

Details of the Highway Project at Mono Lake Coming to Light

New Alternative Avoids Sensitive Areas

from the Mono Lake Committee Policy Staff

Thanks to over 2,500 letters from Mono Lake Committee members to Governor Davis, the Mono Lake Committee Context Sensitive Solutions White Paper, and a lot of hard work, positive progress is being made on Caltrans' Mono Lake Widening Project. Submittal of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for review by the Federal Highway Administration has been delayed until October. The alternatives within that DEIR have also

been modified and a new alternative has been added that may address many of the concerns of the Mono Lake Committee and the various resource agencies responsible for protection of Mono Lake and its associated resources.

For the past two years the Mono Lake Committee has been attending meetings and influencing Caltrans' Mono Lake Widening Project. This project is planned to widen the shoulders of 2.9 miles of Highway 395 along the west shoreline of Mono Lake. The Mono Lake Committee is now cautiously optimistic that a solution can be reached that protects the scenic and



The Mono Lake Widening Project area as seen from the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Visitor Center.

environmental resources at Mono Lake while largely achieving the transportation goals of the project.

The recent progress is also due to a visit by Jeff Morales, Director of Caltrans, and Art Baggett, Chair of the State Water Resources Control Board. Mr. Morales and Mr. Baggett visited the project site in July and spoke at a meeting of the Project Development Team (PDT), of which the Committee is a member. Their message: the Mono Lake Widening Project has merit, the membership of the PDT includes the appropriate stakeholders, the PDT must work together and achieve consensus for

the project to move forward, and some design work may have to be done earlier than Caltrans typically does to alleviate concerns within the group.

Since the July visit, the PDT has met twice. The outcome of these meetings has been a greater understanding of the individual components of the project and the specific impacts resulting from them as well as the addition of a new alternative

to the DEIR.

Project Components Detailed

These recent meetings have delved deep into the details of the project, illuminating its component pieces. Impacts from Caltrans' plan come from rockfall solutions and design speed increases as well as shoulder widening. Identifying these individual project components and their impacts allows resource managers and concerned members of the public, like the Mono Lake Committee, to prioritize the goals of the project. It also allows interested parties to determine what they wish to achieve while limiting the impacts to scenic and environmental resources in the Mono Basin.

Resource agencies and other members of the PDT now know that an increase in design speed requires a shift in the alignment of the roadway towards Mono Lake. The solution for rock fall problems preferred by Caltrans includes a seven foot rock catchment area that will move the alignment of the roadway towards the lake. Additionally, universal eight foot shoulders will also move the roadway eastward. Taken together these individual project components will move

Governor Receives Thousands of Letters from Mono Lake Supporters

Mono Lake supporters made a big difference in the outcome of the highway widening project by sharing their opinions on the issue with Governor Davis. Over 2,500 letters, faxes, and emails went to the governor this summer, many sharing eloquent personal thoughts, histories, and feelings.

Mono Lake Committee staff truly works for the tens of thousands of Mono Lake supporters throughout the state and country. Their effectiveness is a direct measure of the strength of public support for Mono Lake's continuing protection. Thank you to all the letter writers for speaking up on Mono's behalf!

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portions of the paved roadway almost 20 feet, requiring retaining walls up to 20 feet high and/or extensive fill slopes that extend into the State Reserve to the future level of the lake.

DEIR Alternatives Changed

The alternatives outlined in the DEIR now offer a greater range of possibilities for the Mono Lake Widening Project. Caltrans is now proposing the following three alternatives:

- The no project alternative;
- An alternative that describes a design speed increase to 60 mph, allows for a seven-foot rock catchment area, and increases shoulder width to eight feet throughout the project area;
- And a third “variable width” alternative that widens the roadway only where impacts and disturbance

at sensitive locations can be avoided. These sensitive locations are limited to 20% of the project area and would keep the existing four foot shoulder.

The Committee has been calling for a variable shoulder width alternative all along and is pleased to see it in the DEIR. Under discussion is the addition of a fourth alternative that would round out the range of project options. The fourth alternative would describe a 55 mph design speed, no rock fall catchment area, and eight foot shoulders throughout.

What are the Next Steps?

Caltrans will be completing the Draft EIR in the next month or so, and will call another PDT meeting at that time to discuss, as much as the law allows, the document and the special areas of concern within it. The DEIR will then be submitted to the Federal Highway Administration for its review and approval prior to being released to the

public in early 2003. The subsequent comment period will be a critical time for your voice to be heard on this project!

In the meantime, the Mono Lake Committee continues to seek solutions that achieve project goals to the greatest extent possible while protecting the scenic and environmental resources at Mono Lake. Committee staff are meeting with Caltrans staff to discuss possible solutions.

All of this adds up to substantial movement from where things were just a few short months ago and gives the Mono Lake Committee cause for hope. Much of this change can be attributed to the efforts of Committee members. Thank you!

Information about the current status of the project is at www.monolake.org. Or contact Craig Roecker (craig@monolake.org) or Lisa Cutting (lisa@monolake.org) at (760) 647-6595 for more information. ❖

L A Times Articles Raise Statewide Interest in the Mono Lake Widening Project

Two recent pieces in the *Los Angeles Times* have brought the concerns about the Mono Lake Widening Project to statewide scrutiny.

In July, an editorial questioned the need for an “overgrown” Mono Lake Widening Project. The editorial asked, “If there’s not an urgent safety problem and motorists wouldn’t gain much in terms of safe speed, what’s the point?” The article noted the important environmental resources at Mono Lake, “With jagged Sierra peaks on one side and sweeping high chaparral on the other, this stretch of US 395 is one of the most beautiful drives in the state. It cuts through the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area, created to protect the area’s natural resources.” At its close the editorial opined that “The notion of any overgrown project should be rejected. Then Caltrans can get back to doing the small job that the people of Mono County asked for in 1992.”

In August, the paper ran a news article that went into greater detail about the project and its current status—describing the controversy and the progress that has been made.

This second article noted the concerns of the public and the resource agencies, “the Mono Lake Committee ... flood[ed] Gov. Gray Davis’ office last month with more than 2,000 pleas to scale back the venture. Local officials with the U.S. Forest Service, California State Parks and the Regional Water Quality Control Board piled on too, favoring no development at all if a more sensitive alternative weren’t forthcoming.”

The article also described the current status of the project. “The California Department of Transportation widening project is now being more closely evaluated and may be scaled down from its original blueprint. And all sides say they are cooperating to come up with a plan that improves safety while protecting the precious resource.”

As Mono Lake Committee Co-Executive Director Geoff McQuilkin observed, “Caltrans is coming to see ... how much higher the bar is to do a project here. The number of citizens of California, and the number of agencies that have an investment in protecting the lake and seeing it restored, is not something they initially realized.”

The Caltrans perspective was also

shared. Officials said, “They have worked closely with local constituents and just want to make the roadway safer.” Caltrans project manager Tim Shultz was quoted, “All the opposition caught us off guard. People are coming out saying, ‘We don’t like your draft EIR’ before they’ve even seen it. Usually people wait, see it, and then say it’s garbage.”

The article concluded with two quotes that sum up where things stand. McQuilkin said, “We’ve been able to get everyone talking about the project at the level of detail where we can ... consider different options. It feels like a partnership.” Shultz noted, “We may put forward an alternative that doesn’t 100% meet our need and purpose but may substantially meet it. It may say, O.K., a lot of people don’t want this. It could be ugly; we don’t know if we can mitigate it, so let’s not even try.”

These articles have raised awareness about this project throughout California. To read them in their entirety, visit the *L A Times* website at www.latimes.com, and go to the archives—unfortunately, there is a small charge.