



February 7, 2012

Governor Jerry Brown
State Capitol Building
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Environmental issues and high-speed rail

Dear Governor Brown:

On behalf of Sierra Club California's 150,000 members and activists, I am writing to draw to your attention some key environmental issues that should be considered as your administration and the High Speed Rail Authority pursue ways to improve the state's high-speed rail plans.

Sierra Club California supported the 2008 bond measure to help fund high-speed rail in California. We remain committed to transportation projects and systems that will help Californians reduce environmental impacts as we achieve mobility and access to work, school and services. In January, we wrote to the High Speed Rail Authority about our concerns regarding the *California High-Speed Rail Program Draft 2012 Business Plan*, released November 1, 2011. Previously, our members have attended workshops and submitted comment letters regarding project details.

Going forward, we believe there are six key issues that can and should be more fully addressed to ensure that a high-speed rail system delivers environmental benefits and regains public support. I list them briefly here:

1. Diesel emissions. The current plan calls for using diesel-powered engines on the Fresno-to-Bakersfield first leg of the high-speed rail (HSR) construction. The San Joaquin Valley is one of the most heavily air polluted regions in the country. Research indicates that this is expressed in high levels of asthma and other lung disease, heart disease and a range of other health impacts. Some recent research suggests that this air pollution—especially the diesel particulate pollution—is creating multi-generation negative changes in immune systems. In short, the region cannot afford additional diesel emissions. The administration should ensure that HSR construction—both during the construction process and during operation—results in no net gain in air pollution in the region. The technology and mitigation opportunities exist to support this.

2. Sensitive habitat encroachment. The high-speed routes now under consideration cross certain sensitive grasslands and other habitat, particularly in the Pacheco Pass area. We continue to believe this encroachment should be avoided or substantially mitigated.
3. Community disruption. The current plan would split actively cultivated farmlands and/or run through low-income communities that already bear a disproportionate environmental impact burden from various sources. These issues need to be forthrightly addressed by the High-Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) or succeeding responsible entity.
4. Noise. The train's noise impacts can be reduced in various ways, including by reducing speeds through populated areas.
5. GHG reductions. The level of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction associated with the train's operation depends on a range of factors and assumptions, including ridership, what other forms of transportation are avoided, and whether renewable resources are used for generating electricity for the train. There is much confusion about what those impacts will be for California's HSR. The HSRA or other responsible entity should produce robust and transparent modeling of the GHG impacts of a California system under various scenarios. These might include low-ridership, mid-level ridership and high-ridership scenarios, and/or they might include scenarios linked to different levels of completion of the system.
6. A train that Californians can use. Ultimately, the train system must work for Californians to collect environmental and transportation benefits. The plan needs to put a high-quality alternative to automobiles and intrastate jet flights in place as soon as possible so that Californians can actually use the system. One of the most glaring problems with the current business plan is that it is unclear that investment will actually result in a useable system within a reasonable amount of time.

Thank you for considering these comments and addressing these issues as deliberation on the high-speed rail system continues.

Sincerely,



Kathryn Phillips
Director
Sierra Club California