

Newly approved high-speed train route has 'unavoidable' effects on Valley

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The latest section approved from Fresno to Bakersfield for California's proposed high-speed train project would displace hundreds of homes and businesses and take as much as 5,000 acres of farmland out of production on at least a temporary basis during construction.

Those details are embedded in the 20,000 or so pages of the environmental impact report certified last week by members of the California High-Speed Rail Authority board at its meeting in Fresno.

The route generally follows the BNSF Railway freight tracks that run through rural Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties between the cities of Fresno and Bakersfield. It includes a bypass that veers from the freight railroad by sweeping eastward around the city of Hanford, and takes shorter bypasses to avoid the communities of Corcoran and Allensworth. The route also follows the BNSF tracks through the Kern County cities of Wasco and Shafter.

The final route is one of more than 100 possible combinations of various options that were evaluated by consultants over more than two years.

The EIR details the anticipated effects of building and operating the 114-mile segment on residents, businesses, farms, air and wildlife habitat in the region. But despite these and other significant effects of project, the rail authority deemed the "unavoidable" environmental risks as "acceptable due to overriding considerations and benefits expected to result" from the train system.

In a 328-page finding of facts adopted last week as part of its approval, the rail board acknowledged that the project "will result in certain significant impacts to the environment that cannot be avoided or substantially lessened" through measures to offset the effects.

But, the findings continued, the board "has carefully weighed these impacts and benefits and finds that the benefits ... outweigh the significant and unavoidable environmental impacts."

Among the effects detailed in the EIR are:

- The displacement of 376 homes and relocation of 1,144 residents to make way for the railroad right of way as well as related overpasses and other structures to support the tracks. Most of the displaced homes would be in the Bakersfield area.
- The need to relocate 393 commercial or industrial businesses, employing a total of nearly 2,900 employees, along the route. As with the residential displacement, most of those businesses -- 294, with 1,604 workers -- are in the Bakersfield area. In Fresno, 62 businesses with about 1,100 workers would need to be relocated.
- The permanent loss of about 3,500 acres of "important" farmland between Fresno and Bakersfield for the railroad right of way or related structures and roads. "Important farmland" is property that is considered to be prime, unique or of statewide or local importance under the federal Farmland Protection Policy Act. In addition, construction of the system over the next four years is estimated to

temporarily disrupt farming on about 1,600 acres in the four-county region.

- The splitting of almost 140 farm properties, and displacement of 15 agriculture-related facilities, by the railroad right of way as it heads across the landscape, including for the bypasses around the communities of Hanford, Corcoran and Allensworth. Among the ag facilities in the bullet-train's path are an animal-carcass rendering plant operated by Baker Commodities east of Hanford. In its EIR, the rail authority acknowledged the importance of relocating the rendering plant before the existing facility is closed "to avoid interruption in the services these facilities provide."

- A reduction of about \$34 million in agricultural revenue and about 340 fewer farm jobs as a result of farmland being taken out of production across the four-county region, mostly in Kern and Kings counties.

The board's statement of overriding considerations asserts that the anticipated benefits of building and operating the project outweigh the unavoidable effects. Those anticipated benefits include providing the nation's first test track for testing high-speed trains at speeds of 220 mph or faster; serving as a valuable transportation asset, in the short-term as a route for conventional Amtrak passenger trains and ultimately as part of the statewide bullet-train system; peak employment of as many as 4,750 workers per year in construction to build the rail line in the southern San Joaquin Valley; long-term environmental benefits through reduced automobile traffic and improved air quality in the region; and focusing metropolitan growth in downtown areas around stations and reducing the encroachment of urban sprawl onto farmland.

While the EIR spans the section between proposed passenger stations in downtown Fresno and downtown Bakersfield, the vote approving the project only applies to the span from Fresno to the northern outskirts of Bakersfield.

Leaders in Bakersfield asked the board to postpone a decision on a route into the heart of the city because of concerns over disruption of businesses and historic resources. The rail board agreed that it would not begin any work south of 7th Standard Road without giving the city of Bakersfield 60 days notice.

Affected parcels

Visit the map links and pages below to see the specific parcels anticipated to be affected by the Fresno-Bakersfield portion of California's high-speed rail project (warning: large files):

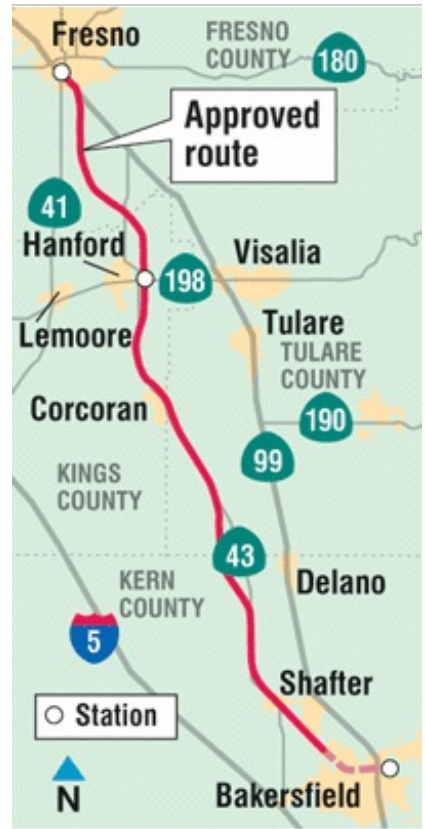
- [Fresno-Hanford \(Pages 1-79\)](#)
- [Corcoran Bypass \(Pages 54-70\)](#)
- [Corcoran-Allensworth \(Pages 6-16\)](#)
- [Allensworth Bypass \)\(Pages 71-80\), \(Pages 1-31\)](#)
- [Allensworth-Wasco-Shafter-Bakersfield \(Pages 56-60\), 1-35\)](#)
- [Bakersfield Hybrid \(Pages 85-98\)](#)

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Rail route

The California High-Speed Rail
Authority's approved
Fresno-Bakersfield route

spans about 114 miles. It is the second portion to be approved for the proposed statewide bullet-train system.



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