
Chapter 5 California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Evaluation

This chapter provides the basis for describing any environmental effects identified in Chapters 3 and 4 that would be considered significant under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

5.1 Relationship Between the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and CEQA

This combined environmental document complies with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements for the preparation of an Environmental Assessment (EA), and with CEQA requirements for an Environmental Impact Report (EIR). Use of the term “significant” differs under these two laws. CEQA requires that an EIR include a determination of significant impacts, while under NEPA, an EA is prepared to determine whether a project will have a significant impact on the environment and, if no unmitigable significant impact would occur—the situation that has been found to prevail for the Highway 101 HOV Lane Widening Project—then a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is made. Given these differences, the CEQA significance criteria and the determination of significant impacts have not been specifically addressed in other sections of this combined NEPA/CEQA EA/EIR. These criteria and determinations are grouped for discussion in this chapter.

It should be noted that although the presence of mitigation creates a presumption of significant impacts under CEQA, NEPA encourages mitigation for all of the impacts of a project. For this reason, some mitigation measures described in this document are wholly appropriate under NEPA, although the impacts they address may not be considered significant under CEQA.

5.2 Significance of the Proposed Project’s Impacts Under CEQA

This section identifies impacts of the Highway 101 HOV Lane Widening Project that would be considered potentially significant under CEQA before proposed mitigation measures are applied.

5.2.1 CEQA Criteria of Significance

CEQA requires that an EIR identify the significant environmental effects of the project (CEQA Guidelines Section 15126), but does not promulgate specific thresholds for significance. Instead, CEQA Guidelines Section 15064(b) states that “the determination...calls for careful judgment on the part of the public agency involved...” and that “an ironclad definition of significant effect is not possible because the significance of an activity may vary with the setting.” CEQA encourages lead agencies to develop and publish their own thresholds of significance for the purpose of determining the significant effects of their projects. The fundamental definition of significant effect under CEQA is “a substantial adverse change in physical conditions.” This criterion underlies the evaluation of environmental impacts for most of the impact issues identified in the CEQA Environmental Checklist Form (Guidelines Appendix G).

Some impact categories lend themselves to scientific or mathematical analysis, and therefore to quantification. Some categories have significance thresholds established by regulatory agencies, such as the California Department of Conservation or the regional air quality management district. For other impact categories that are more qualitative or are entirely dependent on the immediate setting, a hard-and-fast threshold is not generally feasible, and the “substantial adverse change in physical conditions” is applied as the significance criterion. In the current analysis, Caltrans and the Sonoma County Transportation Authority have given careful consideration to the issue of significance and have applied the significance criteria established in Appendix G in the State CEQA Guidelines to evaluate the significance of the effects of the Highway 101 HOV Lane Widening Project under CEQA.

CEQA does not require a discussion of socioeconomic effects except where they would result in physical changes, and states that social or economic effects shall not be treated as significant effects (see CEQA Guidelines Sections 15064(f) and 15131). The Highway 101 HOV Lane Widening Project will not have socioeconomic effects that either cause or result from physical changes.

5.2.2 Unavoidable Significant Adverse Effects Under CEQA

The Highway 101 HOV Lane Widening Project would not result in unavoidable (unmitigable) significant adverse impacts. The measures proposed to mitigate the potentially significant impacts of the project are summarized in Section 5.3, Mitigation Measures for Potentially Significant Impacts under CEQA. Note that each respective impact category section in Chapter 3, Affected Environment, Environmental Consequences, and Avoidance, Minimization, and/or Mitigation Measures, presents these and other mitigation measures without regard to CEQA significance.

5.3 Mitigation Measures for Potentially Significant Impacts Under CEQA

The Highway 101 HOV Lane Widening Project would result in several impacts that would be potentially significant under CEQA. These impacts, their level of significance before mitigation with respect to CEQA criteria of significance, the mitigation measures proposed to reduce the impacts to a level below significance, and their level of significance after mitigation is applied are presented in Table 5.3-1. There would be no unavoidable significant adverse impacts of the Highway 101 HOV Lane Widening Project with the proposed mitigation in place. Note that Table 5.3-1 addresses only those impacts that would be potentially significant before mitigation is applied.

Table 5.3-1: Summary of Potentially Significant Impacts and Significance After Mitigation Highway 101 HOV Lane Widening Project

Impact	Significance	Mitigation	Significance After Mitigation
3.6 Visual/Aesthetics			
<p>3.6.3.1 The HOV lane widening would remove up to 236 mature trees, including 179 redwoods.</p>	PS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replacement planting at interchange locations, and along linear portions of the corridor (where feasible) would help reduce project effects on the removal of mature trees and landscaping. • SCTA and Caltrans would coordinate with the City of Santa Rosa, the Town of Windsor, and the County of Sonoma to develop a planting plan, including the types of trees and other plants to be installed and replacement ratios to be used. • A three-year plant establishment period would be implemented. • Efforts would continue during final design to reduce the numbers of trees that would be affected. • Important groups of trees would be protected with metal-beam guardrails, where feasible, to help maintain the corridor's identification as the "Redwood Highway." Only large trees in good health would be preserved. 	LS
<p>3.6.3.2 Removal of mature vegetation would be inconsistent with Sonoma County, City of Santa Rosa, and the Town of Windsor policies that promote preservation of roadside landscapes.</p> <p>Construction of sound walls would be inconsistent with Town of Windsor policy to avoid soundwalls, particularly along identified scenic corridors.</p>	PS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A landscaping replacement plan would be implemented and replacement trees planted. • Aesthetic design treatments of sound walls would be developed in coordination with Sonoma County, the City of Santa Rosa, and the Town of Windsor. • Where feasible, vines would be planted and allowed to grow over the walls to help visually integrate them with the overall landscape and soften the visual experience of traveling in a wholly paved, urban environment. 	LS
<p>B=Benefit, N=Neutral, LS=Less Than Significant, PS=Potentially Significant, S=Significant, SU=Significant Unmitigable Source: Parsons 2005.</p>			

Table 5.3-1: Summary of Potentially Significant Impacts and Significance After Mitigation Highway 101 HOV Lane Widening Project

Impact	Significance	Mitigation	Significance After Mitigation
3.15 Biological Environment			
<p>3.15.3.3 The project would permanently affect up to 0.0039 ha (0.0097ac) of aquatic habitat at Mark West Creek that is suitable for coho salmon, steelhead, and chinook salmon; Russian River tulle perch, northern red-legged frog, foothill yellow-legged frog; western and northwestern pond turtle. The roadway improvements could affect these species by direct take, destruction of habitat, increased run-off of sediments that could degrade bottom habitat and water quality, and construction of barriers to fish movement.</p>	PS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modifications at the Mark West Creek crossing would be developed in consultation with NOAA Fisheries, and protective measures would be implemented to minimize incidental take and avoid jeopardizing the species. Revegetation of the creek and surrounding riparian areas, including erosion control, seeding, and planting, would maintain water clarity, increase cover, prevent erosion in streams, and provide a source of fish nutrients. Modifications and revegetation at Mark West Creek would be consistent with the CDFG's California Salmonid Stream Habitat Restoration Manual. Riparian habitat would be restored at a ratio to be established in consultation with NOAA Fisheries, USFWS, and CDFG. • Mitigation measures for impacts to habitat for coho salmon, steelhead, and chinook salmon would be sufficient to provide for Russian River tulle perch. • Preconstruction surveys for northern red-legged frog, foothill yellow-legged frog, western and northwestern pond turtle will be conducted at Mark West Creek. 	LS

B=Benefit, **N**=Neutral, **LS**=Less Than Significant, **PS**=Potentially Significant, **S**=Significant, **SU**=Significant Unmitigable
 Source: Parsons 2005.