

Federal oversight board OKs California high-speed rail

Juliet Williams, Associated Press, 6-14-13

SACRAMENTO — The California High-Speed Rail Authority won approval Thursday from a federal railroad oversight board to start construction on the first leg of what would be the nation's first bullet train.

In a 67-page decision issued Thursday, the Surface Transportation Board ruled 2-1 that the state could begin construction on the first 65 miles of the project from Merced to Fresno, as long as it follows the current plans and follows through with environmental and other mitigation the authority has promised.

The STB's ruling removes a key hurdle for the rail authority to start construction of the \$68 billion system in the Central Valley this summer. A ruling against the state could have caused substantial delays and cost overruns for the project, which is under tight federal construction deadlines to collect billions of dollars in federal matching grants.

Republican Rep. Jeff Denham had appealed to the board to step in and halt the project, arguing that the obscure federal agency should have oversight because the train will connect to interstate rail lines.

The board ruled in April that it does have oversight of the project, but granted an exemption for the project in its ruling Thursday.

"We can now focus on starting major work on the project this summer and providing thousands of jobs in the Central Valley," the authority's chief executive, Jeff Morales, said in a written statement.

The Surface Transportation Board said California officials and the Federal Railroad Administration have already extensively reviewed potential environmental and archaeological harm from the project and the current construction plans include steps to mitigate it.

The board said the existing transportation infrastructure in the San Joaquin Valley is insufficient to meet future needs and that without the bullet train, air quality would continue to deteriorate and travel times would increase.

"The current transportation system in the San Joaquin Valley region has not kept pace with the increase in population, economic activity, and tourism," the STB wrote. "The interstate highway system, commercial airports, and conventional passenger rail systems serving the intercity market are operating at or near capacity and would require large public investments for maintenance and expansion to meet existing demand and future growth over the next 25 years or beyond."

The board overseeing the California project last week approved a nearly \$1 billion bid for a consortium of engineering and construction firms to start work on the first 30-mile segment from Madera to Fresno.

Voters approved issuing \$10 billion in bonds for the project in 2008, but public support has dwindled in recent years as the costs have soared and California's economy weakened.