

Albion Bridge Stewards

A working group of the Albion Community Advisory Board

P.O. Box 363
Albion, CA 95410

By Electronic Mail
albionbridge@dot.ca.gov

October 9, 2024

Caltrans
Attn: Liza Walker, Eureka Office Chief
Caltrans North Regional Environmental
1656 Union Street
Eureka, California 95501

RE: "ALBION RIVER BRIDGE PROJECT" DEIR/S -
SUPPLEMENTAL COMMENTS, PART 1

Dear Ms. Walker,

This letter contains our supplemental comments on Caltrans' "Albion River Bridge project" DEIR/S appendices and belated project revisions and explanations that Caltrans first presented to the public in a Power Point Presentation during the virtual "informational meeting" on the evening of September 26, 2024.

Respectfully submitted for the Albion Bridge Stewards (by authorized electronic signatures):

Tom Wodetzki	Warren DeSmidt	Arlene Reiss
David Steinrueck	Kelly Steinrueck	Ali van Zee
Annemarie Weibel	Bill Heil	Alison Gardner
John Johansen	Janet Eklund	Jim Heid

Website: <http://albioncab.wordpress.com>
Email: acab@mcn.org

1. Appendix A –

Section 4(f). It is the policy of the United States Government that special effort should be made to preserve the natural beauty of the countryside and public park and recreation lands, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and historic sites. (49 U.S.C. 303, Section 4(f).)

In enacting the California Coastal Act (Division 20, Public Resources Code - incorporated by the United States in the approved California Coastal Management Program (CCMP) that pursuant to the United States Coastal Zone Management Act (16 U.S.C. § 1451 et seq.) controls US Federal Highway Administration actions and activities that affect coastal resources - the legislature found and declared that a basic goal of the state for the coastal zone is to protect, maintain, and, where feasible, enhance and restore the overall quality of the coastal zone environment and its natural and artificial resources. (PRC § 30001.5(a).) To that end, the legislature also found and declared that the California coastal zone:

- a distinct and valuable natural resource of vital and enduring interest to all the people and exists as a delicately balanced ecosystem;
- the permanent protection of the state's natural and scenic resources is a paramount concern to present and future residents of the state and nation;
- to promote the public safety, health, and welfare, and to protect public and private property, wildlife, marine fisheries, and other ocean resources, and the natural environment, it is necessary to protect the ecological balance of the coastal zone and prevent its deterioration and destruction; and,
- existing developed uses, and future developments that are carefully planned and developed consistent with the policies of this division, are essential to the economic and social well-being of the people of this state and especially to working persons employed within the coastal zone. (PRC § 30001(a)-(d).)

Consistent therewith and in furtherance thereof, both California and the United States provided the following mandatory conservation and development standard for development in the coastal zone, as here, following January 1, 1977: "The scenic and visual qualities of coastal areas shall be considered and protected as a resource of public importance. Permitted development shall be sited and designed to protect views to and along the ocean and scenic coastal areas, to minimize the alteration of natural land forms, to be visually compatible with the character of surrounding areas, and, where feasible, to restore and enhance visual quality in visually degraded areas. New development in highly scenic areas such as those designated in the California Coastline Preservation and Recreation Plan prepared by the Department of Parks and Recreation and by local government shall be subordinate to the character of its setting." (PRC § 30251.)

The iconic Albion River Bridge is located on the scenic California Coast Highway in a designated and mapped "highly scenic area" in rural coastal Mendocino County and within the California coastal zone. The CCMP incorporates PRC § 30251 and its

County Local Coastal Program (LCP) implementation, including the delineations and specifications of LCP land use map 18 (Albion), as controlling law.

The Albion River Bridge was constructed - primarily of treated Oregon Douglas Fir timber - across lower Albion River Valley through creative, coordinated, well-designed, carefully sourced, and efficiently performed work during the material shortages of World War II, and now constitutes a Federal- and State-listed historic place.

The Bridge is not exempt from Section 4(f) review and Caltrans' proposed destruction (and misidentified "replacement") of it will substantially adversely affect its historic qualities, which cannot be avoided, minimized, or otherwise mitigated by mere illustration (or retention of a concrete capped tower foundation in or adjacent to Albion River and abandonment-in-place of other sawn-off Bridge foundation elements), as the DEIR/S proposes. In this context, we object to Caltrans' continued abject failure to respond to our reasonable request, made on August 22, 2024, for the Albion Bridge Stewards to be recognized as a formal participant in the Section 4(f) consultative process.

More than 1.5 million persons - including, but not limited to members and supporters of the Albion Bridge Stewards - on average cross the straight (linear, not curved, as the DEIR/S falsely indicates) Bridge in a year, flanked by its iconic white posts and railings that afford majestic views to and along the coast, the Albion River, lower Albion River Valley, and scenic South Albion Village. Renowned graphic artists and countless others from California, the United States, and other countries photograph, draw, and paint the Bridge in its designated and mapped highly scenic setting, appreciate the traditional beauty of its now unique design and construction in coastal California, and receive inspiration from its standing testament to the nation's Greatest Generation that built the Bridge.

To the west of the Bridge are the Albion Cove Beach public and in part semi-privatized recreational area, the lower 500 feet of estuarine wild-and-scenic (recreational) Albion River, semi-sheltered Albion Cove (Albion Bay), the California Coastal National Monument, the dramatic North and South Albion Heads, and beyond them, the planet's Great (Pacific) Ocean. The River and Cove provide vital migratory habitat for listed Coho salmon and Steelhead; the lower Valley, Cove, and Monument support other sensitive species, including Ospreys and Golden Eagles. To the east of the Bridge are the Albion River Campground and (riverside) Marina, and Schooners Landing, traditional lower cost coastal commercial recreational facilities of which only a reduced number continue to exist in the County, and existing South Albion Village residential, educational, and commercial (recreation supportive) uses. Along the north and south ends of the Bridge are the designated and mapped highly scenic areas of the Albion River Bluffs, which also support sensitive floral species and before Caltrans destroyed it, the LCP-mapped Osprey nesting site on the wooded northwest side of the Bridge that overlooks Albion Cove.

The ARB project proposes to (a) effectively preclude public access to and recreational use of the Beach, Campground, vertical public access ways, lower River, Cove, and adjacent eastern Pacific Ocean variously during the 4 to 6 year project construction/ destruction period, (b) place fill in the Albion River, (c) discharge toxic materials to it in the absence of a site-specific pollution prevention plan and analysis of its adequacy, (d) extract construction process water from the Albion River hyporheic zone below Albion Flat, without analysis of it, (e) excavate the designated highly scenic, environmentally sensitive Albion River Bluffs, (f) excavate and place fill on the Albion Flat Dune beneath and westerly of the Bridge, and otherwise grade Albion Flat, (g) shade the Dune, Albion River, Albion Cove Beach, and inner Albion Cove tidelands by the proposed “West Alternative 1” bridge location, (h) construct physical obstructions and create substantial noise barriers in Albion River that would block or impede migration and estuarine pre-migration staging by the sensitive fish species, and generate uncontrolled turbidity in the River, and (i) substantially impede visitor recreational access along Highway 1 through repeated “temporarily”, but cumulative significant, lane or full road closures of the Bridge and approaches, without a site- and time-specific Transportation Management Plan and analysis thereof, over a 4-6 year period, with significant direct and cumulative adverse effects on access to public and commercial recreational destinations in Albion and upcoast to Mendocino (Town) and beyond.

The feasible, legally consistent, environmentally superior alternative to these substantial, unmitigated adverse effects of the Caltrans’ “ARB project” on coastal recreational facilities and sensitive species consists of historic Bridge-congruent maintenance, repair, completed seismic retrofitting, and addition of a cantilevered pedestrian/bicycle way with connecting upcoast (lateral) and intersecting (vertical) improved paths in Albion.

We therefore respectfully request Caltrans to (a) continue the public review and comment period on the DEIR/S open until the requested Section 4(f) consultation has been concluded and opportunity for legal review of it has occurred, and (b) prepare a new or supplemental DEIR/S that fully and accurately analyzes the proposed “ARB project”, the environmentally preferred and only legally available alternative, and (c) that reflects the requested historic resource consultation, before Caltrans takes any further action on this project.

2. Appendix D – Avoidance, Minimization, and/or Mitigation Summary. This Appendix reveals that Caltrans has no site-specific, mapped and textually described and analyzed, or legally available site(s) extrinsic sites for mitigation through avoidance or off-site related, proportionate compensation of the direct and cumulative (significant) adverse effects of the “ARB project”, including, but not limited to, its proposed “West Alignment 1” alternative, that we have identified in our comments on the DEIR/S of September 9, 2024. Instead, Appendix D tellingly omits (or omits reference to) a complete and accurate project area baseline conditions study and consists of speculative, ambiguous, generic, frequently unquantified, and unenforceable hodgepodge that does not constitute the required mitigation protocol for each identified (significant) project impact on sensitive environmental resources. Centrally, the

proposed project (bridge and approaches, both during construction and operation) is located in the designated and mapped “highly scenic area”, where its width, length, height, and out-of-character concrete structures are plainly not subordinate to the character of the setting in lower Albion River Valley and adjacent uplands. The DEIR/S thus proposes a project (development) that lacks requisite mitigation and on that basis fails.

3. Appendix F – Public Outreach and Scoping: Notice of Preparation, Notice of Intent, Public Comments. This Appendix documents that Caltrans (a) has created a paper (check-the-box) trail (albeit with blank pages in the electronic version posted to the project web site) of notices regarding various aspects of the project, (b) omits disclosure of its - apparently substantially incomplete - noticing list(s), (c) received numerous comments in opposition to the project prior to DEIR/S publication, (d) has not included all of them in this Appendix, (e) has not ascertainably or by specific references responded to many pre-DEIR/S comments from the public, (e) has not disclosed to the DEIR/S record, as of the publication date, all Caltrans or project consultant writings with all entities with which Caltrans has contractual payment-for-services rendered “Interagency Agreements”, and (f) has not produced them, and thereby has denied relevant environmental information that Caltrans used in preparation of the DEIR/S. In addition, (g) we strongly object to Caltrans’ repeated failure - after repeated requests - to hold any public hearings on the DEIR/S, and to exclude public testimony at Caltrans’ intentionally unorganized “meetings” (e.g., by failure to identify speakers by name, artificially limiting time for testimony, and having informed Caltrans or consultant representatives present to answer the public’s questions) on the DEIR/S from the comments that the Final EIR/S will address.

4. Appendix I – Consideration of Rehabilitation Alternative. Appendix I is both inaccurate and incomplete. First, preservation of the iconic Albion River Bridge is significant not only to the Albion community, but even correspondence produced in the DEIR/S indicates, to people from other places in California, other states, and other countries. Second, the list of “rehabilitation” components (a) is unsupported by specific component/location identification, (b) relies on speculative projections of component conditions, (c) omits reference to specific prior Bridge inspection recommendations and variously exceeds them or conflates them with recommendations for work that the inspections do not base on specifically identified need for maintenance or repair or replacement of subject components, (d) omits presentation of the Bridge structural and paint system maintenance records, (e) omits presentation and analysis of Caltrans’ demonstrated ability to repair and quickly reopen the Bridge to vehicle traffic after the car-log truck collision that resulted in shearing of X-timber components on the east side of the timber tower at Bents 9-10 in 2002, (f) omits explanation of other repair and maintenance not being timely, or incompletely, or marginally (sub-standardly) performed, including Caltrans’ knowing, intentional, and unlawful failures to properly maintain, repair, or replace deteriorated Bridge components (including, but not limited to below and adjacent to Bridge scuppers, road deck potholes, and fractures by which water has variously been discharged, exfiltrated, and infiltrated to impact timbers below or downwind from them), and (g) any professional current cost and feasibility

assessment for sustainable, non-destructive, and minimized Bridge operations impacts repair, maintenance, and enhancement work in comparison to the \$125 million to \$165 million projected cost for the proposed bridge. The Caltrans bridge engineer who spoke at length during the “informational meeting” on September 26, 2024 is not a recognized timber bridge (or structure) engineer, and his comments therefore lacked requisite foundation. Appendix I consists of a self-serving Caltrans statement that does not qualify as an accurate, complete, internally consistent, and valid assessment of the Bridge preservation alternative, which renders the DEIR/S also in this regard as substantially deficient.

Tellingly, Caltrans in 2018-2019 declined to benefit from the offered expert assessment of the Albion River Bridge by national timber bridge/structure experts Dr. Ben Brungraber and Dr. Dick Schmidt, both also licensed engineers.