



**CALIFORNIA
HIGH-SPEED RAIL
AUTHORITY**

BRIEFING: December 2011 BOARD MEETING ITEM # 4

TO: Chairman Umberg and Authority Board Members

FROM: Dan Leavitt, Deputy Director

DATE: November 29, 2011 *(Amended December 7, 2011 - See page 4)*

RE: Merced to Fresno Section Recommendation for the Preferred Alternative

Discussion

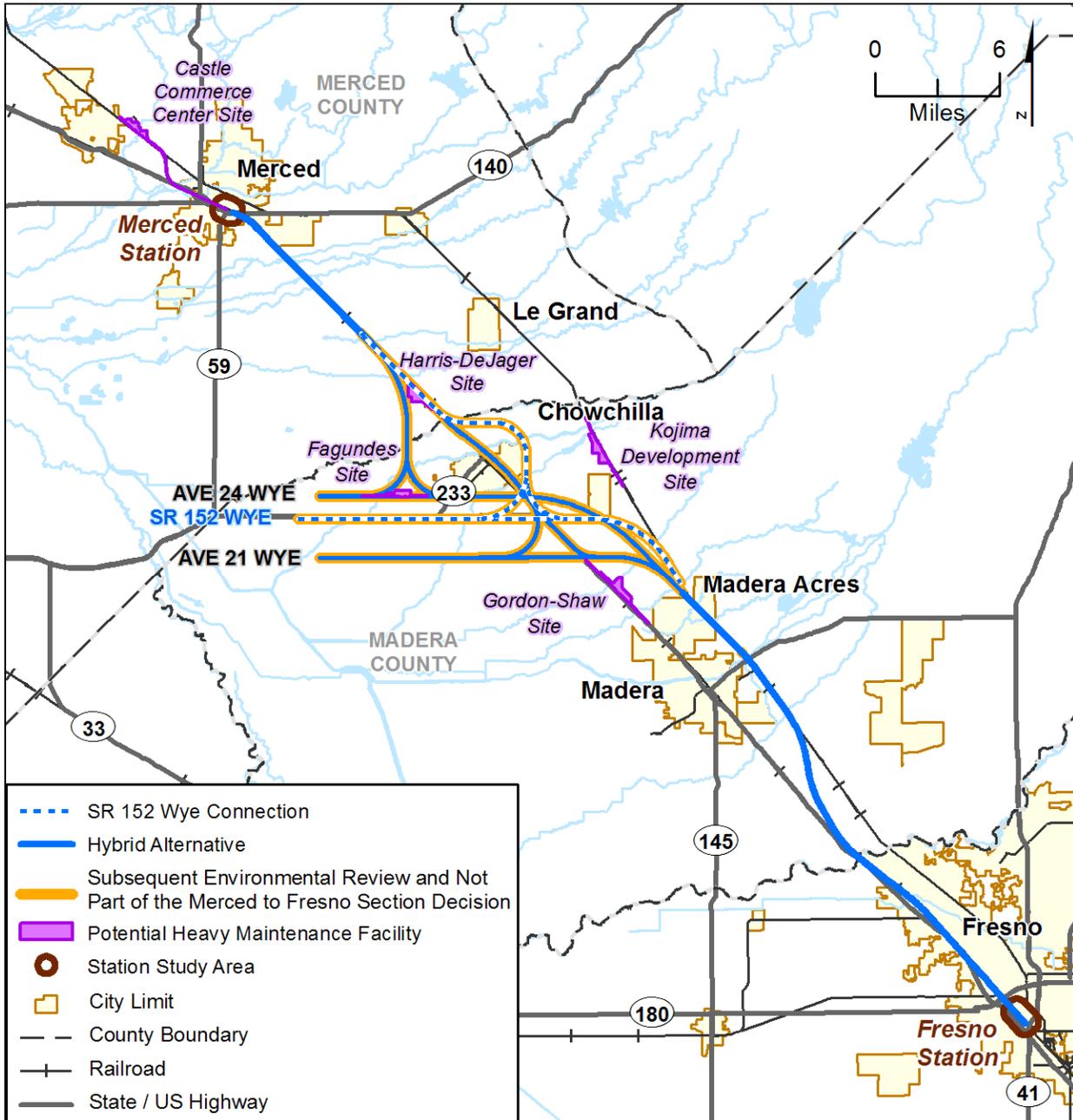
The 60-day public comment period for the Draft EIR/EIS on the Merced to Fresno section of the high-speed train system ended on October 13, 2011. Staff has reviewed all comments received during the public comment period and is preparing responses to those comments for inclusion in the Final EIR/EIS.

After careful consideration of data in the Draft EIR/EIS and public comments, staff will present its recommendations for identifying preferred alternatives in the Final EIR/EIS to the board as an action item on December 13, 2011.

The “Hybrid Alternative” is the staff recommendation for the preferred north-south alignment for the Merced to Fresno section (see Figure 1). The Hybrid Alternative provides the least environmental impacts considering the collective evaluation of natural and community resources, is the least costly alternative, and has the fewest constructability issues and therefore best meets the Authority’s project objectives and purpose and need.

The Hybrid Alternative has:

- Fewer natural resource impacts than the BNSF Alternative and generally similar to the UPRR/SR 99 Alternative
- Fewer effects on community resources than either of the other two alternatives but substantially less than the UPRR/SR 99 Alternative
- Fewer construction impacts such as noise, dust, air quality, and reduced access to parks and businesses than the other two alternatives



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Figure 1
Preferred Alternative - Hybrid

- Least constructability issues, and lowest cost alternative.
- Second best travel time, taking only 30 seconds longer between San Francisco and Los Angeles, a minute more between Merced and Fresno, and the same between San Francisco and Merced, compared to the UPRR/SR 99 Alternative.

The estimated cost of the Hybrid Alternative is about \$500 million less than the BNSF Alternative for the equivalent Wye connection and over \$1 billion less than the UPRR/SR 99 Alternative. The Hybrid Alternative also avoids Downtown Madera and the community of Le Grand. Moreover, the Hybrid alternative minimizes constructability issues which can lead to delay and cost escalation.

The Hybrid is similar in impacts or the least impacting alternative consistently over all environmental resources. The environmental process demands a balanced view of the collective resources to inform the decision process. Therefore, Authority and FRA staff anticipate that the USEPA and USACE will conclude that the Hybrid Alternative is the least environmentally damaging practicable alternative (LEDPA) consistent with the USACE's permit program (33 CFR Part 320-331) and USEPA's Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines (40 CFR 230-233).

The Mariposa Alternative is recommended as the preferred station location for Downtown Fresno. This location best serves the City of Fresno's land use planning, has the most potential for transit oriented development, and is strongly supported by the City of Fresno. The Downtown Merced Station location is recommended as the preferred station location for Merced.

Staff recommends that no preferred alternative for the wye option or the Heavy Maintenance Facility (HMF) be identified at this time. The wye decision is dependent on additional environmental analysis being developed as part of the San Jose to Merced section, therefore all three wyes alternatives identified in the Merced to Fresno Section Draft EIR/EIS are carried forward for further evaluation. Both the wye and HMF for the Merced to Fresno section should be determined as part of the San Jose to Merced section EIR/EIS.

After receiving direction from the board regarding these recommendations, a Final EIR/EIS will be developed that will include the preferred HST north-south alignment and station locations, the comments received on the Draft EIR/EIS, responses to the comments received, and any corrections needed in response to the comments received. After the release of the Final EIR/EIS, at the conclusion of this environmental review process, the Authority board will consider whether to certify the Final EIR/EIS, adopt necessary findings, and take action to approve the preferred north-south alternative and station locations for this portion of the HST system; and it is further anticipated that the FRA would issue a Record of Decision (ROD) on the Final EIR/EIS. The Merced to Fresno environmental process is of particular significance since the initial construction section of the California HST system is expected to occur within the Merced to Fresno section.

Attached is a copy of a revised staff report (dated December 7, 2011) containing more details and analysis for the preferred alignment and station locations recommendations for the Merced to Fresno section. **This version of the staff report (updated December 7, 2011) has two minor changes from the version that was sent to you on November 29, 2011. Page 5 was changed to note that Madera County has passed a resolution preferring the UPRR/SR99 alternative with a wye along SR152 (the previous version stated that they did not have a preference for any alternative), and on page 7, the number of letters sent by “Madera Friends of High-Speed Rail” was changed from “1,113” to “nearly 1,800”.**

Staff Recommendation

The staff requests the Board to concur with:

- The Hybrid Alternative identified as the Preferred North-South Alignment Alternative.
- The Mariposa Station Alternative for Downtown Fresno
- The Downtown Merced Station Alternative
- No preferred alternative for the wye option be identified as part of this document
- No preferred alternative for a Heavy Maintenance Facility (HMF) site be identified as part of this document

Attachments

- ✓ Staff Report