

114-mile Stretch Of Calif.'s Bullet Train Project Approved

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The federal [Surface Transportation Board](#) on Tuesday approved a 114-mile section of the California High-Speed Rail Authority's planned \$68.4 billion high-speed rail project, determining that the portion of the total 520-mile project poses no serious environmental or competitive threat.

The board announced its determination in a 56-page decision that included background on the project, reasons for each voting member's decision and a detailed environmental analysis. The board voted 2-1 to approve the 114-mile slice of the project, which would run from Fresno to Bakersfield.

"By providing another travel option, the line would enhance intermodal competition and increase capacity, as well as promote the development of a sound rail transportation system to meet the needs of the traveling public," the board wrote in its decision.

"Although many construction projects entail some degree of adverse environmental consequences, passenger rail operations, once construction is complete, are among the most environmentally friendly modes of transportation," the decision continued. "Additionally, the extensive environmental mitigation that will be imposed on this project will eliminate or minimize potential impacts on public health and strategy to the extent practicable."

Chairman Daniel R. Elliott III and Vice Chairman Deb Miller voted to approve the segment, while Commissioner Ann D. Begeman offered a dissenting opinion, saying the decision to approve the segment was too hasty.

Begeman warned the hurried approval "could have very serious consequences and needlessly impose service disruptions on a key segment of our nation's freight rail network and its shippers."

HRA Press Secretary Lisa Marie Alley offered Law360 an emailed statement on Wednesday regarding the STB's decision.

"High-speed rail improves mobility, strengthens our economy and protects the environment in California," Marie Alley said. "The Surface Transportation Board's decision today allows us to begin construction on the 114-mile Fresno to Bakersfield portion of the statewide system."

The board's decision came on the same day that the HRA announced it had awarded Arcadis US Inc. the project and construction management contract for a 60-mile portion of the rail that will run from Fresno to the Tulare and Kern County line. Arcadis won the contract, which would end up being worth up to \$71.86 million over five years, after a competitive bidding process that included five "world-renowned firms," according to the HRA.

HRA Chief Executive Jeff Morales called the awarding of the contract a "significant step forward" for the project in a statement on Tuesday.

"Partnering with Arcadis will help provide California with a high-speed rail system worthy of our state," Morales said. "Their experience, expertise and employment opportunities will be a tremendous asset to the high-speed rail program."

The process to getting the high-speed rail project on track has been long and arduous.

About two weeks ago, the project scored a victory when a California appeals court ruled that the HRA can finance the project by issuing \$8.6 billion in bonds, saying that because the funding is preliminary, the HRA does not yet have to detail its reasons for approving the bonds.

And while that marked a victory for the project, which was initially approved by voters in 2008, it still faces several lawsuits and roadblocks, including opposition from Kern County and environmental groups, including the Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund.