

High-speed rail agency OKs Fresno-Bakersfield route over Kings County objections

By Tim Sheehan, The Fresno Bee

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The California High-Speed Rail Authority approved its Fresno-Bakersfield section Wednesday -- the second piece of what is planned as the backbone of a statewide passenger train network.

The agency's board, meeting in Fresno, took two separate votes related to the 114-mile route. Board members certified the final 20,000-page version of its environmental-impact report, intended to analyze how building and operating the rail system would affect homes, businesses, farms and wildlife habitat in the region, and detail how the agency will minimize or make up for those effects.

A short time later, the board approved the rail project itself and the route from downtown Fresno to the northern outskirts of Bakersfield. That route generally runs near the BNSF Railway freight tracks, now shared by Amtrak passenger trains, between Fresno and Bakersfield.

Over the objections of residents and farmers in Kings County, the route diverges from the BNSF corridor with a bypass east of Hanford that sweeps diagonally across farms and dairies. It also has bypasses that skirt the towns of Corcoran and Allensworth.

Lemoore farmer Frank Oliveira, co-chairman of Kings County's Citizens for California High-Speed Rail Accountability, was disappointed -- but not surprised -- by the votes.

"As we expected, the authority declared that their work resolving any questions in Kings County was adequate," Oliveira said. "We believe they have not done their due diligence, despite what they say. They're not adequately evaluating the environmental impacts of this project."

More than 2 1/2 years after the rail agency issued its first draft of the EIR, Oliveira said he believes the authority has done little more than pay lip service to Kings County's concerns.

"There are things in the EIR that are not intellectually honest," he said. "The line through the county has not changed since 2010. They ran around and talked to people, but have they really listened to us? I don't think so, if the line has not changed in four years."

Kings County's Board of Supervisors and two of its residents are already suing the rail authority over its statewide plan. Authority leaders acknowledged that Wednesday's votes are likely to generate more lawsuits over whether the EIR complies with the California Environmental Quality Act.

The first high-speed rail section from Madera to Fresno was the subject of several CEQA lawsuits after the authority board approved the section two years ago. By last spring, however, all of those cases were settled.

"I'm sure that we'll see a couple of lawsuits," said Tom Richards of Fresno, the rail board's vice chairman. "But I don't think they'll be any different than the ones we worked through in the past."

Dan Richard, the board's chairman, said he knows the agency has its work cut out to convince the project's opponents, who cite escalating costs, loss of homes and farms that have been in families for generations, and fears of dust and air pollution during construction.

"I don't want to pretend that we're going to resolve all these issues," Richard said after the votes. "But as we move down the Valley from Madera, and people see what we're doing to work with them, to relocate affected businesses, to compensate them for any losses, I think you're starting to see a level of comfort that we're really trying to do things the right way."

Wednesday's votes are significant steps -- but not the final ones -- toward construction south of Fresno.

Substantial work has yet to commence on the first stage of construction between Madera and Fresno, part of the Merced-Fresno section that was approved by the rail board two years ago. The agency hopes to begin construction -- estimated to cost between \$1.5 billion and \$2 billion -- between Fresno and the Tulare-Kern county line by spring 2015.

Before that can happen, two federal agencies must still lend their approval: the Federal Railroad Administration, which has committed more than \$3 billion in federal stimulus and transportation funds for construction in the San Joaquin Valley, and the Surface Transportation Board.

Permits from agencies including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will also be needed for work involving waterways, wetlands and other habitat.

Also Wednesday, the board agreed to commit up to \$35 million to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to offset the anticipated pollution created by earth-moving and construction on the high-speed rail project between Merced and Bakersfield. The agreement with the air district is part of the rail agency's efforts "to provide near-term and ongoing benefits to this region for clean air," said Jeff Morales, the authority's CEO.

Morales said the agreement will pay for investments in clean technology, including the replacement of older diesel pumps on farms with new electric pumps, as well as upgrading older tractors and farm equipment.

The agreement is in addition to the authority's requirements for its construction contractors to "use the cleanest-burning construction fleet reasonably possible," Mark McLaughlin, the authority's director of environmental services, said in a memo to the board. "But even a clean fleet will produce emissions."

High-speed board OKs next section to Bakersfield

Lodi News Sentinel, Thursday, May 8, 2014

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — The board that oversees California's \$68 billion high-speed rail project has unanimously adopted a planned route for its second and most substantial section to date, a 114-mile stretch between Fresno and Bakersfield.

Meeting in Fresno, the board voted Wednesday to approve a 20,000-page environmental planning document, sending the next phase of the project on for federal review. Engineering work has started on the first, much shorter section, a 30-mile segment from Merced to Fresno.

The document approved Wednesday includes plans to address air quality during construction, add green space to compensate for damaged habitat and prevent the spread of the highly contagious fungal disease known as Valley fever.

The complex review is required to comply with state and federal environmental laws and has been in the works since 2011.

Owner of Arvin faulty pipeline to do assessment of health risks

By Ruth Brown

Bakersfield California, Thursday, May 8, 2014

The oil company owning the faulty Arvin gas line that leaked and caused the evacuation of eight homes will compile a human health risk assessment on the released toxins.

Petro Capital Resources LLC pipeline has left more than three dozen people displaced since March 18. The pipeline has since been shut down.

A company-hired toxicologist will perform the assessment, which will evaluate the effect of the released chemicals on people.

PCR has said that the chemicals released by the leaky pipe included methane and benzene, among several others. But a study by an environmental nonprofit agency found heptane and n-hexane along with more than a dozen other harmful chemicals.

PCR spokesman Larry Pickett told the Arvin City Council on Tuesday about the planned assessment.

He said Wednesday the company should have an idea of when the assessment will be completed and released "in the next few days." Results of the evaluation will be released to residents, county officials and the public.

The assessment is only on the evacuees' homes; houses on the opposite side of Nelson Court that were not evacuated will not be checked.

The assessment will include an evaluation of soil samples plus air samples taken both inside and outside the homes, Pickett said.

At Tuesday's council meeting, Arvin Mayor Jose Flores stressed PCR needed to be transparent with residents. He said that has not been the case.

"From information I gathered, (PCR representatives) have been keeping them in the dark and that is very, very unfair," Flores said.

Pickett responded at the meeting that if that was the case, then PCR needed to do a better job.

Throughout the more than six-week ordeal, PCR has taken several air and soil samples. However, none has been released by the company. Kern County Environmental Health Services also has taken samples and also hasn't released results.

Kern County Supervisor Leticia Perez said Tuesday she wants the county to release its results.

PCR is still paying for some evacuees to stay in the Golden Valley Luxury Apartments on Hosking Avenue in Bakersfield.

The company is paying for the evacuees' apartment rent and utilities, and some of the transportation costs for residents who must now commute from Bakersfield to Arvin for work or school, Pickett said.