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California high speed rail proposal: “High speed rail and wildlife”

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(Supplemental materials provided by Dan Leavitt, California High Speed Rail Authority)

Abstract

The California High Speed Rail (HSR) Proposal is in the initial planning phase. In response to increasing population and an overtaxed transportation network, a 700-mile HSR proposal has been proposed to link major metropolitan areas in the state. The HSR proposed would be devised of state-of-the-art technology, travel at a maximum speed of 220 miles, a 50-foot right of way, and include at-grade, aerial, and tunnel alignments. The entire length of the at-grade alignments would be fenced. Due to sophisticated communications systems, trains would be frequent, with options for local as well as long-distance use. Travel times are comparable to, and in some cases surpass, door-to-door travel times for driving or flying alternatives.

The Final Environmental Impact Report/Statement (FEIR/S), which was released in August 2005, concludes that the HSR option leads to decreased energy consumption, reduced air pollutant emissions and improved air quality, uses less land, and has fewer overall impacts to sensitive habitats and water resources than either the option to continue with currently planned transportation projects or to expand existing highways and airports. A major concern in terms of wildlife is the impact of the fencing on wildlife movement and migration corridors. The California HSR Authority has decided to relegate the analysis of this impact to the project-level environmental documents. There is a recognized concern that this approach will fail to provide the landscape-level analysis necessary to accommodate the wildlife movement needs.

The environmental review process revealed several areas of controversy. For the northern mountain crossing connecting the Bay Area to the Central Valley, there was a concern that the Altamont Pass alignment, which tracks I-580, was not included as an option. As a result, the HSR Authority will be working with groups in the Bay Area on an additional EIR/S to specifically choose the alignment on this crossing.

A second area of controversy is the southern mountain crossing, which connects the Bakersfield to Los Angeles stations. Seismic and tunneling constraints caused the southern mountain crossing to be chosen, which cuts east into the West Mojave Desert with a station in Palmdale instead of following I-5 directly south. This decision was made despite major concerns of direct and growth-inducing impacts to the West Mojave Desert. Those with a desire to decrease impacts to public lands or to expand the growth in the city of Palmdale were in support of this option.

The third area of controversy concerned impacts on parks, wildlife areas, and recreational resources. As a result, no alignments were chosen through Henry Coe State Park, Don Edwards San Francisco Bay Wildlife Refuge, or San Luis State Recreation Area. Additionally, alignments which occur adjacent to state parks will occur on existing rail corridors, and other concerns will be considered at the project level.

The final area of controversy was the growth-inducing impact of the stations themselves. All stations are required to serve as multi-modal sites.

Identified environmental impacts will be avoided, minimized, and mitigated. Nearly 70 percent of the alignments will occur on existing transportation corridors and rail lines. Only 24 percent of the alignment will be at-grade in new corridors. Underpasses and overpasses will be designed during the project-level analysis, and tunneling will occur in mountainous habitat in major portions of the undeveloped alignments. Mitigation will be determined at the project-level but may include project-design changes, contribution to a conservation bank or natural management area, relocation of sensitive species, and construction of wildlife underpasses, bridges, and/ or culverts. The FEIR/S also outlines specific mitigation strategies to be employed at the project level for plant communities, biological resources management plans, sensitive plan species, invasive species, wildlife movement and migration corridors, and jurisdictional waters and wetlands.

For details on the California High Speed Rail Proposal, please visit the California High Speed Rail Authority's website at: www.cahighspeedrail.ca.gov

Biographical Sketch: Cynthia R. Wilkerson is a conservation biologist with the California office of Defenders of Wildlife. She has been with Defenders for over three years and has developed and implemented on-the-ground wildlife conservation campaigns focusing on reducing conflicts between humans and bears, desert habitat and species conservation, regional conservation planning, and road ecology. The species covered by this work include the black bear, Channel Island fox, San Joaquin kit fox, desert tortoise, Mohave ground squirrel, and Pacific fisher. Ms. Wilkerson has an undergraduate degree in conservation biology from the University of Washington and a master's of science in wildlife ecology and conservation from the University of Florida. As an undergraduate, she formed a non-profit research organization in British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest and conducted fieldwork on the acoustic behavior of song sparrows, plant ecology, marbled murrelets, and northern goshawks. Her master's research focused on the importance of isolation to temporary wetlands and included field work as well as spatially-implicit modeling. Ms. Wilkerson's professional interests and experience include natural resource group facilitation and conflict resolution, regional conservation planning, landscape and spatial ecology, and conservation policy.