

The California High-Speed Rail Authority wants to run a 225-mph bullet train through the largest remaining intact wetland area in the state: the Grasslands. The rails would be on a viaduct elevated 20 feet off the valley floor where it runs through the Grasslands Ecological Area, running on power lines 45 feet above the valley floor. The trains, which will be louder than freight trains, would run several times an hour day and night, and the line would be brightly lighted.

BULLET

THROUGH THE HEART OF THE GRASSLANDS

by **JEFFREY A. VOLBERG**, DIRECTOR OF WATER LAW AND POLICY

The state of California is planning to run high-speed “bullet” trains at 225 miles per hour through the middle of the Grasslands Ecological Area. What could go wrong?

Plenty, we’re afraid. That’s why California Waterfowl is on it.

The Grasslands Ecological Area is the largest remaining area of freshwater wetlands left in California. Only 5 percent of

California’s historic wetlands remain, with the Grasslands area comprising more than half the remaining wetlands in the state.

Situated in the northern San Joaquin Valley near Los Banos in Merced County, the Ecological Area consists of 180,000 acres of duck clubs, national wildlife refuges, state wildlife areas and a state park. The Ecological Area provides

habitat for up to a million migrating ducks and geese each winter, as well as sandhill cranes, white pelicans, shorebirds and tri-colored blackbirds. Approximately 20 percent of the birds on the Pacific Flyway use the area for wintering habitat.

Duck hunting is a passion for the members of the area's duck clubs, and many more hunters use the state and national wildlife areas and refuges each year. Hunting is a major part of the Los Banos area's heritage and culture.

Despite the fact that waterfowl are a public trust resource that the state and federal governments are required by law to protect, the state has decided to run its bullet trains directly across the Ecological Area, near its midpoint. The rail line will cross Interstate 5 at Santa Nella, just north of Los Banos, and run along the side of Henry Miller to an interchange near Carlucci Road, which will allow trains to go north to Merced or south to Bakersfield.

In 2008, the Grassland Water District negotiated an agreement to allow the use of the Henry Miller Road route, provided the High-Speed Rail Authority fully mitigated for the impacts of the rail line on the Ecological Area. The agreement also required that the state purchase or enter into conservation agreements on 10,000 acres, with the intent of avoiding the encroachment of new housing on the Ecological Area. The agreement prohibited the placement of a station between Pacheco Pass and Merced. In 2017, having completed the design of the route along Henry Miller Road, the High-Speed Rail Authority is finally beginning to consider the mitigation measures it will need to put in place.

The trains will run at over 200 mph on the top of an 8-foot berm on the south side of Henry Miller Road. (In comparison, wind turbine blades – which kill thousands of birds in the region each year – spin at 179 mph at the tips.) The High-Speed Rail Authority says that it will run several trains per hour out of San Jose, en route to Merced or Bakersfield. When the rail line reaches the Ecological Area, it will go up onto a viaduct approximately 20 feet high. The viaduct is intended to allow birds and animals to pass under as they move through the Ecological Area.

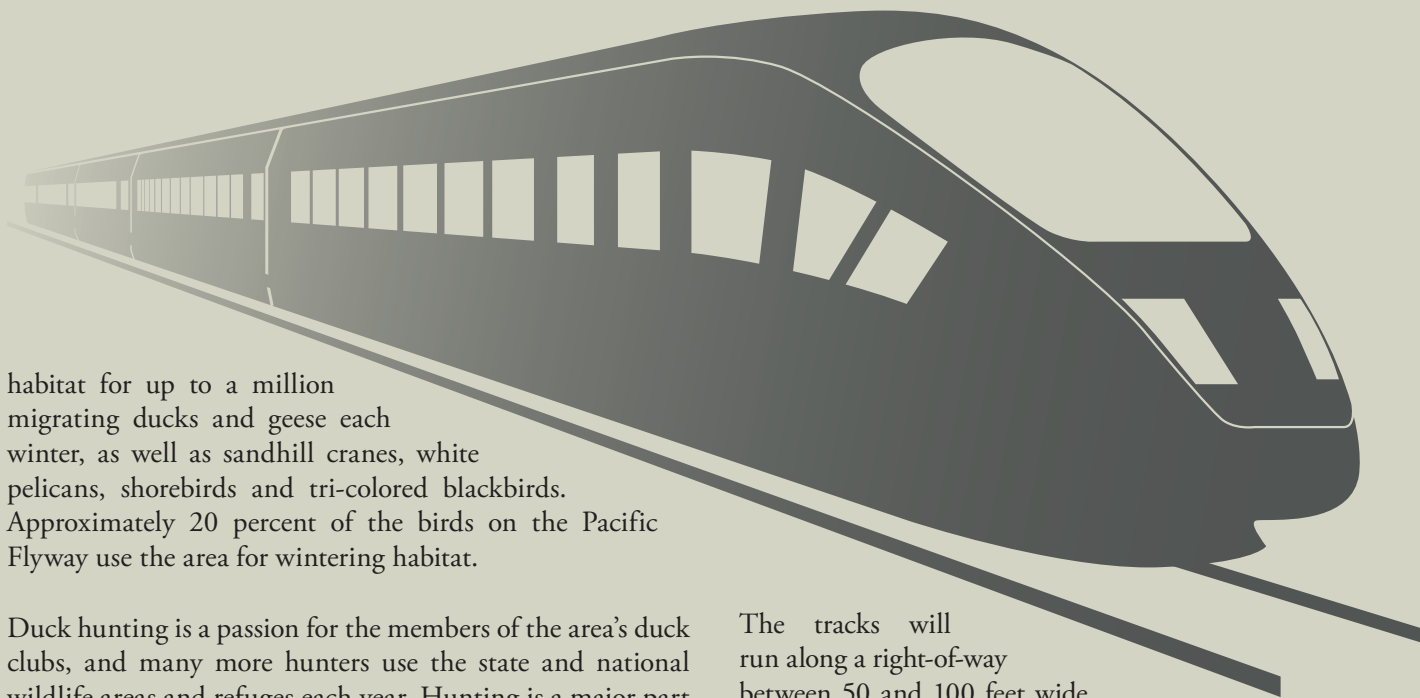
The tracks will run along a right-of-way between 50 and 100 feet wide, comparable to a four- to eight-lane highway. The plans call for 8-foot chain-link fencing on both sides of the tracks, and in some areas, 12- to 16-foot sound walls, which will create a substantial barrier.

The trains will run day and night. They will be louder than a conventional freight train. They will be brightly lighted at night. The trains will run on electric power from overhead lines, which will stand 45 feet above the surface of the valley. Birds and animals in the Ecological Area will be subjected to noise, bright lights and the danger of collision every time a train passes.

Looking at the design, it is practically impossible to imagine how the impact of a large viaduct with huge, speeding machines running on top can be mitigated. The noise and bright lights generated by the rail line will empty the wetlands of birds within at least a mile or more on either side of the tracks. The experience for hunters will be significantly degraded, even if there are any birds left for them to hunt. It is possible that the presence of the trains may cause the birds to fly past much of the Grasslands area entirely.

Furthermore, the High-Speed Rail Authority touts the opening of the San Joaquin Valley to development and economic opportunity as one of the bullet trains' most important features. New development will increase the population pressure of people and traffic on surface roads and highways in the vicinity of the Ecological Area. Already, land speculators have been picking up properties in the area for future development.

California Waterfowl has sent letters to the High-Speed Rail Authority, recommending that the route be moved to either the north or the south of the Ecological Area. Alternatively,



THE TRAINS WILL RUN AT OVER 200 MPH ON THE TOP OF AN 8-FOOT BERM ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF HENRY MILLER ROAD. IN COMPARISON, WIND TURBINE BLADES — WHICH KILL THOUSANDS OF BIRDS IN THE REGION EACH YEAR — SPIN AT 179 MPH AT THE TIPS.

the train could tunnel under the Ecological Area.

The Authority will run its trains through 14 miles of tunnel from Pacheco Pass down into the San Joaquin Valley, in order to protect the oak woodland and the California condors (which haven't actually made it over Pacheco Pass yet.) The Grasslands resource is arguably more important.

There are still questions as to whether the high-speed rail project will proceed much further. The project is expected to cost in excess of \$60 billion. The voters of the state approved a general obligation bond for approximately \$10 billion. The federal government has kicked in approximately \$3.5 billion. The High-Speed Rail Authority is going forward with the assumption that the additional funding will appear. Actual construction has started around Fresno. Once a portion of the route is built, the Authority assumes, investors will provide the remaining \$47 billion that is needed.

It is clear that the bullet train is a greater threat to wetlands habitat than was contemplated in 2008. California Waterfowl is working actively to either persuade the Authority to change its route, or to ensure that the impacts are fully mitigated. 🦆

**BETTER SHOT,
BETTER DAY.**

10 Non-Toxic Shotshells 12.3

BISMUTH

KENT
CARTRIDGE

Performance. Quality. Tradition.

Visit kentgamebore.com for more information
or contact your local dealer.

USA 1-888-311-5368 Canada 1-800-844-1880

KENT
CARTRIDGE