

## Summary

The Mono County Local Transportation Commission, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) propose making the following improvements to U.S. Highway 395 in Mono County, California, between kilometer posts 85.0 and 90.0 (post miles 52.8 and 55.9):

- Widening the existing shoulders to 2.4 meters (8 feet) throughout the project limits
- Improving five existing pullout locations and constructing one new vista site.
- Upgrading the highway's cross drainage facilities
- Expanding the rockfall retention areas adjacent to southbound shoulders

Numerous operational concerns exist within the project limits. The absence of uniform paved 2.4-meter (8-foot) shoulders along approximately 70% of this stretch of highway presents operational concerns. Motorists have little room for corrective maneuvers. Construction of the proposed shoulders would provide greater visibility and more recovery space for motorists, away from through traffic. Uniform 2.4-meter (8-foot) shoulders would provide more space between vehicles and bicyclists.

Eight unpaved, widened areas currently serve as public pullouts. The lack of uniform 2.4-meter (8-foot) shoulders makes it difficult to use these unpaved widened areas. In addition, motorists weaving in and out of these "pullouts," stopping to take photos, or sightseeing at these spots have kept these locations from being used as proper pullouts. Improvements proposed for five of these locations and the construction of a new vista point near Cemetery Road should alleviate current conflicts and improve usage.

As another concern, during periods of high storm water flow, the inlets of the existing culverts at Tioga Lodge tend to plug up with debris carried down from higher elevations. Over the past 60 years, this condition has resulted in at least four major floods, in which water and debris have flowed over the highway to close or destroy the roadway.

Caltrans found that a rockfall area exists along the southern portion of U.S. Highway 395 within the project limits. Rocks from the nearby mountain slopes have fallen onto the highway. The existing right-of-way could be modified to provide additional area to catch or contain rocks before they enter the traffic lanes.

## **Project Alternatives**

### **Alternative 1**

This alternative proposes 3.6-meter (12-foot) lanes and 2.4-meter (8-foot) shoulders throughout the length of the project for both northbound and southbound lanes from kilometer posts 85.0 to 90.0 (post miles 52.8 to 55.9). Retaining walls would be used in certain locations to minimize ground disturbance to wetland areas and to reinforce cut slopes. All other locations would be built using fill slopes (see Appendix F). A highway cut section is that part of the roadway or adjacent slope which when constructed, is lower in elevation or set further back than the original ground. A total of 3.7 hectares (9.07 acres) of additional right-of-way is expected. The September 2003 estimated cost of Alternative 1 is \$14,164,040 (\$729,000 for right-of-way and \$13,435,040 for construction). Alternative 1 would also include the following:

- Shifting the existing alignment (in areas affected by rockfall) east to provide a rockfall retention area west of the proposed alignment.
- Using guardrail at locations where deemed necessary.
- Improving five existing pullout locations and building a new scenic vista point.
- Improving cross-drainage facilities.
- Modifying county road intersections and private driveways to current Caltrans standards.
- Improving the intersection at Picnic Ground Road to meet current standards for California semi-trailer wheel tracks of 15-meter (49-foot) radius.
- Using retaining walls in wetland and riparian areas to minimize impacts.
- Adding drainage facilities to the Cemetery Road intersection area to provide additional drainage.
- Leaving the existing highway access, limited to encroachment standards for residential use.
- Planting native vegetation on disturbed areas.

### **Alternative 2**

This alternative proposes to improve U.S. Highway 395 from kilometer post 85.0 (post mile 52.8) to kilometer post 90.0 (post mile 55.9). Alternative 2 would construct roadway improvements with fewer disturbances to environmental resources than Alternative 1. Alternative 2 proposes 2.4-meter (8-foot) shoulders for all of the southbound lanes and approximately 87% of the length of the northbound lanes in this stretch of highway (see Appendix F). The estimated cost of Alternative 2 is \$10,204,920. Alternative 2 consists of the same improvements proposed in Alternative 1, except for the following:

- Less alignment shift for the rockfall retention area.
- No intersection improvement at Picnic Ground Road.
- Portions of Segments 2, 3, 4, 8, and 9 would have northbound shoulders less than 2.4 meters (8 feet) in width. A design exception would be required for the lack of uniform shoulder width throughout the project limits (see map of Alternative 2 in Appendix F).

### ***No-Build Alternative***

The “No-Build” Alternative proposes to leave the highway as it currently exists. Traffic and safety improvements would not be implemented. The highway would stay with 3.6-meter (12-foot) lanes and, on average, 1.2-meter (4-foot) paved shoulders. The eight existing unpaved widened areas that currently serve as pullouts would remain. No improvements to the roadway or shoulders would be done under this alternative. No pullouts or vista points, no drainage improvements and no county road intersections or driveway improvements would be considered under this alternative. The “No-Build” Alternative would not meet the purpose and need for this project.

### ***Environmental Concerns***

#### ***Biology***

The project, as currently proposed, would have no adverse effect on any listed plant or animal species or their respective habitat. To minimize impacts to sensitive wetland and riparian areas, structural modifications (retaining walls) have been incorporated into the project design where feasible.

Coordination with the Army Corps of Engineers established that the project would fall under a Nationwide Permit 14, road crossings. Approximately 0.02 hectare (0.06 acre) of wetland habitat would be affected. However, due to design considerations, approximately 0.07 hectare (0.18 acre) of new surface area would be exposed adjacent to current wetland habitat. Over time this ground surface would take on the characteristics of the wetland habitat adjacent to it. As a result, no net-loss of wetland habitat would occur. This natural process of vegetation growth will be dependent on many natural variables, so this would not be considered an impact immediately resolved after completion of the project. Alternative 1 would affect approximately 0.71 hectare (1.76 acres) of riparian habitat. Alternative 2 would affect approximately 0.13 hectare (0.32 acre) of riparian habitat. The proposed highway alignment has been shifted to minimize wetland and riparian impacts. Continuing improvements to the project design would decrease these figures. In locations where sensitive areas could not be avoided, mitigation measures would be required.

The proposed wetland and riparian mitigation measures would replace, restore and enhance vegetation habitat. If onsite mitigation were not possible, Caltrans would pursue offsite “in-kind” mitigation as close to the project as possible. Surface impacts to vegetation communities would also be offset by the mitigation measures proposed for visual impacts to the project area.

### *Cultural Resources*

Within the area of potential effects for the proposed project, cultural resource studies identified 10 resources: four archaeological sites, one historic linear feature and five architectural resources. None of these resources has been previously found eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Four of the architectural resources were treated under the Memorandum of Understanding regarding buildings less than 50 years old. A formal evaluation of the remaining six resources found that one had the qualities necessary to be considered eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and for placement on the California Register of Historic Resources under Criterion D (which applies to properties that have yielded or are likely to yield information important to prehistory or history); the other five were recommended “not eligible” for the National Register of Historic Places.

The State Office of Historic Preservation concurred on September 3, 2002 that site CA-MNO-3402H is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Although historic site CA-MNO-3402H is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and lies partially within the area of potential effects of the proposed project, the project would not affect the qualities for which the site is recommended eligible. Portions of the site contributing to the site’s eligibility under Criterion D would be protected by establishing an Environmental Sensitive Area and would not be affected by the proposed project. A finding that “the undertaking will not adversely affect historic properties” has been recommended for the project by the State Historic Preservation Officer and agreed to by the Federal Highway Administration. The State Historic Preservation Officer also concurred that the remaining three archaeological sites, one historic linear feature and five architectural resources were not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

### *Visual*

The project would result in short-term visual impacts. Much of the visual impact stems from the altering of landforms and disturbance of vegetation during construction. Two visual perspectives were evaluated for the project: that of the motorists traveling through the project limits (primary) and that of spectators within

the Mono Basin directing their attention toward the project area (secondary). Construction of the proposed improvements would result in a disturbed landscape, mostly a secondary view impact.

The project was found to have a minimal short-term impact to the primary view. After construction, changes to the project area would be indistinguishable to motorists. Much of the impact would take place below the line of sight for those traveling along U.S. Highway 395. Proposed mitigation measures would restore vegetation removed during construction and screen new structures placed along the highway.

Impacts to the secondary view would also be short-term, most notably close to the project area. There are only a few locations within the Mono Basin where the project area is visible. U.S. Highway 395 is not a focal point from these locations and would be screened by mitigation proposed for the project. Proposed walls would be textured and then screened by existing and planted vegetation. Bare fills would be replanted and seeded with native vegetation to blend them into the surrounding landscape.

For primary and secondary visual impacts, mitigation would involve a separate landscape project, created prior to construction that would plan and implement the replanting of native trees and shrubs. A success rate would be established and maintained as part of the mitigation project relative to the weather patterns being experienced at that time. The seeding of native vegetation would ultimately improve and restore visual conditions within the project area after construction.

### ***Coordination***

Caltrans consulted with the California Department of Fish and Game, California State Lands Commission, California Regional Water Quality Control Board, California Department of Parks and Recreation, State Historic Preservation Officer, Native American Heritage Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Inyo National Forest Service, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during the environmental studies for the proposed project. Caltrans also coordinated project activities with the Mono Lake Committee, U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

For public input, Caltrans held public “open house” information meetings in June 1999 and June 2001 to inform local community members of the project’s progress and to answer any questions of concern. The input received and concerns raised at these meetings were instrumental in the development of this project.

***Permits***

The following regulatory agencies would issue permits to Caltrans for the completion of the proposed project:

- Section 404 Nationwide Permit, No. 14 from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- Section 401 Certificate, from the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board
- Section 1601 Streambed Alteration Agreement, from the California Department of Fish and Game

***Areas of Controversy***

The Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area is a unique feature present in Mono County that is visited by many tourists yearly. It's a location that has been photographed and displayed in many publications. As such, regional environmental groups, community members and business owners have all expressed concern over visually impacting the Mono Basin with this highway project. Numerous public meetings have been held to keep those interested informed of our progress.

### Summary of Major Potential Impacts from Alternatives

Potential Impact	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	No-Build Alternative
<b>Business displacements</b>	No	No	No
<b>Housing displacements</b>	No (Potential exists for 1 single-family residence)	No (Potential exists for 1 single-family residence)	No
<b>Utility service relocation</b>	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Consistency with the <i>Mono General Plan</i></b>	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Air quality</b>	No	No	No
<b>Water quality</b>	No	No	No
<b>Wetland</b>	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Increase in Floodplain</b>	No	No	No
<b>Cultural resources</b>	No	No	No
<b>Potential hazardous waste sites</b>	No	No	No
<b>Number of Pullouts</b>	6	6	0
<b>Visual quality</b>	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Cumulative impacts</b>	No	No	No
<b>Growth inducement</b>	No	No	No