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February 7, 2013

The Honorable Mark DeSaulnier, Chair
California Senate Transportation and Housing Committee
State Capitol, Room 5035
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Senator DeSaulnier and Members of the Transportation and Housing Committee:

It is with a full appreciation of your oversight responsibilities that I provide you with the accompanying set of reports and independent analyses dealing with irregularities in the California Department of Transportation's (Caltrans) Foundation Testing Branch.

The subject matter may be complicated, but the conclusion is simple: California's transportation infrastructure rests on dependable foundations.

These three reports, cumulatively, serve not only as an enumeration of procedural deficits and subsequent reforms within our testing system, but, more importantly, as an assurance that the irregularities were so exceedingly rare, and of such limited scope, that they cannot cast any reasonable doubt on California's transportation infrastructure.

I am pleased to call your attention to the fact that my assertions are bolstered by the independent review of the Federal Highway Administration, which concludes that "additional effort to locate, identify and analyze any missing data files has reached the point of diminishing returns" and recommends that "Caltrans will be better served to focus on future prevention measures given in this report."

As you are aware, one of the many methods by which we determine the quality of concrete foundations for bridges, overcrossings, retaining walls, road signs and lights, is a technique called Gamma-Gamma Logging or GGL, which involves lowering radioactive probes down tubes built into the foundations specifically for that purpose. This system has been in use since 1994. As you also are aware, this technique has been under intense internal and external scrutiny since it came to light that a single technician had falsified data on some of his test logs.

Experts analyzed more than 23,000 individual tests, and found that in 11 instances, the results were demonstrably unreliable. Engineers then conducted structural evaluations as if each of those flawed results represented inadequate or missing concrete. In every single case, the structures were found to withstand the stresses for which they were designed.

As recommended by the Federal Highway Administration, the reports detail a series of new practices and procedural improvements to protect against future tampering. Caltrans has, for example, changed its GGL control practices to prevent technicians from having access to the test data before the engineering analysis is completed. GGL test data is now subjected to a quality control assessment to verify the accuracy of the test data sets generated.

Caltrans officials also have begun a retraining program and are completely overhauling the operations manual for the Testing Branch. Greater in-field oversight will be expected of supervisors. Further, all testing personnel will make use of stringent new documentation tools and logging requirements to ensure more rapid and dependable storage of information gained through the testing procedures.

Even basic personnel management reforms have been enacted, dealing with work-time reporting, travel expense reimbursement claims, and overtime claims. Storage, handling and disposal requirements have been addressed, along with rules for recycling waste. A full list of reforms, which were enacted concurrent to the investigation, and which continue to be realized, are included in the reports.

Should you have any questions about these reports, please do not hesitate to contact me at (916) 654-6130.

Sincerely,

MALCOLM DOUGHERTY
Director