

# Caltrans Draft EIR Just Released

**A**s this newsletter goes to press, Caltrans has just released the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) on the Mono Lake Widening Project to the public for comment. Because of the project's complexities, the review deadline has been extended from November 14th to December 1st in order to allow for adequate analysis and input from the public.

Committee staff and experts are currently analyzing the document and are comparing the proposed alternatives contained in the DEIR to the several years' worth of work completed by the Project Development Team (PDT)—the group of agencies and special interest groups that have been working with Caltrans to help significantly reduce project impacts. The Committee will send our final analysis out to members soon by mail. We hope that you will provide written comments to Caltrans so that the shoreline of Mono Lake remains protected.

A first quick review of the document has Committee staff disappointed. While Caltrans did incorporate a few suggestions made by the PDT into the second alternative, it does not nearly go far enough to minimize serious impacts. In fact, there is no mention in the DEIR of any agency concerns although there were plenty raised both in PDT meetings and in writing to Caltrans. Also missing from the document are supporting studies on which Caltrans' analysis is based. Additionally the various components of each alternative and their associated impacts are not clearly stated. Therefore, it is difficult for the evaluator to tease apart what specific part of the project is causing what impact—and

what choices can be made to reduce certain impacts. The Committee will be working hard to distill this information down to make it available in a more understandable form.

The Mono Lake Widening Project is proposed for a 2.9 mile section along the west shore of Mono Lake. There are two alternatives outlined in the DEIR in addition to the No Build alternative. The first alternative describes the full extent of the project that Caltrans has proposed. It includes a shift in road alignment to address rock fall issues and to increase the design speed of the highway, and also an alignment shift to increase the shoulder width to a uniform eight feet throughout the project area. This alternative would result in the greatest impact to the natural and scenic values of the area.

The second alternative attempts to balance transportation goals while still protecting the natural and scenic resources. It takes the first alternative and reduces the realignment for rockfall but still maintains the realignment related to design speed increase. It allows for less than eight foot shoulders in some areas. And it eliminates the intersection improvement at Picnic Ground Road (Old Marina) completely.

Public comment on the DEIR is a critical step to convincing Caltrans and local decision makers that Mono Lake is a special place and deserves extra special care. For the latest updates please check [www.monolake.org](http://www.monolake.org) or contact Lisa Cutting ([lisa@monolake.org](mailto:lisa@monolake.org)) at (760) 647-6595. ❖

**DEIR comment letters  
due December 1.**

**Watch for an action alert  
in the mail soon or visit  
[www.monolake.org](http://www.monolake.org).**

## Motor Boat Tour Operator Refuses State Permit

by Lisa Cutting

**D**espite years of discussion, several months of negotiation, and the completion of an environmental review, the proponent of a motor boat tour at Mono Lake has refused to sign the permit offered to him by California State Parks.

For the last six months, State Park rangers have been developing permit conditions that carefully protect Mono Lake's wildlife, scenic, and ecological resources. While the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve has the duty to protect Mono Lake for all Californians, they also recognize the desire for responsibly conducted interpretive programs that teach others about Mono Lake. Balancing the two has been challenging but the Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve has gone to great lengths to craft such a permit (see Spring 2003 *Newsletter*).

The environmental review for all three types of commercial boat tours at Mono Lake—motor, canoe, and kayak – was completed in late July. The analysis determined that none of the tour operations would significantly impact the environ-

ment provided they adhered to the permit guidelines. Some of those guidelines include buffer zones near stream deltas and nonfocal visitation sites, maximum tour lengths, shoreline no-wake zones, and a four-stroke motor requirement (where relevant) to minimize noise and reduce impacts to water quality.

The Mono Lake Committee and Caldera Kayaks signed their permits for canoe and kayak tours respectively. Tom Crowe of Mono Lake Charters did not sign his permit complaining that the permit guidelines were too restrictive.

Tom Crowe continued to operate his commercial tours and on August 20th California State Park rangers cited him for operating without a permit. His arraignment is pending.

The Mono Lake Committee continues to seek to protect the lake while encouraging people to experience and learn from it. Interpretive tours are a part of the educational experience, but they must be conducted in a manner that does not significantly impact the lake or the visitor experience.