

ALKALI SINKS, RIPARIAN CORRIDORS, AND SLOUGHS – OH MY! INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION TO CORRECT PAST RESOURCE IMPACTS AND ADDRESS FUTURE TRANSPORTATION NEEDS IN CALIFORNIA'S CENTRAL VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

The State Route 180 Westside Expressway project (SR 180) in the Central Valley of California is a proposed 50 mile expressway corridor that would run east-west through some of the valley's most sensitive and rare habitats. The existing roadway traverses an area adjacent to the Kerman Ecological Reserve, Alkali Sink Ecological Reserve, proposed Alkali Sink Conservation Bank, Mendota Wildlife Area, Fresno Slough, and San Joaquin River. Together these areas represent a valuable patchwork of open water, riparian, alkali scrub, and vernal pool habitats that have become increasingly rare due to conversion to agriculture and residential development. In March of 2011, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) released a Draft Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement analyzing 3 proposed alternatives; Alternative 1 would extend and improve the existing SR 180 facility, while Alternatives 2 and 3 would create entirely new roadway corridors to the north. While Alternative 1 had the greatest potential for impacts to existing reserve areas, Alternatives 2 and 3 would result in direct and indirect impacts to unprotected habitat areas and would create an additional barrier to wildlife movement between existing reserves and the San Joaquin River riparian corridor. Through agency coordination facilitated by Caltrans, a number of design variations were developed to address the concerns of transportation and resource agencies regarding which alternative was environmentally preferable: expansion of the existing route or construction of a new facility. The Preferred Alternative resulting from this coordination proved to be transformative for the project, changing the focus from project impacts to potential environmental benefits that could result from the project. Through the addition of viaduct structures traversing areas adjacent to reserves, among other improvements, the project is now proposing an alternative that addresses historic resource impacts from the original roadway construction, while allowing for expansion to address future facility needs. Elevating portions of the expressway along the existing corridor will 1) remove the existing roadway that acts as a barrier between reserve lands on the north and south; 2) reconnect historic sloughs and seasonal waterways; 3) allow for improved sheet flow between north and south reserve areas; 4) enhance genetic exchange of vernal pool species; 5) improve connectivity between sides of the roadway to allow safe migration of species; and 6) reduce the incidence of wildlife/vehicle collision. This alternative also avoids the additional fragmentation of natural habitats and prime farmland that would have been caused through the creation of an entirely new expressway corridor to the north. In coming together to collaborate on an environmentally preferable project, Caltrans and the resource agencies involved were able to reach consensus on an expressway project that corrects infrastructure impacts of the past, while allowing for the needs of the future.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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