



Comments to the
U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and the
Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act Office
Regarding the South Coast Rail Project,
Scope for the
Environmental Impact Statement and Environmental Impact Report
December 2, 2008

On behalf of Mass Audubon I submit the following preliminary comments on the scope for the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the South Coast Rail Project. Mass Audubon will submit additional detailed comments during the comment period that ends on January 9, 2009.

Mass Audubon generally supports commuter rail improvements as an alternative to highway expansion and a means to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. We also support concentrated development on appropriate land in close proximity to transit and other infrastructure to preserve habitat and reduce vehicle-miles traveled. However, as the Environmental Notification Form filed on 11-17-08 acknowledges, the South Coast Rail Project involves significant adverse environmental impacts, with “high levels of impacts” associated with the Stoughton alternative. This project also entails a major investment of up to \$3 billion in expansion of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority’s (MBTA) commuter rail system at a time when the MBTA is struggling under a heavy existing debt load. Therefore, it is vital that the alternatives analysis for this project carefully evaluate both the environmental and financial impacts in relation to the overall commuter rail system. In particular, the evaluation of the Middleboro alternative must put the costs associated with improvements in the Quincy/Braintree area in the context of overall system improvements, including potential future expansions of the commuter rail system in Southeastern Massachusetts, such as service to Cape Cod.

The NEPA and MEPA review processes must demonstrate that the alternative ultimately selected is the “least environmentally damaging practicable alternative” that the project does not result in unacceptable impacts to aquatic ecosystems or rare species and that anticipated impacts to those natural resources are unavoidable, cannot be minimized and are adequately mitigated. To achieve compliance with the Federal Clean Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act, the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act and other environmental statutes and regulations, we urge you to require that the EIS and EIR evaluate a broad range of alternatives and provide detailed analysis of all impacts to communities and natural resources associated with each one.

The following are some of our most important concerns and recommendations. The EIR and EIS should:

- Define the level of service that would satisfy the project purpose: “to more fully meet the existing and future demand for public transportation between Fall River/New Bedford and Boston.” To do this, EOT should provide and fully analyze ridership projections for each alternative considered.
- Reconcile the state and federal project purposes, and fully address the growth related aspects of the alternative approaches to the project. The state version of the project purpose includes smart growth whereas the federal version agreed to by the Army Corps of Engineers for review under the federal Clean Water Act does not.
- Reduction of traffic congestion, air pollution and emissions of greenhouse gases are among the most important benefits associated with public transit systems and must be addressed in the project purpose, goals, and alternatives analysis.
- Consider a significantly expanded range of alternatives beyond the three recommended by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Transportation (EOT). The ENF includes the April 2008 Analysis of South Coast Rail Alternatives: Phase I Report based on a review by an interagency working group of 65 alternatives and the selection of the five presented in the ENF, some of which EOT has already rejected. The MEPA/NEPA review of alternatives should be more extensive and at a minimum the following alternatives should be subjected to further review:
 - rail service in Route 24 corridor (entire length or between Routes 495 and 128);
 - coupling of trains from Fall River and New Bedford at Taunton;
 - Middleborough alternative with improvements to bottleneck in Braintree; and
 - service for Fall River and New Bedford through Wareham, as suggested by CSX Railroad.¹
- Identify costs associated with each alternative including cost of mitigation and cost per rider, and explain how the project will be funded.
- Consider the potential benefits that each alternative would provide to MBTA commuter service systemwide in comparing alternative costs. Higher cost alternatives should not be automatically be eliminated if they result in needed improvements elsewhere in the system.
- Avoid use of overly restrictive screening criteria that result in elimination of potentially viable alternatives to determine whether an alternative is “practicable.” In its preliminary screening process, for example, EOT eliminated several alternatives because they would disrupt existing transportation routes without considering how temporary disruption could be handled.
- Provide complete disclosure and analysis of all potential environmental impacts of the project, including but not limited to:
 - specific areas where wetlands alteration will occur;
 - impacts extending beyond the footprint of actual work such as hydrological effects to wetlands and streams, fragmentation and secondary growth impacts;
 - direct and indirect impacts to rare species and habitats;
 - impacts to ecological systems that are difficult or impossible to replicate; and
 - proposed mitigation for unavoidable impacts.

¹ “Cape Cod Offers Rail Plan,” *The Enterprise*, October 6, 2008.

- Evaluate impacts of the proposed upgrading of existing freight lines through Mass Audubon's Assonet Cedar Swamp Wildlife Sanctuary. We request that field surveys of wetland resources and rare species habitats be conducted in coordination with Mass Audubon during the MEPA/NEPA review process, and that a full evaluation of physical, biological, and hydrological impacts and mitigation be conducted.
- Identify specific measures that the Commonwealth will take to assist municipalities on or near the rail line to plan for growth and development that will result of the project to insure that valuable natural, historical and cultural resources are not lost.

In conclusion, in light of the magnitude of this project and its potential impacts on natural resources, it is critically important that the Corps and MEPA require a comprehensive, greatly expanded scope of issues to be reviewed in the EIR and EIS. We look forward to reviewing these documents when they are available. Thank you for considering these comments.

Priscilla Chapman
Taunton Watershed Advocate
Mass Audubon
1298 Cohannet Street
Taunton MA 02780