Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Rocky Creek Bridge Rail Replacement Project

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) District 5 is preparing a project level/supplemental (Tier II) Environmental Impact Report (EIR) consistent with the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). A Tier 1 Programmatic EIR for Big Sur Bridge Rail Replacements was certified and approved by Caltrans May 7, 2021. The purpose of this Notice of Preparation (NOP) is to notify agencies, organizations, and individuals of this intent, and request input on the scope and content of environmental information of the proposed Tier II EIR for the Rocky Creek Bridge Rail Replacement Project. More information regarding the project can be found at: https://dot.ca.gov/caltrans-near-me/district-5/district-5-current-projects/big-sur-bridge-rail-replacements

Scoping Period for Receipt of Comments

Comments must be sent by March 15, 2026. Submit written comments in one of two ways:

1. By mail, at the following address:

   Caltrans District 5
   Attn: Lucas Marsalek
   50 Higuera Street
   San Luis Obispo, CA 93401

2. By email, to the following address: Lucas.Marsalek@dot.ca.gov

Project Title: Rocky Creek Bridge Rail Replacement

Project Location

The project is located on State Route 1 (SR-1) in Monterey (MON) County at post mile 60.1, approximately 13 miles south of Carmel-by-the-Sea at Rocky Creek Bridge (No. 44-0036).

Background

Caltrans is implementing a Bridge Rail Safety Program to upgrade non-standard bridge rails along the State Highway System to meet current crash safety standards. In 2021, Caltrans certified a Tier I Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that evaluated the programmatic impacts of replacing or upgrading bridge rails along the scenic and environmentally sensitive Big Sur Coast segment of State Route 1. In order to comply with the current Manual for Assessing Safety Hardware (MASH) standards, these railings assessed in the programmatic EIR would not be able to be replaced in kind.

Alongside the Tier I EIR, Caltrans prepared a Tier II EIR for the Garrapata Creek Bridge Rail Replacement Project, which proposed installation of the Type 86H concrete barrier rail. Although the EIR was certified, the Monterey County Planning Commission denied the Coastal Development Permit (CDP) for the Garrapata project in 2023 and subsequent appeal in 2024, citing concerns about the visual impacts of the 86H rail type on the historic bridge and the surrounding coastal viewshed.

In response to the CDP denial and in coordination with the California Coastal Commission and local stakeholders, Caltrans has reassessed the design criteria for bridge rail upgrades along this corridor. Due to recently reduced posted speed limits on State Route 1 in the project area, Caltrans has determined that the Type 511H rail—a lower-profile, crash-tested barrier—can now be considered for both Rocky Creek Bridge and Garrapata Creek Bridge. The 511H rail offers improved visual compatibility with the historic character of the bridges and the scenic coastal setting while still meeting safety standards for the lower speed limit.

This Tier II EIR for the Rocky Creek Bridge Rail Replacement Project will evaluate the site-specific environmental impacts of replacing the existing rail with the proposed Type 511H barrier.

Caltrans is working concurrently to evaluate the site-specific environmental impacts of replacing the existing rail with the proposed Type 511H barrier at the Garrapata Creek Bridge and pursuing a new CDP from Monterey County.

Project Description

This project proposes replacement of the historic concrete baluster bridge rail, install a one-inch-thick polyester concrete bridge deck overlay and replacement of bridge approach railing to meet Manual for Assessing Safety Hardware (MASH) standards. The project intends to preserve the integrity of the character-defining features and historical significance of Rocky Creek Bridge.

Purpose and Need

Purpose of the Project
The purpose of the project is to improve the safety performance of the Rocky Creek Bridge rail system to meet current MASH standards, and to extend the service life of the bridge deck. The project also seeks to avoid adverse effects to the bridge's character-defining features to maintain its eligibility for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Need for the Project
Inspection reports from 2015–2021 document progressive deterioration of the bridge rails, including numerous spalls, exposed and corroded rebar, and severe cracking—

conditions that reduce structural integrity and diminish crashworthiness. The existing historic baluster rail system does not meet current MASH safety standards, creating a performance deficiency in rail containment. The 30-year-old concrete overlay has exceeded its service life and shows signs of wear, necessitating replacement to maintain the bridge's functionality and long-term durability.

Alternatives

Caltrans has identified two alternatives: build (alternative 1) and no build (alternative 2).

Viable Alternatives

Alternative 1: Bridge Rail Replacement (Programmable Alternative)

This alternative proposes replacement of the historic concrete baluster bridge rail**,** replacement of the polyester concrete bridge deck overlay, and replacement of bridge approach railing. The project intends to preserve the integrity of the character-defining features and historical significance of Rocky Creek Bridge. A modified Concrete Barrier (Type 511H) will be evaluated during the Project Approval & Environment Document (PA&ED) and the Plans, Specifications and Estimate (PS&E) phases of the project in consultation with the California Coastal Commission (CCC), the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and Monterey County organizations such as their Land Use Advisory Committee (LUAC), the Big Sur Byways Organization (BSBO), and the Big Sur Agency Advisory Council (BSMAAC) to lessen the historic, cultural, and aesthetic impacts as much as possible.

The Big Sur Coast Highway Management Plan (BSCHMP) gives guidance to minimize shoulder width to four feet instead of the department standard of eight feet width. This project, like other projects in the Big Sur corridor, will pursue a Design Exception to policy to reduce the shoulder width to comply with the BSCHMP. The proposed project will follow all other design standards except for the existing nonstandard design features that will be perpetuated.

Rejected Alternatives

Alternative 2: No-Build

The "no-build" alternative is not recommended since the bridge rail would continue to deteriorate and potentially result in higher preservation costs, as well as not meeting the project's purpose and need.

Figure 1. Drawings of the Rail Replacement Design

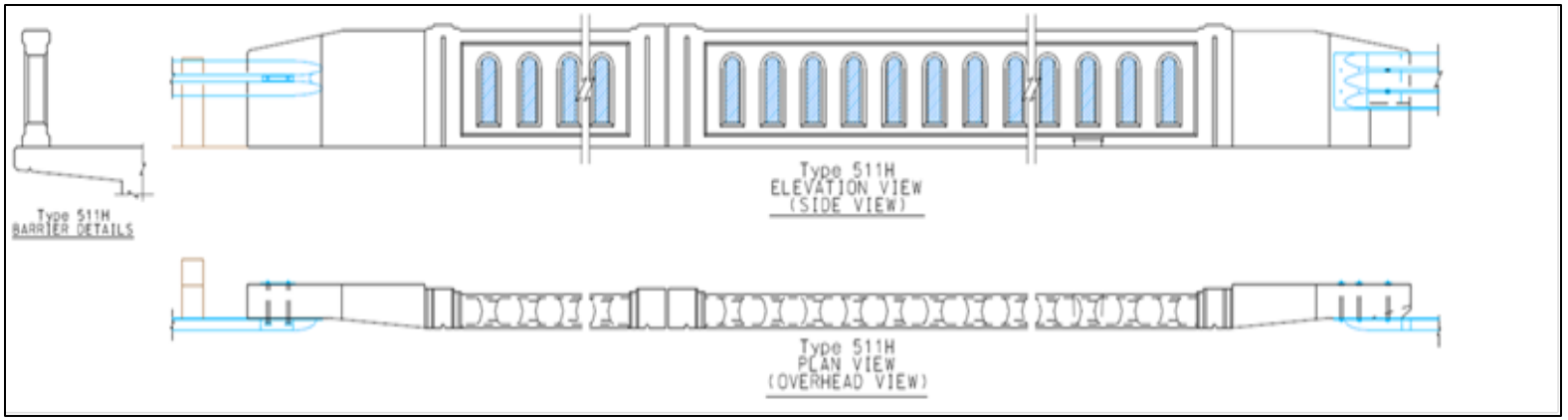


Figure 2. Location Map

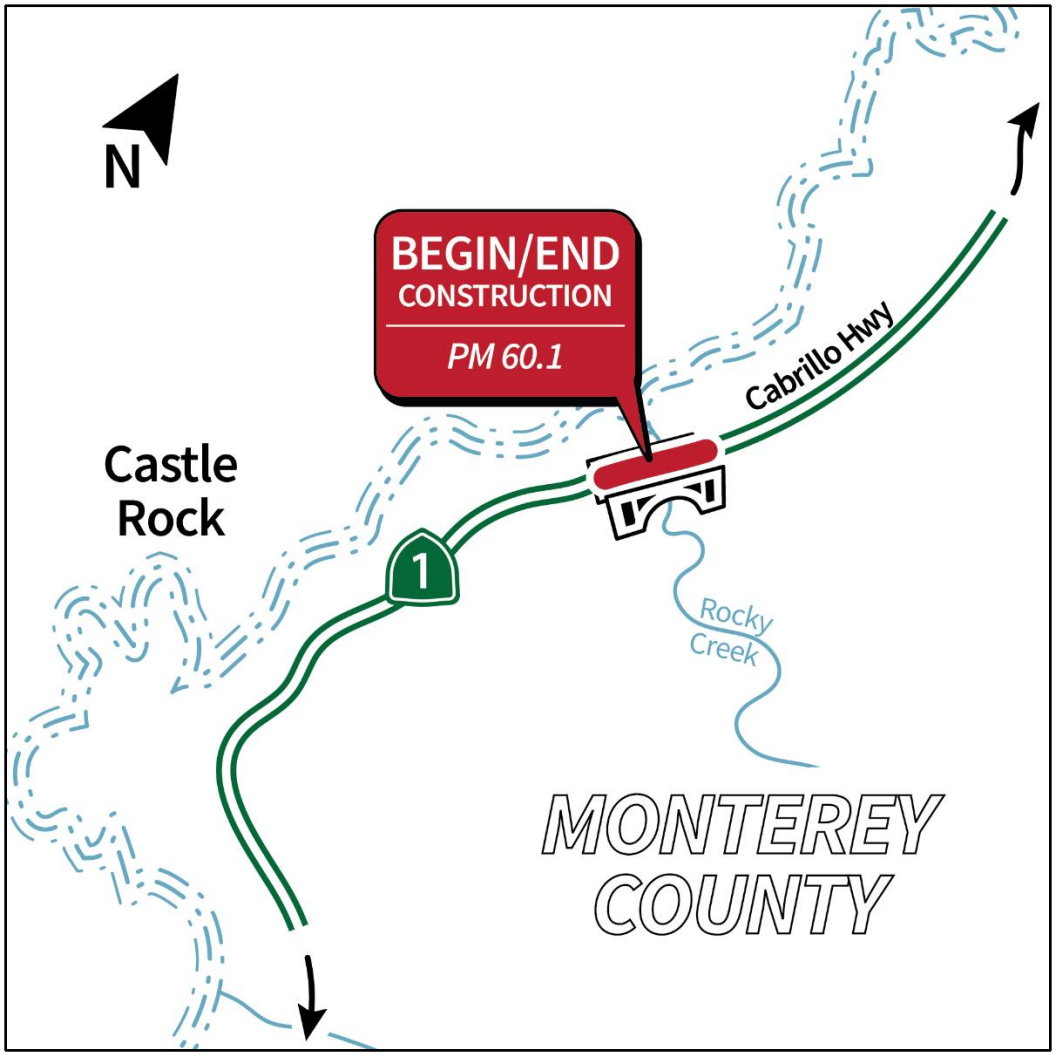
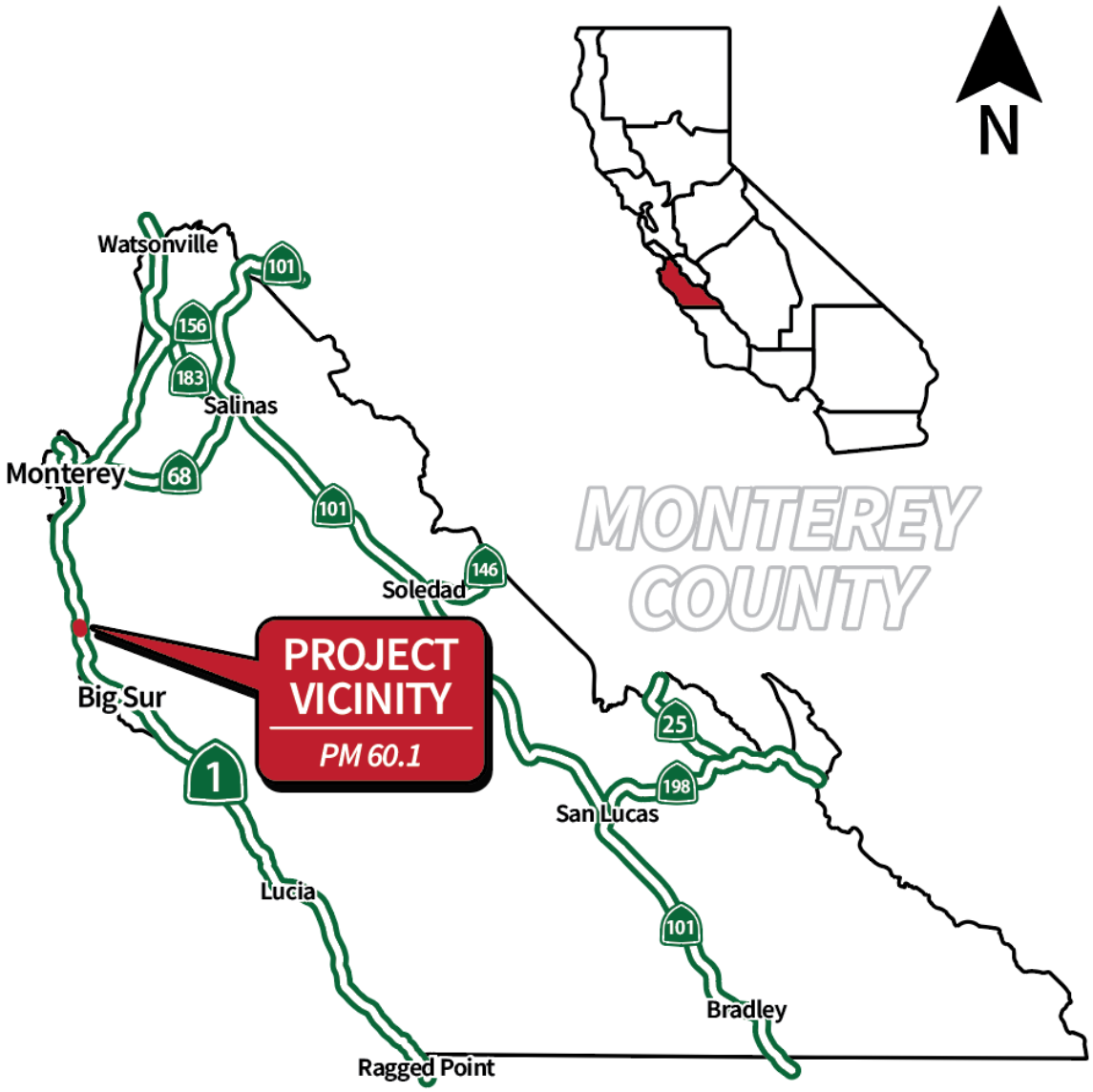


Figure 3. Vicinity Map



Summary of Key Environmental Considerations

The Draft EIR will address potential environmental effects of the proposed project for each of the environmental topics outlined in the CEQA guidelines, Appendix G. The proposed project may impact environmental resources, or may have the following effects, including:

Biological Resources

The project will need botanical surveys and wildlife surveys. The project may require biological monitoring for birds, bats, and Smith's Blue Butterfly (SBB) and bird/bat exclusion if work on the bridge is planned during nesting bird season. Three to four botanical surveys may be needed depending on blooming season. Additionally, SBB protocol surveys may be required if host plant is present (5 visits). A bat habitat assessment will be required. If bat habitat is present on bridge, three to four focused surveys will be required in winter, spring, summer, and fall. No work would occur below the bridge deck, and thus avoiding impacts to Rocky Creek, including streambanks and riparian areas.

The anticipated document will be a Natural Environment Study with Minimal Impacts (NESMI), which will outline potential impacts, mitigation and/or minimization measures, and the permits required from outside agencies.

Cultural Resources

The Rocky Creek Bridge is located within the Carmel-San Simeon Highway Historic District, which is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The bridge is considered a contributing element to the historic district and is individually eligible for listing in the NRHP. The proposed project is located in an area with high sensitivity for built-environment resources, as it affects the Historic Rocky Creek Bridge directly, and low sensitivity for archaeological resources. The bridge rails are a contributing feature to the NRHP-eligible bridge and removal, or alteration will constitute an adverse effect. To assess potential effects to cultural resources, as well as determining the appropriate mitigation for any potential effects an Archaeological Survey Report (ASR), a Historic Property Survey Report (HPSR), and a Finding of Effect (FOE) document will be prepared. If there is a Finding of Adverse Effect (FOAE), then a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) would also be prepared.

Hazardous Waste

Rocky Creek Bridge will need a Preliminary Site Investigation (PSI) to test for Asbestos Containing Materials (ACM) which will take approximately four to six months to complete during the PA&ED phase of the project. If Treated Wood Waste

(TWW) will be removed from metal beam guard rail, three beam barrier, piles or roadside signs, appropriate standard special provisions (SSP's) will need to be incorporated into the project to ensure proper management of TWW. If yellow thermoplastic or painted traffic strip is going to be removed it will need to be managed differently depending on its age and method of removal. The project will require site investigation for yellow thermoplastic or painted traffic stripes and other hazardous materials during the PS&E design phase.

Traffic and Transportation

This project will require a Transportation Management Plan (TMP) to minimize and manage traffic delays during construction operations of the project. A temporary signal system, portable changeable message signs, construction area signs, lane closures, and bicycle and pedestrian accommodations will be required. Since potential traffic delays may occur during construction, a Public Awareness Campaign will be used for this project to inform traveling motorists and local people on construction activities. The Public Awareness Campaign will include a planned lane closure web site.

Visual/Aesthetics

Due to the high degree of viewer sensitivity along Highway 1 and the bridges Historic designation, the project should be assessed for potential impacts to the bridge's Historic and scenic qualities, alterations to visual character, and for consistency with the Local Coastal Plan, Coastal Act, State Scenic Highway, National Scenic Byway, Coast Highway Management Plan, and State and National Historic guidelines. The Coastal Development Permit is expected to require increased consideration to be given to aesthetic treatment of roadside elements. Any alteration to the bridge's appearance may affect the scenic character of the site and its surroundings, requiring implementation of a Visual Impact Assessment (VIA) to document impacts and propose mitigation.

Coastal Resources

The project is located in the coastal zone and within the jurisdiction of the Monterey County Local Coastal Program (LCP). The project will require an evaluation of existing coastal policies that are applicable to the proposed work. This would include, but is not limited to, policies related to visual resources, biological resources, cultural resources, and public access resources. The project's design and construction plans will adopt measures to minimize, avoid, and mitigate for impacts to existing coastal resources as a result of the project.

The project would have no effects on agricultural and forestry resources, energy, land use and planning, mineral resources, paleontological resources, population and housing, public services, recreation, utilities and service systems, and wildfire. The project would have less than significant impacts on air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, hydrology and water quality, and noise.