



San Dieguito River Valley
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November 19, 2010

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Subject: Comments on Interstate 5 North Coast Corridor Draft EIR/EIS

The San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority (JPA) Board considered the Draft EIR/S for the I-5 North Coast Corridor at their meetings of September 17 and November 19, 2010. Interstate 5 travels across the newly restored San Dieguito Lagoon and through the western portion of the San Dieguito River Park, a 55-mile long regional river valley open space corridor. It bisects the San Dieguito Lagoon as it does through the other San Diego County coastal lagoons, representing a major impediment to east/west tidal flow and connectivity.

The JPA, with representation from each land use jurisdiction within the San Dieguito River Park's focused planning area; is empowered to plan and maintain the San Dieguito River Park. The adopted San Dieguito River Park objectives include not only the preservation of open space, but to preserve the natural character, visual quality and sensitive resources of the open space corridor, including protection of water resources, and creation of recreational opportunities throughout the Park (*San Dieguito River Park Concept Plan, 1994*). The San Dieguito Lagoon represents the western gateway to the San Dieguito River Park. While the JPA recognizes the importance of I-5 as a coastal transportation route and the need to keep goods and services flowing efficiently, we also place great value in the role our coastal lagoons play in the region. We support a fair balance between these two vital resources. The project to widen I-5 through this area must not occur at the expense of the San Dieguito River Park and the associated coastal lagoon.

The JPA's comments specific to the Draft EIR/S are substantial and warrant a recirculation of the DEIR/S with our questions and comments addressed:

1. The Draft EIR/S does not adequately address the need for the project as required by NEPA, in particular the need relative to or in combination with the proposed LOSSAN rail corridor. In Section 1.3 (Need for the Project), a statement is made "even with the proposed improvements (to the rail corridor), capacity would not be sufficient to address anticipated travel demand along the I-5 corridor in 2030", yet no further explanation or analysis is provided to justify why widening of the I-5 to 14 lanes is needed if public transit along the LOSSAN corridor is expanded (ie, double tracking). Caltrans' NEPA guidance regulations require explanation of and justification for the purpose and need of a project in an EIS. The Draft EIR/S should

provide a quantified comparison of vehicular and rail trips within the I-5 corridor and how implementation of both the I-5 widening project and double tracking affects those trips. In addition, Table 1.3-11 states that the LOSSAN double tracking (to expand public transit) is a “vision” yet it is included in SANDAG’s 2030 RTP. It is not clear in the Draft EIR/S that expanding public transit would still require a need for the project to the extent proposed. Without this knowledge, it cannot be determined if impacts to the San Dieguito Lagoon wetlands and Park are justified or if other less impactful alternatives are feasible.

2. How does the project fit with the I-5 NCC Corridor System Management Plan (CSMP) with respect to a multi-modal approach to the corridor? Again, the Draft EIR/S does not adequately convey how the different modes of transit work together to meet demand and how public transit would reduce vehicular travel. If Caltrans continues to widen freeways to improve level of service and decrease vehicular travel times then there is no incentive for the public to use public transit. Impacts associated with widening the freeway are numerous and significant and are not adequately justified.
3. Main arterials adjacent to I-5 within the Del Mar/San Diego region, such as Via de la Valle and El Camino Real, are also proposed to be widened. Widening the adjacent roadways will also have significant effects on the San Dieguito River Valley. It is unclear in the Draft EIR/S how the I-5 project may affect vehicular flow and level of service on the area roadways. The Draft EIR/S must adequately address the cumulative impacts of all proposed vehicular roadway/freeway widening in this sensitive coastal area.
4. The EIR/S does not adequately describe the amount of additional freeway right-of-way (R/W) needed for the widening. Figure 10 (page A-25) shows new R/W over the Coast to Crest Trail (east side of freeway), but states that the project would not “interfere with existing trails or planned trails” (page 3.1-44) and “would not result in permanent impacts to any of the trails...” (page A-28). There appears to be a direct conflict in the analysis, which shows new R/W proposed right over the existing Coast to Crest Trail yet a statement that no impacts would occur to the trail. Page 3.1-25 refers to “minor acquisitions” in the San Dieguito River Park but provides no detail on what is proposed within the new R/W. What are the “minor acquisitions” proposed in the San Dieguito River Park?
5. We disagree with the unsubstantiated blanket statement on page A-28 that the project “would not affect the visual quality of the SDRP because they would simply extend the Caltrans’ right-of-way boundary outward slightly and ultimately result in a view of the area adjacent to I-5 very similar to the existing condition.” Figures 2-2.10 and 2-2.11 show an expansion of 48-60 feet into the park and directly over the Coast to Crest Trail. The DEIR/S must provide specifics, as required by CEQA Section 15126.2, to substantiate the conclusion of no impact.
6. The first paragraph on page A-29 addressing the Coast to Crest Trail completely dismisses any impacts to the trail and San Dieguito River Park as *de minimis*. We strongly disagree with that assessment, which is based on vague unsubstantiated statements that appear to ignore the addition of 120 feet of freeway lanes, tall retaining walls, higher traffic volumes, increased shadowing in the river channel from a wider

bridge, loss of habitat, and new R/W over the Coast to Crest Trail. Incremental additions to the freeway width and vehicular use over the past twenty years has contributed substantially to adverse effects on the River Valley from the freeway, which would be made worse by the proposed project. These impacts must be addressed in greater detail and mitigated by the project.

7. The buffer design would reduce the footprint needed for the expansion through the sensitive coastal areas by 26 feet. Minimizing the project footprint should be one of the project objectives.
8. The project description is not clear on what exactly is proposed northbound at Via de la Valle. The configuration for the Via de la Valle northbound section appears to be a 12+4 configuration (not 8+4 or 10+4 as described in the DEIR) since the auxiliary lane apparently would remain. The DEIR/S does not accurately describe the project details. Please clarify what is proposed for the existing auxiliary lane northbound at Via de la Valle, which adds another lane to the existing 5 lanes northbound.
9. The text in the 2nd paragraph on page A-27 that discusses the existing trails within the lagoon area should be updated. For example, the Coast to Crest Trail lagoon segment is not proposed, but is now complete from Horsepark to Jimmy Durante and includes a freeway undercrossing. Inaccurate information misleads the decision makers and does not allow for an accurate assessment of impacts.
10. The last sentence of this same paragraph conflicts with the statement on Figure 10 “not subject to 4(f) (private)” shown for the area that contains the existing recreational trail and on land that is clearly part of the San Dieguito River Park. Clearly, public open space and recreational trails are subject to 4(f) analysis. In addition, the aerial background should be updated to show the current condition of newly created wetlands in order to accurately analyze impacts to the wetlands. Inaccurate information misleads the decision makers and does not allow for an accurate assessment of impacts.
11. The Coast to Crest Trail lagoon segment is not clearly described or shown accurately in the Draft EIR/S. Figure 9 describes it as “proposed hiking trail”. The trail already exists and is not a “hiking trail” but a regional public multi-use trail (pedestrians, bicycles, and horses) and the western extent of the CTC Trail.
12. During the widening of I-15 Managed Lanes in the Lake Hodges area the Coast to Crest Trail undercrossing was impacted by the lengthy freeway widening construction period and was not rebuilt in a satisfactory condition. Litter and drainage impacts occurred throughout the multi-year construction period and adequate notice was not provided to JPA staff and trail users during periods of trail closures. Trail facilities such as bollards, fences, benches, and signs were also damaged or removed by Caltrans’ contractors and, in some cases, were not repaired or replaced. Better communication and coordination with JPA staff must occur during project implementation. Please add the JPA to the agencies with which Caltrans will be coordinating and clearly describe in detail what communication and coordination you plan to undertake with the JPA.

13. Aerial backgrounds used for base maps are outdated and do not show the dramatic changes in the lagoon area from the restoration/creation of over 150 acres of wetlands, a new tidal basin just west of I-5, new tidal wetlands on both sides of freeway, and the new Coast to Crest Trail lagoon segment. Views of this area from the freeway and surrounding area have been greatly enhanced and the coastal wetland and upland habitat has been expanded and greatly improved. Inaccurate information misleads the decision makers and does not allow for an accurate assessment of impacts.
14. Of great concern to the JPA is the lack of community enhancements proposed for this portion of the North Coast Corridor that includes the western gateway to the regional 55-mile long San Dieguito River Park. The I-5 corridor provides vehicular access and public views to the park but at the same time represents the major urban intrusion into the valley as it does for the other coastal lagoons in San Diego County. Proposed I-5 widening will negatively impact this area by greatly expanding the freeway expanse through the lagoon and park by as much as 146 feet (Figure 2-2.10). Several opportunities for community enhancements were documented in Caltrans' Community Enhancement Plan (Jan 2008) including an extended trail along San Dieguito Drive and a nature center east of I-5 visible from the freeway, but are not proposed as part of the I-5 NCC project. A lack of public parking also exists in this area to provide adequate public access to recreational facilities that were recently expanded. In addition, the Coast to Crest Trail is incomplete west of Jimmy Durante. The JPA has obtained over \$7.1 million in grants and donations to acquire open space and build public park facilities in this area (in addition to SCE's \$86M wetlands mitigation project) that could be further expanded and enhanced. The I-5 NCC does not contribute to any enhancements in the San Dieguito River Park area, a substantial deficiency in the project.
15. The JPA opposes traditional sound walls along the I-5 lagoon corridor because they would block scenic views to the lagoon, valley floor, and ocean beyond. Coastal estuarine views define the character of the coastal drive through north San Diego County. These views would be destroyed by sound walls that also would form a tunnel along the freeway. We agree with the impact assessment in the Draft EIR/S of sound wall 573 described on page 3.15-9 and oppose any traditional noise barriers (e.g., S603).
16. Because of the negative visual impact that sound walls would create through the lagoon area, the Draft EIR/S should address other design solutions to attenuate freeway noise along the Coast to Crest Trail as feasible mitigation measures required by CEQA/NEPA. Since tire/road noise accounts for 75-90% of overall roadway noise (*I-5 NCC Traffic Noise Basics*), then alternative freeway surface materials that reduce vehicular wheel sound should be examined as a mitigation measure. Also since wind is an important meteorological factor that effects noise levels and off shore wind is prevalent adjacent to I-5 in the San Dieguito River Valley, shorter noise walls that may reduce noise at sensitive receptors below the freeway elevation could also be examined as a mitigation measure (the trail is located at least fifteen feet below the freeway elevation). The DEIR/S should address other design solutions to attenuate freeway noise.
17. The information in the Draft EIR/S about retaining walls proposed for both sides of the freeway is inadequate to accurately determine impacts to habitat and scenic views. The

EIR/S should describe exposed height, design, length, and proposed landscaping, etc. for these walls. Native landscaped buffers should be incorporated into any wall design within the San Dieguito River Valley specifically adjacent to the existing preserved open space.

18. Recent landscaping done by Caltrans has included planting acres of ice plant along widened freeway corridors. Some varieties of ice plant, as well as other invasive non-native species, spread to adjacent native habitat causing significant impacts to native plants and the wildlife that depend on them and, therefore, should be strictly forbidden within the I-5 NCC. All landscaping within and adjacent to wetlands and adjacent uplands should be required to be native species.
19. The information in the Draft EIR/S about widening San Dieguito Bridge over the river lacks the specificity needed to accurately determine impacts to habitat, hydrology, tidal flushing, and to the existing trail undercrossing. We are opposed to adding any new piers in the already impacted river. Page 3.9-5 under San Dieguito River states that the bridge would be widened by 39 feet on each side. How is this widening to be accomplished without impacting the existing trail, habitat, or drainage channels?
20. Widening the San Dieguito River bridge without lengthening its span would cause unmitigated impacts because the only connection between the west and east sides of the coastal estuary/river being under the freeway would be further constrained. As stated on page 3.17-5 of the Draft EIR/S, the freeway represents a barrier to east/west wildlife movement across the lagoon. An opportunity exists to provide habitat connection between the west and east sides, but instead the project proposal is to further constrain the only link by widening the concrete bridge. The conclusions reached in the Draft EIR/S about wildlife movement are unsubstantiated calling the trail under the freeway a wildlife trail. The concrete trail under the San Dieguito River bridge does not function as a wildlife corridor. No connecting habitat exists on the north side of the bridge and the south side is also constrained with little habitat connectivity. Widening the bridge without providing a better wildlife corridor connection will further constrain wildlife movement in this corridor and is not mitigated by the project.
21. How are the two existing drainage channels paralleling I-5 impacted by the project? Coast to Crest Trail bridges exist over both drainages that drain into the river. The Draft EIR/S does not describe these or identify impacts.
22. Why doesn't the EIR/S address a potential DAR to the Fairgrounds? The Draft EIR/S (page 1-9) states "A DAR at Via de la Valle may be analyzed in conjunction with the anticipated traffic impacts from the Del Mar Fairgrounds project." This statement is outdated since the Fairgrounds Master Plan Draft EIR circulated at the end of 2009 did not include a DAR. Not providing this information is potentially piecemealing the project.
23. The biological analysis must be updated to reflect the current condition of the lagoon since SCE created 150 acres of new tidal wetlands including a new tidal basin on the west side of the freeway and several acres of new marsh habitat on both sides of the freeway. The restoration has substantially increased the number and species of fish and birds at the

lagoon as well as the quality of habitat. The biological surveys were conducted prior to the restoration (lagoon technical study is dated June 2006, which is during construction of the restoration project) and do not reflect the existing condition. In fact, if the surveys were conducted during lagoon restoration construction then the results may be even further underestimated. Indirect impacts to species are of particular concern from increases in noise (temporary during construction and permanent after project completion), urban intrusion, particulate matter, edge effects, litter, and visual. Inaccurate information misleads the decision makers and does not allow for an accurate assessment of impacts.

24. The floodplain and hydrologic analyses are based on conditions that existed prior to the San Dieguito Lagoon restoration and must be updated to accurately assess the impacts of the project since areas were dredged and new wetlands created.

The JPA appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Draft EIR/S. Pursuant to CCR 15088.5, we strongly recommend that Caltrans recirculate the DEIR/S prior to its certification as it is presently inadequate in its evaluation of significant effects and mitigation regarding the San Dieguito River Park. The JPA would be pleased to work with Caltrans to identify design solutions to mitigate some of the impacts to the Park. Please keep us informed as the environmental process continues and feel free to contact our Environmental Planner, Shawna Anderson at shawna@sdrp.org if you have any questions about our comments.

Sincerely,

JPA BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Richard Earnest, Del Mar City Council
JPA Board Chair