



## CALIFORNIA HIGH-SPEED RAIL AUTHORITY

SCH 2009021107

### NOTICE OF PREPARATION

**FROM:** Mehdi Morshed  
Executive Director  
California High-Speed Rail Authority  
925 L Street, Suite 1425  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**SUBJECT:** Notice of Preparation of a Project Environmental Impact Report / Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/EIS) for a Merced to Bakersfield High-Speed Train system

The California High-Speed Rail Authority (Authority), as the Lead Agency for the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) process for a proposed California High-Speed Train (HST) system, is issuing this Notice of Preparation of a Project EIR/EIS for the Merced to Bakersfield section of the proposed HST system.

This NOP initiates the State CEQA process and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement for the Merced to Bakersfield section of the proposed California High-Speed Train System. The Authority is issuing this NOP to solicit public and agency input into the development of the scope of the EIR and to advise the public that outreach activities will be conducted by the Authority and its representatives in the preparation of the combined EIR/EIS. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), an operating administration with the United States Department of Transportation, will serve as federal lead agency for the federal environmental review process complying with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The FRA has responsibility for oversight of the safety of railroad operations, including the safety of any proposed high-speed train system. The FRA will publish a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the *Federal Register*, announcing the agency's intention to initiate the federal environmental review process for this section of the HST project.

The Authority and the FRA completed a Final Statewide Program EIR/EIS in August 2005 as the first-phase of a tiered environmental review process for the proposed California HST system. The Authority and the FRA completed a second program EIR/EIS in July 2008 to identify a preferred alignment for the Bay Area to Central Valley section of the HST system. The Bay Area to Central Valley HST Program EIR/EIS identified a preferred alternative through the Pacheco Pass with San Francisco and San Jose termini, as well as preferred corridor alignments and station location options. The alignment selected with the second program EIR/EIS uses the Union Pacific (UPRR) railroad corridor through the portion of the Central Valley studied (just north of Madera to just south of Stockton). The Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) is the preferred alignment from Madera to Bakersfield, as selected with the Statewide Program EIR/EIS. Tiering from the two program EIR/EISs, the Authority and the FRA will prepare a project EIR/EIS for the Merced to Bakersfield section of the HST.

**DATES:** Written comments on the scope of the Merced to Bakersfield HST project EIR/EIS should be provided to the Authority at the earliest possible date but not later than April 10, 2009. Public scoping meetings are scheduled from March 18 to March 26, 2009 as noted below.

**ADDRESSES:** Written comments on the scope should be sent to Ms. Carrie Pourvahidi, Deputy Director, ATTN: Merced to Bakersfield HST Project EIR/EIS, California High-Speed Rail Authority, 925 L Street, Suite 1425, Sacramento, CA 95814, or via email with subject line "Merced to Bakersfield HST" to: [comments@hsr.ca.gov](mailto:comments@hsr.ca.gov). Comments may also be provided orally or in writing at the scoping meetings.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Ms. Carrie Pourvahidi at (916) 324-1541 or at the above noted address.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The California High-Speed Rail Authority (Authority) was established in 1996 and is authorized and directed by statute to undertake the planning and development of a proposed statewide HST network that is fully coordinated with other public transportation services. The Authority adopted a Business Plan in June 2000, which reviewed the economic feasibility of an 800-mile-long HST system capable of speeds in excess of 200 miles per hour on a dedicated, fully grade-separated state-of-the-art track. The Authority released an updated Business Plan in November 2008.

In 2005, the Authority and FRA completed a Final Program EIR/EIS for the Proposed California High-Speed Train System (Statewide Program EIR/EIS), as the first phase of a tiered environmental review process. The Authority certified the Final Program EIR under CEQA and approved the proposed HST System, and FRA issued a Record of Decision under NEPA on the Federal Program EIS. This statewide program EIR/EIS established the purpose and need for the HST system, analyzed an HST system, and compared it with a No Project/No Action Alternative and a Modal Alternative. In approving the statewide program EIR/EIS, the Authority and the FRA selected the HST Alternative, selected certain corridors/general alignments and general station locations for further study, incorporated mitigation strategies and design practices, and specified further measures to guide the development of the HST system in site-specific project environmental review to avoid and minimize potential adverse environmental impacts. In the subsequent Bay Area to Central Valley HST Final Program EIR/EIS, the Authority and FRA selected the Pacheco Pass alternative to connect the Bay Area to the Central Valley.

The Merced to Bakersfield HST Project EIR/EIS will tier from the Final Statewide Program EIR/EIS and the Final Bay Area to Central Valley HST Program EIR/EIS in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations, (40 CFR § 1508.28) and State CEQA Guidelines (14 C.C.R. §15168[b]). Tiering will ensure that the Merced to Bakersfield HST Project EIR/EIS builds upon all previous work prepared for and incorporated in the Statewide Program EIR/EIS and the Bay Area to Central Valley HST Program EIR/EIS.

The Project EIR/EIS will describe site-specific environmental impacts, will identify specific mitigation measures to address those impacts and will incorporate design practices to avoid and minimize potential adverse environmental impacts. The FRA and the Authority will assess the site characteristics, size, nature, and timing of proposed site-specific HST project sections to determine whether the adverse impacts are potentially significant and whether adverse impacts can be avoided or mitigated. This and other project EIR/EISs will identify and evaluate reasonable and feasible site-specific alignment alternatives, and evaluate the impacts from construction, operation, and maintenance of the HST system. Information and documents regarding this HST environmental review process will be made available through the Authority's Internet site: <http://www.cahighspeedrail.gov/>.

**Project Objectives/Purpose and Need:** The purpose of the proposed HST system is to provide a new mode of high-speed intercity travel that would link major metropolitan areas of the state; interface with international airports, mass transit, and highways; and provide added capacity to meet increases in intercity travel demand in California in a manner sensitive to and protective of California's unique natural resources. The need for a HST system is directly related to the expected growth in population, and increases in intercity travel demand in California over the next twenty years and beyond. With the growth in travel demand, there will be an increase in travel delays arising from the growing congestion on California's highways and at airports. In addition, there will be negative effects on the economy, quality of life, and air quality in and around California's metropolitan areas from a transportation system that will be come less reliable as travel demand increases. The intercity highway system, commercial airports, and conventional passenger rail serving the intercity travel market are currently operating at or near capacity, and will require large public investments for maintenance and expansion to meet existing demand and future growth.

**Alternatives:** Merced to Bakersfield HST Project EIR/EIS will consider a No Action or No Project Alternative and a HST Alternative for the Merced to Bakersfield corridor.

**No Action Alternative:** The No Action Alternative (No Project or No Build) represents the conditions in the corridor as it existed in 2007, and as it would exist based on programmed and funded improvements to the intercity transportation system and other reasonably foreseeable projects through 2035, taking into account the following sources of information: State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), Regional Transportation Plans (RTPs) for all modes of travel, airport plans, intercity passenger rail plans, and city and county plans.

**HST Alternative:** The Authority proposes to construct, operate and maintain an electric-powered steel-wheel-on-steel-rail HST system, about 800 miles long, capable of operating speeds of 220 mph on mostly dedicated, fully graded-separated tracks, with state-of-the-art safety, signaling, and automated train control systems. As part of the Bay Area to Central Valley HST Program EIR/EIS, the Authority and FRA selected the Union Pacific (UPRR) railroad alignment through the portion of the Central Valley studied (just north of Madera and just south of Stockton) as the preferred alternative. This Project EIR/EIS will also evaluate the BNSF railroad alignment in this part of the Central Valley because of the uncertainty of negotiating with the UPRR for some of their right-of-way and will continue investigation of alignments/linkages to a potential maintenance facility at Castle AFB. The preferred BNSF alignment from Madera to Bakersfield was selected in the Statewide Program EIR/EIS. As defined in the Statewide Program EIR/EIS, this alignment utilizes the UPRR corridor through the urban area of Fresno, and requires a new high-speed alignment around the city of Hanford. Alignment alternatives will also be evaluated to serve a potential station in the Visalia/Hanford/Tulare area. The HST would operate at speeds up to 220 mph in the Central Valley on tracks separate from the existing BNSF and UP. Further engineering studies to be undertaken as part of this EIR/EIS process will examine and refine alignments in the BNSF and UP corridors. The entire alignment would be grade separated from existing roadways. In addition, alternative sites for right-of-way maintenance, train storage facilities, and a heavy maintenance and repair facility will be evaluated in the Merced to Bakersfield HST project area. See Figure A for a map of the Merced to Bakersfield section of the HST system.

The three preferred station locations selected by the Authority and FRA through the Statewide Program EIR/EIS and Bay Area to Central Valley HST Final Program-Level EIR/EIS will be evaluated in the Merced to Bakersfield HST Project EIR/EIS. These stations are downtown Merced, downtown Fresno, and downtown Bakersfield. Alternative station sites at or near the selected locations may be identified and evaluated. A potential HST station to serve the Visalia/Hanford/Tulare area will also be evaluated in this Project EIR/EIS.

**Probable Effects:** The purpose of the EIR/EIS process is to explore in a public setting the effects of the proposed project on the physical, human, and natural environment. The FRA and the Authority will continue the tiered evaluation of all significant environmental, social, and economic impacts of the construction and operation of the HST system. Impact areas to be addressed include transportation impacts; safety and security; land use and zoning; land acquisition, displacements, and relocations and cumulative and secondary impacts; agricultural land impacts; cultural resource impacts, including impacts on historical and archaeological resources and parklands/recreation areas; neighborhood compatibility and environmental justice; natural resource impacts including air quality, wetlands, water resources, noise, vibration, energy, wildlife and ecosystems, including endangered species. Measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate all adverse impacts will be identified and evaluated.

**Scoping and Comments:** The Authority encourages broad participation in the EIR/EIS process during scoping and review of the resulting environmental documents. Comments and suggestions are invited from all interested agencies and the public to insure the full range of issues related to the proposed action and all reasonable alternatives are addressed and all significant issues are identified. In particular, the Authority is interested in determining whether there are areas of environmental concern where there might be a potential for significant site-specific impacts. In response to this NOP, public agencies with jurisdiction are requested to advise FRA and the Authority of the applicable permit and environmental review requirements of each agency, and the scope and content of the environmental information that is

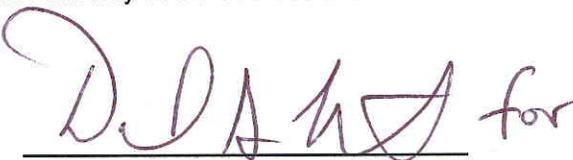
germane to the agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the proposed project. Public scoping meetings have been scheduled as an important component of the scoping process for both the State and Federal environmental review. The scoping meetings described in this Notice will be advertised locally and included in additional public notification. Scoping meetings scheduled from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. as follows:

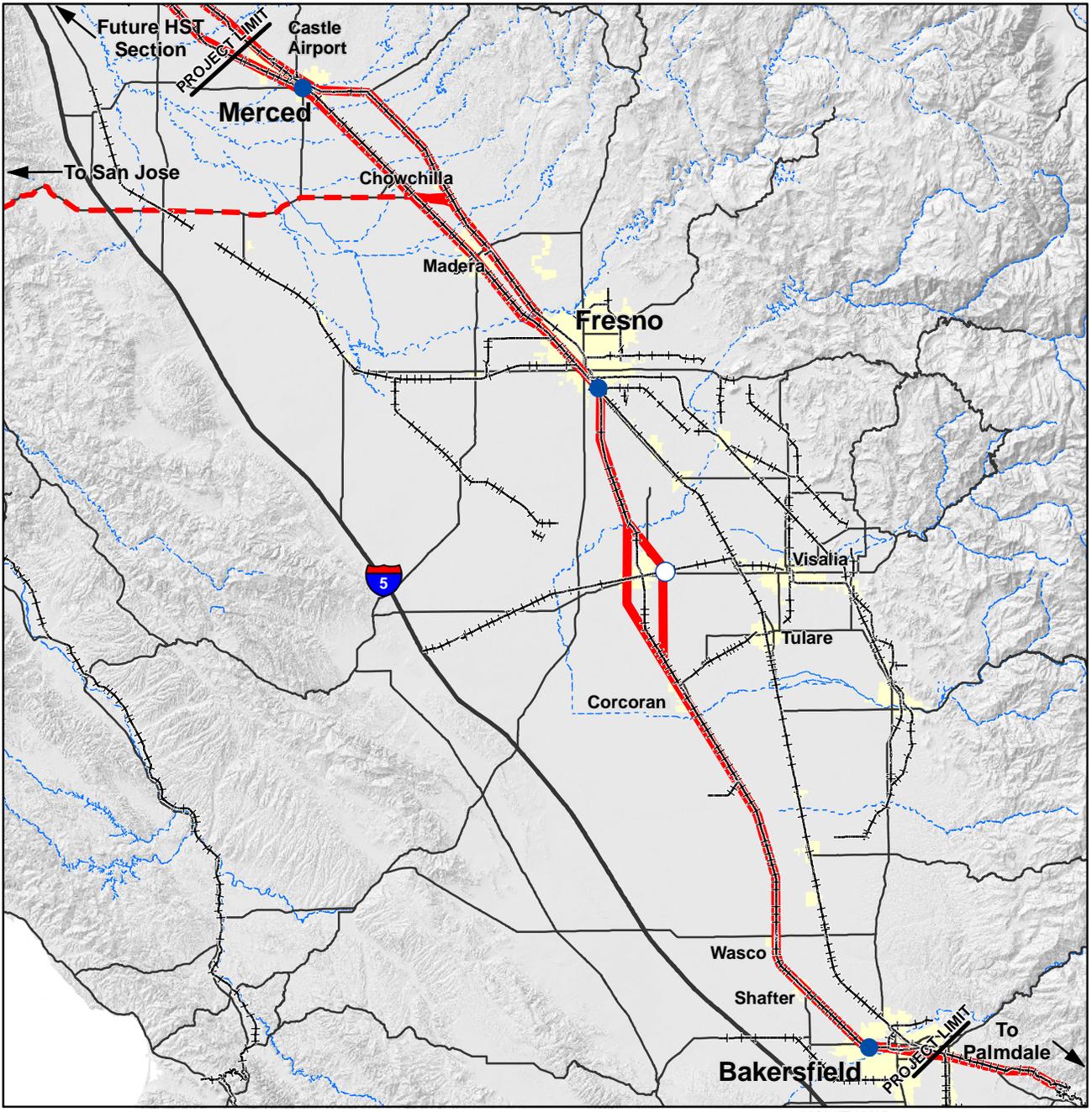
- March 18, 2009: Merced Community Senior Center, 755 W. 15<sup>th</sup> Street, Merced
- March 19, 2009: Madera County Fairgrounds, Madera, 1850 West Cleveland Avenue, Madera
- March 24, 2009: Visalia Convention Center 303 E. Acequia Avenue, Visalia
- March 25, 2009: Fresno Convention Center (Exhibit Hall), 848 M Street, Fresno
- March 26, 2009: Rabobank Theater, 1001 Truxtun Avenue, Bakersfield

Public agencies are requested to send their responses to this Notice of Preparation to the Authority at the earliest possible date but not later than April 10, 2009.

Please send your response and direct any comments or questions regarding this Project to Ms. Carrie Pourvahidi, Deputy Director of the California High-Speed Rail Authority at the address shown above.

Date: 02/23/09

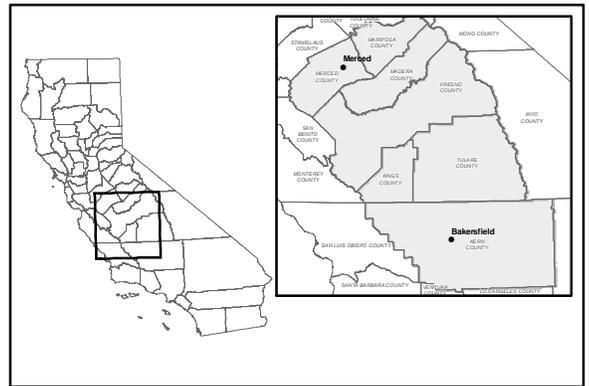
Signature:  for  
Mehdi Morshed, Executive Director



VICINITY MAP

LEGEND

- Preferred HST Station
- Potential Visalia/Hanford/Tulare Area HST Station
- HST Route Alternatives
- - - Link to Other HST Sections
- Interstate System
- State Route
- + + + + Railroad
- - - - River
- County Line



**FIGURE A**  
**Merced to Bakersfield HST**  
**Project Section**