and the performance monitoring process are still in flux because final rulemaking from FHWA was recently delayed until March 29, 2016. In the meantime, a list of potential performance measures for consideration by ALDOT and the MPOs was developed. Key to this is to provide a starting point and basis from which to work in future. Questions to ask include: What are the key variables in your area? What tools are available? What is the staffing commitment?

With regard to Major Findings, the Freight Plan was developed consistent with federal guidelines, and a comparison matrix providing more detail was included within the report document. Importantly, truck flows are projected to increase and will need innovative strategies to manage mobility. Federal legislation now allows for an increased federal share for freight improvement projects; however,
because it does not provide any additional total funding, ALDOT is currently not planning to pursue this approach. The performance measures and monitoring process will be finalized when guidance is released by FHWA.

Some general discussion followed the presentation, as summarized below:

- There are few truck-only facilities nationwide, mostly near Ports, which are also highly dependent on rail.

- Freight planning occurs within the overall context of mixed traffic, which in turn feeds into the state’s annual updated program (the STIP, State Transportation Improvement Program). It requires ongoing analysis and coordination, and that is the point for looking at particular issues.

- A key consideration is designing roadway improvement with an eye towards truck needs. Likely routes for particular attention to freight needs should be identified.

- This is a statewide, macro level assessment. The local level is where analysis should get specific and where the money is actually spent.

- The FAST Act does include a new freight funding category for “freight projects of national significance.” Alabama’s allocation will total $22 million, but FHWA has not yet told the states how they can spend it. That amount will only cover a handful of improvements, and the CMPS already has 170 programmed projects that seem to offer freight related benefits. In addition, more projects (e.g., something at the State Docks) are not even in the CPMS but could possibly be eligible for money. As in everything, there are more needs than revenue across all funding categories.

- No overlay map of the identified freight improvements in the CPMS has been developed.

- The plan addresses all modes. However, the focus is on roadway because of the significance of truck freight movement (80%) and the importance of intermodal connections.

In closing, the study team asked attendees to provide any comments to the draft plan within the next week or two so that the plan can be finalized. The link to access the draft plan was distributed via email as part of the meeting notice reminder. The plan will be updated every 5 years or so, and ALDOT will try to keep the committees involved in the interim. For example, the consultant team will suggest that committee members be added to the notification list for the annual STIP update as a way to continue outreach during plan cycles.