

Putting Caltrans' Context Sensitive Solutions Policy on the Ground

White Paper Details Mono Lake Requirements

from the Mono Lake Committee Policy Staff

Caltrans' plans for 2.9 miles of Highway 395 along the west shore of Mono Lake remain unchanged. The current plan includes uniformly widening and straightening the road, utilizing retaining walls up to 40 feet high and creating fill slopes that will cover wetlands and reach to the edge of the lake. However, as reported in the last issue of the *Mono Lake Newsletter*, a new agency-wide policy called "Context Sensitive Solutions" offers the possibility of designing an appropriate, acceptable project—if Caltrans puts the policy to work.

The goal of Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) is to "plan, design, construct, maintain, and operate [the California] transportation system" and to "integrate and balance community, aesthetic, historic, and environmental values with safety, maintenance, and performance goals" into transportation projects.

A new Mono Lake Committee White Paper details the many important values that must be respected at Mono Lake, discusses how to be sensitive to them, and offers solutions specific to this highway project. Overall, a viable Mono Lake highway project must clearly shift from the current uniform, cookie-cutter approach to one that targets safety concerns at specific spots.

Highlights from the 18-page White Paper follow; visit www.monolake.org to access the entire document.

Context

- The proposed highway project, located between Old Marina and The Mono Inn at Mono Lake on the west shore, falls entirely within the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area, is adjacent to the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve, and is part of a

state Scenic Highway corridor.

- Mono Lake is rising to the Water Board-ordered management level. Any highway work must consider where the lake and wetlands will be in the future and avoid impacts to these spots.
- Through this section of highway there is little room for expansion between the steep mountain slopes, the future shoreline of Mono Lake, and wetlands that will migrate and grow with the rising lake and rising groundwater levels.
- The state is responsible for protecting Mono Lake and its public trust resources.
- Wildlife corridors used by deer and other animals cross the highway.
- The highway is in many of the scenic views of Mono Lake.
- Mono Lake's water quality is protected by law from degradation.
- A quarter of a million people from all over the world visit Mono Lake each year because of its scenic beauty and ecological richness, and local businesses rely upon these visitors and the lake for their livelihoods.

Sensitive

- The rich, multi-faceted environmental, social, and economic context that exists at Mono Lake requires extra care and consideration.
- Responsible agencies from the US Forest Service (USFS) to California State Parks to Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board offer useful standards for a proper project. The USFS, for example, defines where and how to measure scenic impacts within the Scenic Area.

Solutions

Innovative solutions are needed to design a project that incorporates the Context Sensitive Solutions policy. Solving specifically identified problems—rather than uniformly redesigning the entire road—is the key to success.

Examples of solutions that are sensitive to the context of this project include:

- maintaining (not increasing, as proposed) the existing design speed of the highway to ensure that motorists have adequate time to respond to hazards in the roadway (including deer crossing and rock fall)
- adding signage that alerts motorists about the existence of bicyclists along the roadway
- considering a separate bike lane, possibly on the Southern California Edison easement west of the roadway
- revegetation, slope netting, small catch walls or other approaches along rock fall areas to prevent rocks from falling onto the highway, and
- adding a second scenic vista point at Cemetery Road in addition to the existing Old Marina visitor area.

Targeted solutions like these will address the safety goals of the project while minimizing the destructive consequences of large retaining walls and fill slopes, minimizing visual impacts, and avoiding impacts to deer and other wildlife.

The Mono Lake Committee expects that the White Paper will help Caltrans create new alternatives in the draft Environmental Impact Report that represent true context sensitive solutions. ❖