

Planning/Policy/ Programming

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Project Title: Short Line Rail Research

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Completion Date: June 2026

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Short Line Rail Research

Evaluating the California Short Line Rail System with an eye toward policy resiliency.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

California strives to improve environmental conditions for future generations through policies to reduce vehicle emissions and shift freight to more environmentally efficient modes of transportation. The state recognizes the importance of the short line railroads, as they play a critical role connecting shippers to the national rail network.

The primary goal of this project is to support California's environmental initiatives while preserving the operational viability of vulnerable short line railroads in the state. This project will enhance the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans') understanding of the short line rail system by assessing the implications to the economy if the short line industry is unable to comply with California state regulations, focusing also on impact to Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT), vehicle emissions, and pavement. The study will also recommend strategies to navigate existing challenges based on surveys, assessments and a thorough policy analysis.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

The project team will produce a final report which Caltrans can utilize to update the California Freight Mobility Plan (CFMP), revise freight policies, adjust freight project applications and strengthen interagency partnerships. This project will also identify funding strategies to aid short line railroads in continued operation, decide on a phased improvement plan for assets and infrastructure, assist in mitigating the impacts on the state highways and advance sustainable freight strategies.

The project will be conducted in the following manner: Across the project we have project management tasks and quarterly meetings to discuss progress on the work. The project will start with a literature review and data acquisition as related to short line rail systems in California. The team will then perform various impact analyses utilizing this data and compile the



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results in a comprehensive final report that will be subsequently published.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

Caltrans aims to gain a more complete understanding of short line rail system challenges, utilizing interviews and economic impact analysis. It will assess environmental, economic, and mode shift impacts if these challenges are not addressed. This information will prepare Caltrans and partners to understand our role and actions for aiding railroads in overcoming these hurdles, supporting their operation while adhering to the state's environmental goals.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

It is critical to gain an understanding of specific impacts concerning mode shift, VMT, and economic implications that we may face if the necessary funding to comply with the regulations is inaccessible or unavailable. This research will enhance our understanding of the short line rail system and provide compelling data-driven justification for advocating for public investment. Ultimately, this research aims to support the effectiveness of the state's regulation while preserving the operational viability of short line railroads.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

The research team has progressed on literature review and data collection tasks and the next task is going to be completion of these steps. The project is expected to be completed June 30th 2026.

IMAGES



Image 1: The Santa Maria Valley Railroad serves California's Central Coastal region. (Photo: OmniTRAX)

Main and Short Line Railroads in California



Image 2: Main and Short Line Railroads in California