



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION IX
75 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

September 28, 2007

Mr. Mitchell Higa
Environmental Management Branch
California Department of Transportation – District 1
P.O. Box 3700
Eureka, California 95502-3700

Subject: Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Eureka – Arcata Route 101
Corridor Improvement Project, Humboldt County, California
(CEQ #20070275)

Dear Mr. Higa:

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the above-referenced document pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508), and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act. EPA has previously provided feedback on this project through the *National Environmental Policy Act/Clean Water Act Section 404 Integration Process Memorandum of Understanding, 2006 (NEPA/404 MOU)*. Our detailed comments are enclosed.

The State of California has assumed responsibilities under NEPA for this project pursuant to the *Memorandum of Understanding Between the Federal Highway Administration and the California Department of Transportation Concerning the State of California's Participation in the Surface Transportation Project Delivery Pilot Program*.

EPA is supportive of the efforts made by the project development team to minimize impacts to wetlands and waters and other resources through the alternatives development process. However, we have some concerns about community impacts, noise, and air quality. We also encourage Caltrans to coordinate with management of the Murray Field Airport to ensure coordination of projects and proper analysis and mitigation of cumulative impacts. EPA has rated this document EC-2, *Environmental Concerns, Insufficient Information*. Please see the attached *Rating Factors* for a description of our rating system.

We appreciate the opportunity to review this DEIS and look forward to future coordination on the project. The next steps in the NEPA/404 MOU process are agreement on the 1) Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA), the only alternative that is permittable pursuant to the Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines, and 2) the conceptual mitigation plan. When the Final EIS is released for public review, please send two copies to the address above (mail code: CED-2). If you have any questions, please contact Carolyn Mulvihill of my staff at 415-947-3554 or mulvihill.carolyn@epa.gov.

Sincerely,

/s/ Connell Dunning

Nova Blazej, Manager
Environmental Review Office

Enclosures:

Summary of EPA Rating Definitions

EPA's Detailed Comments

cc: Lahn Phan, Federal Highway Administration
Ray Bosch, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Chuck Glasgow, NOAA Fisheries
Carol Heidsiek, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Wetlands and Other Waters of the United States

This project will require an Individual Section 404 Permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) and identification of the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA), pursuant to Clean Water Act Section 401(b)(1) Guidelines. Continued coordination with EPA, ACOE, and other Federal regulatory agencies through the *National Environmental Policy Act/Clean Water Act Section 404 Integration Process for Surface Transportation Projects Memorandum of Understanding (NEPA/404 MOU)* will help to insure that these Guidelines are followed.

The next steps in the *NEPA/404 MOU* process are agreement on the LEDPA, and then agreement on the conceptual mitigation plan. EPA anticipates that Caltrans will request agreement on Alternative 3 as the LEDPA. We recognize that Alternative 3 is estimated to impact more acreage of wetlands, and Alternatives 1 and 2 are projected to result in increased energy use and environmental justice concerns. These, and other environmental impacts identified in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), will be considered in the future *NEPA/404 MOU* request for agreement on the LEDPA.

We commend Caltrans for having initiated early interagency discussions regarding compensatory mitigation and look forward to continued discussions. EPA learned in recent project development team meetings that Caltrans is considering additional options for mitigation for impacts to wetlands that are not described in the DEIS. EPA supports the early consideration of mitigation sites and notes the need to agree on the LEDPA prior to confirmation of specific mitigation parcels. We are also available to review draft work products or to meet with you to ensure that the final mitigation plan satisfies commitments and addresses all pertinent issues once the LEDPA has been determined.

Recommendations:

- Engage EPA, ACOE, and other resource agencies in the identification of the LEDPA before publication of the FEIS, as outlined in the *NEPA/404 MOU*.
- Once the LEDPA is determined, identify in the FEIS the proposal for mitigating for unavoidable impacts to waters of the United States. Include a thorough discussion of the proposed mitigation plan and coordination with any existing established restoration efforts.

Coordination with Murray Field Airport and Federal Aviation Administration

Although the project is in close proximity to Murray Field Airport, the DEIS did not indicate that project managers had coordinated with management of the Murray Field Airport or the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). In discussions with Caltrans, EPA learned that project managers communicated with Humboldt County staff regarding the

airport's flight patterns and air space requirements. However, the airport is a Federally obligated General Aviation Airport, included in the National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems, and the airport sponsor, Humboldt County, has received Federal Airport Improvement Program grants. Therefore, Caltrans and the airport manager must consult with FAA prior to any land disposition, which is proposed in Alternative 3.

In addition, EPA learned during discussions with FAA that the airport is proposing to construct a deer exclusion fence around the perimeter of their property and an environmental assessment is currently being prepared for the fencing project. The fencing project should be coordinated with the Eureka-Arcata 101 Corridor Improvement project, and included in the cumulative impact analyses.

Recommendations:

- Contact Jacquelyn Hulsey, Airport Manager of Murray Field Airport, to begin necessary consultation with FAA for possible land acquisition. Document consultation in the FEIS.
- Identify specific design modifications to alternatives that may be needed as a result of coordination with FAA.
- Include information about the proposed deer exclusion fence in the cumulative impact analyses in the FEIS. Provide alternative design modifications and additional mitigation if warranted.

Community Impacts/Traffic

Page 76 of the document, in the section titled *Division of Established Communities*, states, "None of the project alternatives would displace any homes or businesses from the study area, so they would not divide or disrupt an existing community." Disruption of communities could occur as a result of other impacts besides displacement, including increased traffic on roads that run through the communities, such as Route 255 and Old Arcata Road. On page 115, in the section titled *Project Effects on Local Roads and Intersections*, the document states that Alternative 1 is estimated to increase traffic volumes by 50% in year 2031 on Old Arcata Road, which passes through the community of Bayside. If this alternative is chosen, mitigation for this increase in traffic, such as signage, reduced speed limit, or other measures, should be implemented to lessen adverse effects to residents that live along the road as well as to community members who use the road and services along it. The document mentions specifically that a public elementary school, a post office, and other businesses are accessed immediately from Old Arcata Road.

In addition, it is unclear how the text at the top of page 117 regarding increases in traffic on Route 255 relates to the percentages stated in Table 3-15. Please clarify this information, explain how and why each of the alternatives would impact traffic on Route 255, and identify mitigation measures for these impacts.

Recommendations:

- If Alternative 1 is chosen as the Preferred Alternative in the FEIS, include measures to mitigate the impacts to the community of increased traffic along Old Arcata Road. Quantify and document the benefits achieved from any proposed mitigation measures for Alternative 1 (percent of traffic volumes reduced, community impacts reduced, etc.)
- Clarify the information on page 117 regarding increases in traffic on Route 255. Present the impacts associated with each alternative in a comparable table and provide mitigation measures for these impacts. Quantify the benefits achieved by each mitigation measure proposed.

Air Quality

The *Hazardous Waste/Materials* section states that shallow soil in the project area contains hazardous waste levels of lead. This fact should be discussed in the *Air Quality* section, including the possibility of lead exposure to workers and community members as a result of earthmoving during construction.

The *Hydrology and Floodplain* section states that the proposed interchange at Indianola Cutoff would require placing approximately 300,000 cubic meters of fill. Truck activity required to bring this material to the project site could be significant, especially depending upon where the fill will be acquired. Information on air impacts related to trucking of fill should be included in the *Construction Effects* section and mitigation measures should be identified.

Recommendations:

- Discuss impacts to air quality from potential airborne lead due to earthmoving during construction, and identify sensitive receptors such as children and the elderly who may be impacted. Provide mitigation measures for lead exposure during construction and quantify the impacts that are reduced from the mitigation measures proposed
- If not currently included in the analysis presented in the DEIS, include air impacts and mitigation measures related to acquisition and transportation of fill required for the project, including a discussion of the impacts that will be avoided by specific mitigation measures.

Floodplain

It is unclear from the *Hydrology and Floodplain* section whether the addition of significant amounts of fill, such as that required for the interchange at Indianola Cutoff, and other changes to the landscape associated with the project would have no floodplain impacts. While the DEIS states that encroachment into the floodplain would be a small percentage of the floodplain area, more data on elevations in the area and visual

illustration should be provided to support the determination that the project would have no floodplain impacts.

Recommendation:

- Include a map of the project area with elevations and an illustration of the floodplain, as well as information on the elevation of project elements (lanes, median, etc) so that the “no impact” determination can be verified.

Noise

In the section on *Construction Noise*, the document states that “The majority of construction would occur near the Indianola Cutoff under Alternative 2.” There is no discussion of additional construction noise under Alternative 3, which would occur in the vicinity of Airport Road and the Lazy J Trailer Ranch. The impacts to residents of this area should be analyzed, and mitigation for any adverse impacts to sensitive receivers should be provided.

Section 3.3.4 on impacts to *Animal Species* states that measures to minimize construction noise effects on wildlife are included in Section 3.2.6, however no mitigation measures are specified in that section. Page 293 references Section 3.2.7 for information on noise minimization, but that is the *Energy* section.

Recommendations:

- Analyze construction noise impacts resulting from construction of Alternative 3. If adverse impacts are found in this analysis, provide mitigation measures and identify the reduction in impacts related to proposed measures.
- Include measures to mitigate the effects of construction noise on wildlife, either in the *Noise* section or the *Animal Species* section.

Travel Mode Choice

Humboldt County’s Regional Transportation Plan identifies pedestrian and bicycle improvements as projects having general long-term priority. Based on this and the RTP’s overall emphasis on providing travel mode choice, EPA encourages Caltrans to include safety features, such as signage warning drivers that bicyclists and pedestrians use the shoulder, and pedestrian infrastructure where appropriate, in the improvement project.

Recommendation:

- Include safety features for bicyclists and pedestrians, such as signage and pedestrian infrastructure, in the project.

Project Need and Purpose Chapter

EPA provides the following recommendations for the *Project Need and Purpose* Chapter regarding discrepancies and areas where clarification is needed:

- Correct the discrepancy between the years referenced for collision data on page 1 and Table 1-1. Identify which years of collision data are included in Table 1-1 and include consistent values throughout the chapter.
- Provide a thorough description of the Safety Corridor and corresponding collision data (currently in Table 1-3) when it is first referenced on page 2.
- Define what the numbers in bold represent in Table 1-1 as there is currently no key to indicate if the bolded numbers have additional meaning and importance.
- Include a detailed map to illustrate the current local street/driveway access locations and median crossings described on page 13.
- Add a reference for the “review of safety corridors on other highways within the State” discussed on page 15. Identify when and where the study was conducted and by whom.
- Correct the error in the bottom row of Table 1-3 on page 16, which states a collision rate of 10.47 and corresponding percentage of 1163%.

Additional Editorial Comments

The following are additional editorial comments:

- Page 319: EPA participated in Project Development Team meetings, so please add EPA to the list of agencies in this section.
- Page 171: “California EPA” should be USEPA.