



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION IX
75 Hawthorne Street
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December 5, 2016

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Subject: EPA comments on the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the State Route 79
Realignment Project, Riverside County, California (CEQ # 20160257)

Dear Mr. Burton:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the State Route 79 Realignment Project (SR-79) in Riverside County, California. Our comments are provided pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Council on Environmental Quality's NEPA Implementing Regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508), and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act. Caltrans and the Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC) have proposed this project to address deficiencies in the existing SR-79 transportation corridor and provide a transportation facility that will safely and efficiently accommodate regional north-south movement of people and goods between Domenigoni Parkway to the south and Gilman Springs Road in the north. As described in the Final EIS, the project would be a divided limited-access expressway with two travel lanes in each direction. Several alternatives and design variations were evaluated for their ability to address the project purpose and need. The Final EIS identifies the Preferred Alternative as Alternative 1br, which the EPA, as well as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, agreed upon as the preliminary Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative.

The project has followed the National Environmental Policy Act and Clean Water Action Section 404 Integration Process for Federal Aid Surface Transportation Projects in California Memorandum of Understanding (NEPA/404 MOU). EPA participates on the SR-79 Resource Agency team which provides an interagency forum for early feedback during project development and facilitates the NEPA/404 MOU process. EPA has provided agreement on the project's Purpose and Need (December 19, 2003), agreement on the Range of Alternatives to carry forward in the Draft EIS (July 2, 2007), and agreement on the preliminary Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (May 14, 2015), as well as providing comments on several technical documents which supported the Final EIS.

Additionally, EPA provided comments on the Draft EIS on March 22, 2013, rating the proposed project as *Environmental Concerns-Insufficient Information (EC-2)*. In our comments on the Draft EIS we expressed concerns with the project's impacts to aquatic resources, lack of information on compensatory mitigation, and provided comments regarding tribal coordination and analysis of air quality impacts. We appreciate the extensive additional analysis and coordination which have taken place to address our comments, as well as changes that have been made and mitigation measures which have been committed

to in the Final EIS. Additionally, we would like to acknowledge the magnitude of impact avoidance that Caltrans and RCTC implemented early in the project process by eliminating a more damaging alternative that would have bisected a network of significant alkali vernal pools in the project area. Notably, the SR-79 project was nominated for, and received, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Transportation Environmental Stewardship Excellence Award for their efforts to avoid impacts to vernal pools.

Based upon the information presented in the Final EIS, and the identification of Alternative 1br as the preferred alternative, EPA's concerns with the project have been addressed. We commend Caltrans and RCTC for working so extensively with the public and resource agencies to identify a Preferred Alternative for SR-79 that best balances community needs and concerns with protection of the environment. EPA appreciated the regular and proactive engagement with resource agencies to provide project updates, elicit agency concerns, and provide supplemental analyses and project refinements when needed. We hope that the SR-79 Resource Agency team will serve as a national example of successful interagency coordination.

We appreciate the opportunity to review this Final EIS and look forward to working with Caltrans and RCTC to finalize the project's compensatory mitigation plan. When the Record of Decision is signed, please send one copy to the address above (mail code: ENF 4-2). If you have any questions, please contact me at 415-947-3554 or Clifton Meek, the lead reviewer for this project. Clifton can be reached at 415-972-3370 or meek.clifton@epa.gov.

Sincerely,



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Environmental Review Section

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