

Policy Notes

Caltrans Mono Lake Widening Project update

In June, the Mono Lake Committee submitted 1,885 member letters as environmental scoping comments to Caltrans on the Mono Lake Highway Widening Project north of Lee Vining. These member letters were in addition to formal comments submitted to Caltrans from the Mono Lake Committee.

This proposed highway project would widen shoulders to eight feet, add scenic pull outs, and address rock fall problems. It continues to generate concern from both visitors and residents. At the time this newsletter went to press, a public open house was scheduled for the end of June. At this meeting Caltrans will present the most current project information. It is hoped that Caltrans will have incorporated all environmental public scoping comments into the range of project alternatives.

The Committee's formal scoping comments outlined impacts that should be addressed in the environmental review process. Specific impacts include damage to wetland and riparian areas; impaired wildlife movement, especially deer; loss of upland habitat associated with cut slopes; degradation of the critical visual resources of the Mono Basin; and various social and economic impacts including an increased speed limit.

Because this project is funded in part by federal dollars and is proposed to take place in a National Forest Scenic Area and California State Reserve, federal transportation regulations will come into play. This is good news in that the regulations call for significant increase in the amount of planning that should occur in order to minimize impacts to this sensitive area.

In the meantime, the Committee continues to work with Caltrans, Mono County staff, and agency representatives

in pushing for a project that balances safety needs while maintaining the visual and ecological integrity of Mono Lake.

A special thanks to everyone who has taken the time to return appeal letters, emailed their thoughts, stopped by the store to chat, and attended Caltrans meetings. Your involvement continues to be critical to this issue.

Rush Creek return ditch update

On May 1, at the annual spring meeting on restoration, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) announced that it had reached agreement with the California Department of Fish & Game (DFG) on how to increase the capacity of the Rush Creek return ditch. This was welcome news, if long overdue. For nearly two years, DWP and DFG have been in a stalemate over how to interpret and implement the State Water Board's order that the Rush Creek return ditch be upgraded without "long-term loss of habitat." Meanwhile, Rush Creek has been languishing without high spring flows.

The limited capacity of the return ditch, which is used by DWP to carry water around Grant Lake dam to maintain flows in Rush Creek, has been a frustrating stumbling block to providing restoration flows to Rush Creek as ordered by the State Water Board in 1994. In fact, in five of the last seven years since the 1994 Water Board decision, DWP has been unable to deliver required restoration flows to Rush Creek.

According to DWP and DFG, both parties had to compromise in order to reach agreement. DWP agreed to leave intact a portion of the ditch that DFG felt contained good fish habitat; DFG agreed to limit future assessment of habitat recovery to a few key parameters: extent of willows and instream vegetation, extent of boulders to provide roughness, and channel depth. DFG dropped its earlier requirement that extent of stream surface area be a parameter. Plans for the work should be submitted for approval to the State Water Board this summer, and work is expected to commence this fall.

Thanks go to Committee members who responded to the spring mailing on this issue. During the last two years, the Committee has played the role of "squeaky wheel," regularly calling both DWP and DFG to push them to settle their differences and raising the issue annually with the State Water Board. While a more forceful approach might have resulted in a ditch being in place sooner, it likely could have led to future disagreements between DWP and DFG over how to interpret restoration progress. Due to the extra effort this year, restoration can now move forward with the return ditch issue behind us. 🐾



Photo by Arya Degenhardt

Environmental Resource Coordinator Lisa Cutting handing over the box of 1,885 Caltrans highway widening comment letters to UPS.