United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex
Post Office Box 2176
Los Banos, California 93635

F005

RECEIVED
SEP 27 2007
BY:

25 September 2007

VIA FACSIMILE AND U.S. MAIL
Mr. Mehdi Morshed, Executive Director
California High-Speed Rail Authority
925 L Street, Suite 1425
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: HSRA Should Study Only Alignments that Avoid the Grasslands Ecological Area

Dear Mr. Morshed:

I am writing on behalf of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex, in order to reiterate our natural resource concerns regarding the high-speed rail alignments through or adjacent to the Grasslands Ecological Area (GEA).

The importance of the ecosystem that the GEA protects is increasingly recognized both nationally and internationally. Encompassing approximately 180,000 acres, the GEA is the largest fresh water wetland complex in California and contains the largest block of contiguous wetlands remaining in California. Less than five percent of the original four million acres of Central Valley wetlands remain.

The GEA provides critical wintering habitat for the migratory waterfowl and shorebirds of the Pacific Flyway, including 20% of the Pacific Flyway waterfowl population. Waterfowl populations average a half-million, with peak numbers up to one million. Hundreds of thousands of shorebirds migrate through the area. The GEA provides habitat for more than 550 species of plants and animals, including 47 species that are endangered, threatened, or candidate species under state or federal law. As one of the largest remaining vernal pool complexes, the GEA is home to many rare species associated with this disappearing habitat. San Joaquin kit fox, Aleutian Canada [cackling] geese, sandhill cranes, Swainson's hawks, and tri-colored blackbirds are also very dependent upon the area.

The GEA consists of diverse habitats, including seasonally flooded wetlands, semi-permanent marsh, woody riparian habitat, wet meadows, vernal pools, native uplands, grasslands, and native brush land. The GEA was recognized in1991 by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network as one of only 15 internationally significant shorebird habitats. In addition, it was recognized in 1999 by the American Bird Conservancy as a *Globally Important Bird Area.* Most recently, it was designated a *Wetland of International Importance* under the Ramsar Convention due to its importance to a variety of wildlife, including several rare and endangered species, it critical role as wintering habitat for Pacific Flyway waterfowl, and its status as the largest remaining block of wetlands in what was once a vast Central Valley ecosystem. The Ramsar Convention is an international agreement dedicated to the worldwide protection of ecosystems that span member nation's borders. The GEA is one of only 22 sites in the United States and four in California that have received this status. F005-1
In recognition of the rich and critically important natural resources of the Grasslands, conservation agencies and groups have focused more attention and funding on this area than most areas of the State. There are two U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service national wildlife areas encompassing approximately 36,500 acres, a U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service conservation easement program that encompasses 75,000 acres on 180 separate private properties, six units of the California Department of Fish and Game wildlife areas encompassing approximately 25,000 acres, a California Department of Parks and

Recreation state park, and an extremely active Natural Resources Conservation Service program. This area has garnered numerous habitat restoration and enhancement grants totaling millions of dollars, and is one of the most active areas for conservation group involvement. F005-1 cont.

The Bay Area to Central Valley Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/S) for the California High Speed Train System, completed by the High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA), continues to propose a Pacheco Pass alignment that bisects the GEA along Henry Miller Avenue or else runs immediately adjacent to it along its northern boundary along Highway 140 and fragments a portion of the GEA. Our prior comments have provided extensive documentation of the fragility and importance of this area and the likely harm that would result from even an elevated rail alignment though this area. Both of these Pacheco Pass alignments would cause unrecognized damage to the GEA.

The GEA is a small remnant of the once vast historic Central Valley wetlands. Yet, the HSRA proposes to further degrade this priceless area of the California landscape. The Henry Miller Avenue alignment bisects the GEA through its most vulnerable middle. A Highway 140 alignment would isolate the California Department of Fish and Game's China Island Unit of the North Grasslands Wildlife Area from the rest of the GEA. Both alignments may cross both California Department of Fish and Game wildlife areas and U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service refuges, in addition to lands protected by federal and state conservation easements; regardless, simply aligning immediately adjacent to these protected lands in this locale would be equally harmful. Bisection of -- or routes immediately adjacent to -- the GEA will interfere with critical wildlife corridors, further aggravate the isolation of wildlife populations, interfere with waterfowl/waterbird nesting and breeding, and increase wildlife mortality. The physical description of a typical track layout – with a 50- to 100-foot right-of-way ("comparable to a six-land highway"), 8-foot chain-link fencing on both sides of the tracks, 26-foot tall catenary supports every 30 feet, and 12-foot to 16-foot soundwalls where proposed – would create a profound barrier. F005-2

In addition, any alignment through or adjacent to the GEA leaves open the possibility that a Los Banos/Gustine/Santa Nella area station may be added in the future. Continued population growth may create a situation where a station becomes economically viable – particularly with added political pressure. Much land in the Santa Nella, Los Banos, and the Highway 140 area is already being purchased and/or planned for development by developers.

The EIS/R identifies a proposed site for a fleet storage/service and inspection/light maintenance facility to support the Pacheco Pass alignments immediately west of the SR-165 and Henry Miller Avenue intersection. This is *immediately* adjacent to the GEA. Development of this facility – not to mention additional development pressures that would surely follow -- would have a profound impact on the GEA. This would increase the attractiveness of the area for sprawl and population increases adjacent to the GEA. The EIR/S recognizes the potential threats of urban sprawl; yet, I do not believe that the discrepancy in housing costs between the Central Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area is fully recognized. It has already caused massive urban growth in the Central Valley; and the potential for an extremely convenient commute would increase that growth by an order of magnitude. F005-3

Clearly, a high-speed train is growth-inducing. The impact of growth relative to the existing population, open space, lifestyles, and community type needs to be considered. For example, an increase of 50,000 people may be negligible to a community of nearly a million (San Jose), but it would be devastating to the way of life and habitat linkages of a town the size of Los Banos (less than 40,000). Social impacts and growth-inducing impacts to small towns and urban sprawl could very well be the most damaging negative impact of this high-speed train. F005-4

Bisection of the GEA conflicts with the private-public partnership that has long protected this unique resource. There is very little recognition of these conservation protections in the EIR/S, and no mention whatsoever of the largest category of conservation protection – USFWS conservation easements on private property. Clearly, the environmental review is still inadequate, considering that there is very F005-5

little mention of either the privately-owned wildlife habitat or the lands management by the State of California (both the California Department of Fish and Game and the California Department of Parks and Recreation), and the EIS/R contains such unsupported conclusions as: "The Henry Miller alignment alternatives would not impact the GEA." F005-5 cont.

The Pacheco Pass alignment would result in an estimated 10 minute reduction in travel time between Los Angeles and San Jose or San Francisco over the Altamont Pass alignment. This surely cannot be valid justification for the great environmental damage done to this area of the Diablo Range and the GEA and its environs. And, the Altamont Pass alignment may very well better serve and provide more options for ***intra***-Bay Area transportation needs (an area well-known for its traffic jams), not to mention the obvious benefits to the Sacramento/Stockton/Tracey communities. F005-6

When one looks at the travel needs and deficits of the State in a logical and economical manner, it appears that a blend of options would work best. According to the latest data, San Francisco Bay Area commuters are second only to Los Angeles commuters in time spent stuck in traffic. The HSRA needs to consider such options as improved air travel for the long distances between major metropolitan areas and high-speed rail within the metropolitan areas (San Francisco/San Jose/East Bay, Los Angeles/San Diego, and Sacramento/East Bay). Consolidation of transportation infrastructure that contains sprawl rather than inducing it has the potential to substantially benefit wildlife. Not only would this better focus transportation efforts where they are clearly needed the most, in addition it would eliminate costly and unnecessary expenses, move people off of the highway system, decrease wear and tear on the highway -- and thus operations and maintenance expenses, improve safety, and vastly reduce negative environmental and social impacts across the entire landscape of California. F005-7

There is wide agreement among agencies, environmental groups, and train-rider associations that an Altamont Pass alignment would best minimize environmental impacts and maximize ridership potential. The Altamont Pass alignment would add additional transportation options along an existing disrupted and congested corridor and encourage population growth in already established areas. This is an area of rapid growth; the HSRA should focus their efforts after the European model, which looks to "densification" of existing cities, rather than encouraging urban sprawl and damaging the character of small rural communities. We support the selection of this route as the environmentally preferable alternative over any Pacheco Pass route. F005-8

Due to the importance of the resources of the GEA -- and the amount of public and private focus, energy, and funds that have been invested in its protection -- we strongly urge the HSRA to eliminate any high-speed train alignments that cross through or adjacent to the GEA. F005-9

Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,

Kim Forrest
Wildlife Refuge Manager

Cc: Dan Walsworth, Refuge Supervisor; FWS/CNO
Susan Jones, Branch Chief; FWS/Endangered Species Program
Maryann Owens, Biologist; U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Dave Widell, General Manager; Grassland Water District
Julie Vance, Senior Environmental Scientist; California Department of Fish and Game
Bill Cook, Wildlife Habitat Supervisor II; California Department of Fish and Game
Malia Ortiz, District Conservationist; USDA/NRCS
Dr. Frederic Reid, Director of Conservation Planning; Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
Chris Hildebrandt, Regional Biologist; Ducks Unlimited, Inc.
Diana Westmorland Pedrozo, Executive Director; Merced County Farm Bureau
Rod Webster; Merced Sierra Club
Marsh Pitman/Ken Gosting; Transportation Involves Everyone

United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex
P.O. Box 2176
Los Banos, CA 93635
(209) 826-3508 ~ Fax (209) 826-1445

FAX TRANSMITTAL

Date 5 Sept 07

No. of pages 4
(Including cover sheet)

To: Mr. Mehdi Morshed

916/322-0827

From:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex

KIM FORREST
Refuge Manager

P.O. Box 2176
947-C West Pacheco Blvd.
Los Banos, CA 93635

(209) 826-3508
Fax (209) 826-1445
kim_forrest@fws.gov

Comments:

TAKE PRIDE IN AMERICA