

The End of the Road

Mono Lake Shoulder Widening Project is Over and Mono Can Breathe a Sigh of Relief

by Jen Nissenbaum

Albeit slowly, the Mono Lake Shoulder Widening Project is moving closer its end. In the last *Newsletter*, the Mono Lake Committee wrote that the Project was “suspended” by the Mono County Local Transportation Commission (LTC), the decision making body for highway projects in Mono County. At a public meeting held in Lee Vining in March, the LTC commissioners voted to take the project off suspension and begin the process of closing the Project. In other words, the Final Environmental Impact Report (EIR) will never be released, and construction of the damaging highway project within the Mono Basin Scenic Area will not begin.

The Project was a major concern to the Mono Lake Committee, as it threatened the scenic and natural resources along Mono Lake’s west shore. Members and Mono Lake supporters made a big difference by making numerous comments on the draft EIR and at other opportunities—thank you! While a majority of the Project’s funds have already been shifted to another project in Mono County, close to \$3 million remains dedicated to highway improvements along the 3.1 mile stretch of Hwy 395 adjacent to Mono Lake. At the March LTC meeting, Caltrans discussed the potential for constructing one or two significantly scaled-back project components such as im-

proving the entrance to Old Marina, adding a new scenic vista, or replacing the existing guardrail (see Winter/Spring 2005 *Newsletter* for complete list of proposed options).

Two things became clear at the public meeting: 1) Caltrans has not developed sufficient information to make informed decisions about any of the proposed options; and, 2) Caltrans appears resistant to using the most sensitive technologies available within this unique area. Because of this reluctance, many people present at the meeting—including local community members, Committee staff, and even a few of the LTC commissioners—remarked that more details are needed prior to approving any of the proposed project components.

The public meeting ended with the LTC commissioners directing Caltrans to open a new Project Study Report (PSR), which is a document that essentially establishes the framework for new highway projects. The PSR will include more specifics about each of the proposed, scaled-back options, including costs.

The Committee will remain involved in developing and reviewing any project component proposed for Mono Lake’s west shore and remains optimistic that positive actions which respect Mono Lake are possible. ❖

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brine shrimp population (although exactly how we do not know). Mono’s gull population capitalized on this occurrence, and laid the largest clutches observed in the history of the research.

Nests fail for a variety of reasons, and if the failure happens soon enough in the season, the pair will often lay a second clutch. We have a rough idea of how many pairs do this by the number of small down-covered chicks in the plots when we do the chick banding in July. In most years, these downy chicks make up 5–10% of the chick population that we band. In 2004, however, there was not a single downy chick among the 838 chicks we banded. It seems that not only did the gulls lay more eggs, but their clutches and broods also survived the early part of the season at a much higher rate than in other years, further attesting to the unprecedented success of the 2004 season.

Coyotes Still Like Gulls

The specter of coyote predation on nesting California Gulls, which caused the abandonment of more than 15,000 pairs from Negit Island in the early 1980s when that island became connected to the shore by a landbridge, has occurred again. This time, however, it’s in a new location and on a smaller scale. In 2002 a small number of gulls began to build nests, lay eggs, and raise chicks on a small mound of rock near Old

Marina, adjacent to Highway 395. This ‘island’, which in 2002 was separated from the shoreline by no more than 100 feet of shallow water, is easily visible from the highway. In 2002 the gulls succeeded in fledging chicks, and returned in 2003 to lay again. Again they fledged chicks. In May of 2004 we counted 511 nests on Old Marina Island, though we could barely call it an island anymore since we were able to get there by hopping from rock to rock without getting our feet wet. Pulling over on Hwy 395, I could see hundreds of chicks begging for food on the island and hear their clear whistled calls through the din of raucous adult calls and the drone of passing cars.

I stopped again one day in early July, looked through my binoculars, and saw not a single adult or chick on the entire island. On a visit shortly after we found that not only were there no living chicks, there were no dead ones either. We never observed coyotes preying on the chicks, but as coyotes are commonly seen throughout the area and would have had little difficulty reaching the island, we are relatively sure this was the cause of this rookery’s demise. 511 nests, harboring more than 1,000 eggs and later hatched hundreds of chicks, had simply disappeared.

Until 2005, the water level in Mono Lake had been falling

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