

Colorado Historic Highway Inventory - Historical Summary and Evaluation of Significance

Highway Name: State Highway (SH) 15

CDOT Route Nos. and Milepost (MP) Limits:

<i>CDOT Route</i>	<i>Route Description</i>
015A	From U.S. 160-A and U.S. 285-B in Monte Vista south To (CR 12S) at the Rio Grande/Conejos County Line
015B	From County Roads west of Capulin east via Capulin To U.S. 285-A north of La Jara

Highway Location:

Counties: Conejos, Rio Grande
 Length (Miles): 22.824

OAHP Site Numbers (for previously recorded segments, if applicable)*:

<i>OAHP Site No.</i>	<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Assessment Date</i>	<i>Site Name</i>
5ML.600.1	Supports eligibility of entire linear resource>Field eligible	06/17/2011>10/27/2010	STATE PRIMARY ROAD 15/FSR 648A-1

Discussion of Site Forms (for previously recorded segments, if applicable):

Colorado Cultural Resources Inventory forms (forms) for previously recorded segments of this highway includes 5ML600.1. This site form is available in Compass and includes an approximately 1.2 mile segment of the an earlier alignment of SH 15 that was previously documented in 2010 with an official determination of eligible. A small portion of the current extent of SH 15 follows this earlier alignment of SH 15. The previously documented segment is located approximately 50 miles due west of the current alignment of SH 15 and does not retain an association to the highway as currently designated.

Historic Districts located within 250 feet of highway (OAHP Site Number and Name)*:

<i>OAHP Site No.</i>	<i>District Name</i>	<i>Assessment (If Applicable)</i>
None	No historic districts are found on or adjacent to this highway	

**Information based on data from Compass provided by OAHP*

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Historical Data:

SH 15 is approximately 23 miles long and is located along the western edge of the San Luis Valley in south-central Colorado. The northern terminus of the current route is at the U.S. Highway (US) 160/ US 285 intersection in Monte Vista. The road then extends south and then east to its eastern terminus at US 285 in La Jara.

The earliest transportation corridors in South-Central Colorado were wagon roads that often followed trails established by Native Americans. Settlers from New Mexico moved into the San Luis Valley in the 1850s and established early irrigation and water reclamation systems to facilitate agricultural production. The San Luis Valley developed into a center for agriculture and livestock-raising within the region beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. (Carter and Mehls 1984: 46-48)

Railroad construction began in southern Colorado during the 1860s. The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad (D&RG) was organized in 1870 and construction on tracks south of Denver began that same year. The D&RG reached the San Luis Valley by 1877 and expanded throughout the valley over the next several decades connecting communities to larger markets; D&RG tracks reached Alamosa in 1878, a line was constructed from Alamosa to Espanola, New Mexico in 1880, and tracks connecting Salida and the San Luis Valley were established in 1881. The San Luis Valley Southern Railroad was constructed between Monte Vista and Center in 1913. Railroads served as an important means for distributing livestock and agricultural products throughout the San Luis Valley and beyond. (Carter and Mehls 1984: 46-48, 79-81)

The popularity of the automobile increased dramatically between 1910 and 1920. The Good Roads Movement and establishment of the Colorado Highway Commission in the first decades of the twentieth century led to the establishment of a highway network throughout the region and state. (Carter and Mehls 1984: 138-141) In 1913 the Colorado legislature initiated the creation of a highway (SH 15) across the continental divide in southern Colorado. Earlier routes across the continental divide included wagon roads and unimproved roads between New Mexico and Archuleta County in Colorado. The route of the original SH 15 followed the Navajo Trail and was among the first roads designed for motorized vehicular traffic across the continental divide in the United States and in southern Colorado into the San Luis Valley (5ML600.1 Inventory Form). The original route of SH 15 was in use from 1916 to 1922 based on historic state highway maps; this east-west route was eventually replaced by SH 10/US450 and then US 160 and SH 15 was rerouted north through the San Luis Valley, Salida, and Buena Vista. Only the east-west portion of the current SH 15 extending west from just north of La Jara to a point near its intersection with road 255 is located along the original route of SH 15 and retains a historic association with this early highway as an important early crossing of the continental divide.

The current alignment of SH 15 includes one north-south and one east-west section. Prior to 1926 the north-south portion was part of SH 36 as indicated on a 1916 state highway map. At that time SH 36 extended further north through Saguache, Poncha Springs, ending at Salida. The stretch of road, known colloquially south of Saguache as the Gunbarrel Road for its unusually straight course, extended through the center of the San Luis Valley, in one of the most productive agricultural regions of the state. Around 1926 SH 36 was designated SH 15 and followed a similar route north through the San Luis Valley and extended beyond Salida to Buena Vista. Similar to SH 112, which is historically significant for its role in the transfer of agricultural goods within the San Luis Valley, SH 15 provided a direct and important connection to market centers in the San Luis Valley and beyond as well as travelers in the south-central part of the state. (Colorado State Planning Commission 1941: 395-396) In the late 1960s the extent of this north-south iteration of the SH 15 alignment was scaled back considerably to its present termini.

The current east-west section was included as part of the original route of SH 15 prior to 1926, which extended across the continental divide toward the southwest corner of the state. The current east-west portion of SH 15 is all that remains of the original route of SH 15 that stretched between approximately La Jara and Pagosa Springs; another portion of the original route now follows SH 160 to the southwest part of the state. By 1926 state highway maps indicate that the original route was decommissioned and replaced by SH 160 further to the north and SH 36 was designated SH 15, which extended north through the San Luis Valley through Salida and Buena Vista.

(Unless otherwise indicated, sources used in the preparation of this section included state highway maps, the Highways of Colorado by Matthew Salek, Highways to the Sky: A Context and History of Colorado's Highway System, Colorado State Roads and Highways, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Submission, plans in the Online Transportation Information System (OTIS), and site forms for previously surveyed resources in Compass when available.)

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Not Significant - No historical significance identified

Significant - Historical significance identified (see details below)

Property Type and Areas of Significance:

A detailed explanation why this highway possesses historical significance is provided in the Significance Statement below.

Cultural:

Criterion A specific requirements

- Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
- Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
- Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements

- Representative example (Transportation)

Engineering:

Subtypes

- Farm-to-Market Road
- Limited Access, Multiple-Lane, Divided Highway/Freeway
- Highway Bypass

Criterion A specific requirements

- Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
- Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
- Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements

- Representative example (Transportation)
- Engineering achievement (Engineering)

Aesthetic:

Criterion A specific requirements

- Early and/or prominent project of the Colorado Highway Department (Transportation)
- Association with a significant event (If applicable, the Area of Significance is indicated in the statement of significance below)
- Association with federal work relief programs (Politics/Government)

Criterion C specific requirements

- Representative example (Transportation)
- Engineering achievement (Engineering)
- Landscape architecture (Landscape Architecture)

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Historic periods of highway construction:

- Pre-territorial (pre-1861)
- Territorial and pre-automobile state roads (1861-1890)
- Automobile age (1890-1930)
- Depression and World War II (1930-1945)
- Postwar Interstate Era (1945-1973)
- Completion and Augmentation of Interstate System (1973-2000)

Level of Significance:

- Local
- State
- National

Significance Statement:

SH 15 is classified as a Cultural Route and an Engineered Route under the classification system in the MPS.

Criterion A

Development on SH 15 began in 1913 just three years after the formation of the Colorado Highway Commission and the east-west portion of the current highway, located along the original SH 15 alignment, also followed the Navajo Trail and was among the first roads designed for motorized vehicular traffic across the continental divide in the state. As such, as a Cultural Route under Transportation it has an association with the Navajo Trail at the state level. As an Engineered Route, the east-west portion of SH 15 is considered an example of an early and prominent project by the Colorado Highway Department (CHD) and has significance at the state level. In addition, the north-south portion, a later iteration of SH 15 that extends through a portion of the San Luis Valley is located along a route that served as an important local farm-to-market road within the valley and provided a direct connection for conveying agricultural goods to market centers. Research did not indicate this highway was built or improved as part of a federal relief project. This highway possesses significance in the area of Transportation at the state and local levels under Criterion A.

Criterion B

Research did not reveal this highway to be directly associated with the events or work of a person important in history, nor does research indicate the highway represents the efforts of a specific individual to secure construction of this highway for the economic development of a community or area of the state. Therefore, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion B.

Criterion C

This highway serves as an example of an early infrastructure project by the CHD and was among the first roads designed for motorized vehicular traffic across the continental divide in the state. However, the current alignment does not include that portion of SH 15 that crossed the continental divide. Research and literature review yielded no evidence to indicate the use of innovative or important engineering design or construction techniques that serve to distinguish SH 15 as currently designated from other roads, and it is not known to have been the site of important engineering innovations or important later modification. Earlier portions of SH 15 that crossed the continental divide but are no longer designated as part of the route would be more likely to possess significance for these reasons. As such, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion C in the area of transportation.

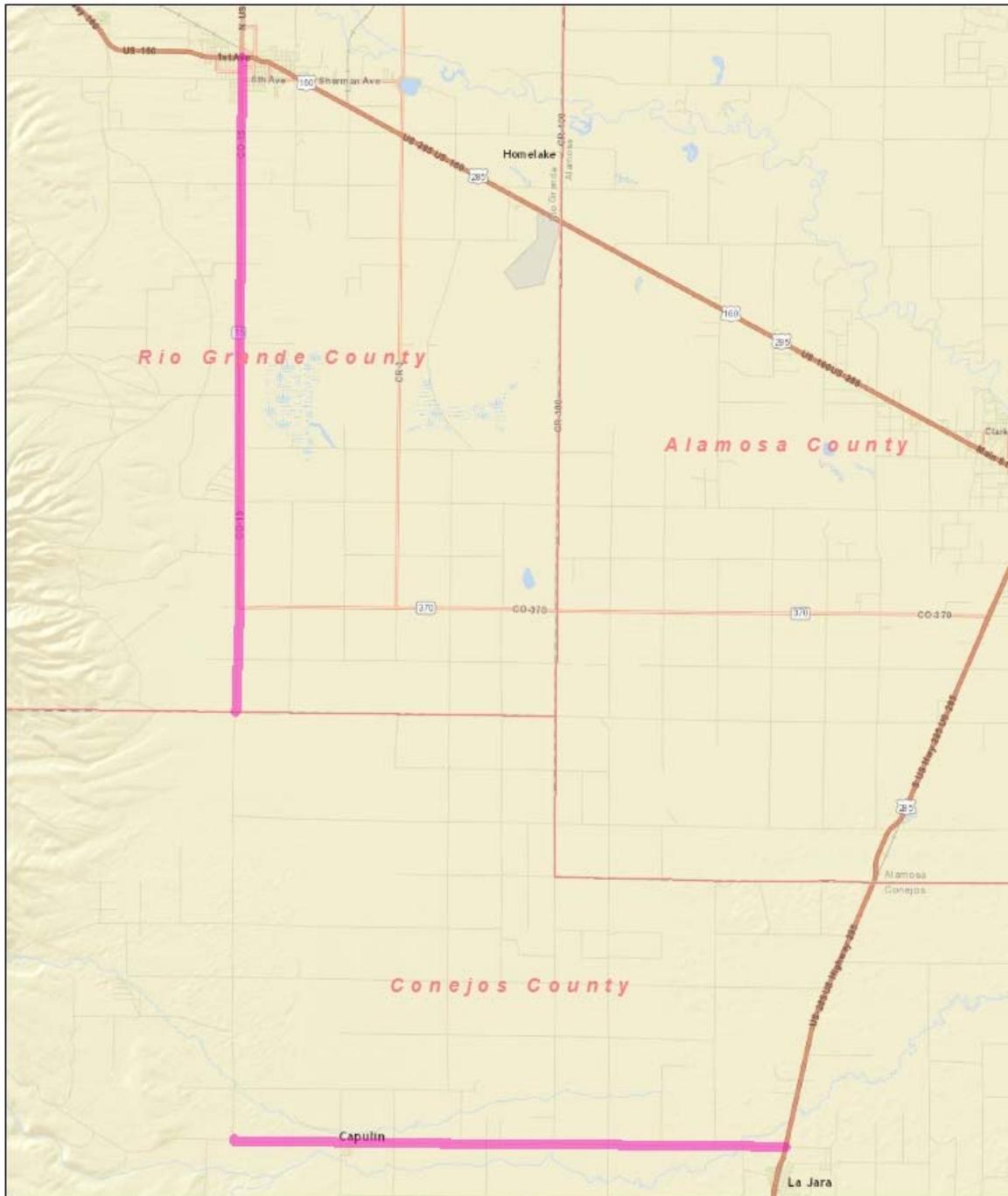
Criterion D

For a property to possess significance for information potential, the information yielded by the property must answer specific important research questions that cannot be otherwise answered. The technology of highway construction is well understood and documented. As such, this highway is unlikely to yield important information that cannot be discerned from archived plans and other records. Therefore, this highway does not possess significance under Criterion D.

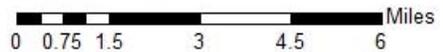
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- SH 15
- County Boundary

SH 15



Map indicates the extent of the highway based on CDOT GIS data; portions co-signed with other highways may not be indicated.