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Joint Statement

LANDMARK AGREEMENT ENDS 15-YEAR DISPUTE OVER SR 241 TOLL ROAD EXTENSION

Agreement between Orange County toll road agency, Attorney General and a broad coalition of national and local environmental groups will protect San Onofre State Beach, the Richard and Donna O'Neill Conservancy and San Mateo Creek watershed while allowing exploration of other transportation solutions for South Orange County

IRVINE, CALIF. – Announcing an end to the 15-year fight over the proposed Foothill-South Toll Road in southern Orange County and northern San Diego County, representatives from the Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency (TCA), California Attorney General Kamala Harris, the Save San Onofre Coalition, the California Park and Recreation Commission and the Native American Heritage Commission detailed the elements of a historic, comprehensive settlement.

The agreement presents an opportunity for TCA to consider a number of transportation project ideas including State Route 241 – Interstate 5 connection options while protecting sensitive lands and cultural resources within the San Mateo Creek watershed, including San Onofre State Beach and the Richard and Donna O'Neill Conservancy.

"TCA is very pleased to join over a dozen environmental organizations in this unprecedented outcome, which underscores the collaboration between the Agency's leadership and leaders of the environmental community," stated Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency Chairman Craig Young.

“For the past two years, TCA and its team of experts have engaged in thoughtful and productive discussions about the future of improving transportation mobility and the importance of protecting environmentally sensitive areas. This agreement is a baseline for achieving both of those objectives,” added Transportation Corridor Agencies Chief Executive Officer Mike Kraman.

“The Settlement Agreement reached today is the culmination of years of work by the Save San Onofre Coalition to ensure the protection of the extraordinary recreational, cultural and natural resources of San Onofre State Beach and the Richard and Donna O’Neill Conservancy,” commented Elizabeth Goldstein, president of the California State Parks Foundation and spokesperson for the Save San Onofre Coalition. “This agreement will guarantee that millions of Californians will be able to enjoy this magnificent park, its beaches and natural areas for years to come.”

This agreement resolves all outstanding litigation arising out of the TCA’s Foothill-South and Tesoro Extension plans to extend the 241 toll road in southern Orange County. Those plans were opposed by the Save San Onofre Coalition, the Attorney General and various state agencies because they would have significantly damaged environmental and cultural resources in San Onofre State Beach, the Richard and Donna O’Neill Conservancy and other open space lands. In 2008, the California Coastal Commission and the U.S. Secretary of Commerce found that the proposed Foothill-South alignment was inconsistent with state and federal coastal protection policies.

San Onofre State Beach, established in 1971 by then-Governor Ronald Reagan, is one of California’s most popular state parks, receiving more than 2.4 million visitors per year and providing habitat for 11 endangered or threatened species. San Onofre also offers low-cost recreational opportunities for working families and boasts a world-renowned surf spot at Trestles Beach.

“This agreement brings an end to one of the most hard fought, long-lasting environmental battles in California history, one that we have successfully pursued for the people of the region, our state’s natural heritage and the integrity of our state park system,” stated Joel Reynolds, western director and senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council. “Today's action is a definitive determination that the California state park at San Onofre will be preserved.”

The final agreement achieves the following objectives:

1. Settles five lawsuits challenging TCA's 2006 and 2013 approvals of its Foothill-South and Tesoro Extension projects brought by the California Attorney General and members of the Save San Onofre Coalition.

2. Provides that TCA will rescind its 2006 approval of the so-called "Green Alignment" that would have run through San Onofre State Beach and its 2013 approval of its Tesoro Extension project.

3. Ensures permanent protection of San Onofre State Beach, the Richard and Donna O'Neill Conservancy, and other critical open space, wildlife habitat and cultural resources in the San Mateo Creek and adjacent watersheds from TCA-sponsored road projects.

4. Allows TCA to move forward with a formal CEQA/NEPA process to review alternative routes for connecting SR-241 to the Interstate 5 freeway and develop an SR-241 extension project that avoids San Onofre State Beach and other environmentally and culturally sensitive lands designated in the agreement, without opposition by the environmental organizations comprising the Save San Onofre Coalition.

5. Establishes a cooperative framework by which an alignment for the SR-241 and other I-5 traffic congestion solutions can be identified, evaluated and potentially advanced in a manner that follows applicable laws, is consistent with recommendations issued by regulatory agencies in 2008, and meets south Orange County's transportation needs.

6. Creates a robust conservation fund to help preserve and restore San Mateo Creek and its watershed. An important component of the agreement is an unprecedented commitment by TCA to create a $28 million conservation fund that will help preserve and restore San Mateo Creek and its watershed. An independent oversight committee comprised of Save San Onofre Coalition members, TCA and resource agencies will work collaboratively to target priority land acquisitions and carry out critical habitat restoration projects.

"The San Mateo Creek Watershed is a unique undammed, intact watershed in coastal Southern California. Protecting the natural and recreational resources that depend upon it has been a key goal of the Save San Onofre Coalition," added Dan Silver, executive director, Endangered Habitats League. "Through this agreement, we not only guarantee protection, but also gain positive benefits now and into the future."

"This settlement agreement is the result of an innovative and collaborative process by a group of bold leaders who have worked together to develop an environmentally conscientious approach for the development of solutions to the region's mobility challenges," said

Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency Vice Chair Lisa Bartlett, who is also the chairwoman of the Orange County Board of Supervisors.

The agreement also requires preparation of a Coastal Access Management Plan that will mitigate impacts from any construction of an alternative toll road alignment project, ensure continuous public shoreline access to San Onofre State Beach during construction of any project and result in permanent public access enhancements.

“Our coalition has worked diligently for more than a decade to save the park and the surrounding watershed. This settlement agreement permanently protects these invaluable cultural, recreational and ecological resources that are treasured by the public,” concluded Stefanie Sekich-Quinn of the Surfrider Foundation.

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[Editor’s Note:]
The Save San Onofre Coalition comprises the following 12 California and national environmental organizations: Audubon California, California Coastal Protection Network, California State Parks Foundation, Defenders of Wildlife, Endangered Habitats League, Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., Natural Resources Defense Council, Orange County Coastkeeper, Sea and Sage Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Surfrider Foundation and WiLDCOAST/COASTALVAjE.

The Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA) are two joint powers authorities formed by the California legislature in 1986 to plan, finance, construct and operate Orange County’s public toll road system. Fifty-one miles of the system are complete, including the 73, 133, 241 and 261 Toll Roads. More than three hundred thousand people from all over Southern California use TCA’s toll roads each day. Elected officials from surrounding cities and county supervisorial districts are appointed to serve on each agency’s board of directors. Public oversight ensures that the interests of local communities and drivers are served and that TCA continues to meet the region’s growing need for congestion-free transportation alternatives.