



*This section of rolling coastal foothills in Santa Barbara County is part of the La Purisma Conservation Bank that historically served as cattle grazing property. Caltrans has purchased conservation credits in the one-time ranch that is home to the endangered California tiger salamander.*

# Investing in Habitat Protection

## Advance Mitigation Program, with SB 1 Funds, Balances Impacts from Projects

Caltrans is taking a proactive approach to offsetting the environmental impacts of transportation projects, particularly when mitigation is required. Now, recent California legislation and funding is backing those efforts with the establishment of an [Advance Mitigation Program](#).

The Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017 (Senate Bill 1) directs \$30 million into an account over each of the next four years to pay for Caltrans' natural resource mitigation needs in advance of project impacts. Such purchases can come from conservation banks, mitigation banks, in-lieu fee programs or the payment of fees associated with conservation plans, mitigation credit agreements, or habitat restoration.

Future qualifying Caltrans transportation projects will "buy" mitigation from the Advance Mitigation Program, replenishing the program account and ensuring it is self-sustaining for future work that requires environmental safeguards.

With these funds, Caltrans' Advance Mitigation Program will plan and implement environmental

mitigation for selected transportation projects much earlier in the planning process.

Protecting habitat before a transportation project breaks ground is expected to assist with regulatory reviews and permitting, as well as save time and money. Advance mitigation also is intended to lead to more comprehensive environmental protection because the offsets will be done first and be better planned with resource agency input early in the process. Select mitigation sites can be purchased or restored early to compensate for future impacts from construction of one or more transportation projects in the area.

Caltrans has long strived to design transportation projects that impose the least possible impact on the environment. But when impacts to natural resources associated with proposed projects are unavoidable, Caltrans takes certain steps to offset or compensate for such an alteration. Purchasing land for habitat conservation or creation is one example.

This is called compensatory mitigation, and several laws require it. However, Caltrans' compensatory mitigation is

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usually tied directly to a transportation project, and the determination of impacts often comes late in the project development process. This delays transportation projects and adds costs, and sometimes restricts the extent of mitigation options.

In a typical year, Caltrans obtains environmental permits on about 100 transportation projects that each present unique regulatory challenges. For instance, Caltrans spends an estimated \$50 million on average just for wetlands and endangered species mitigation to comply with federal laws and regulations. That does not include expenditures to comply with California laws and regulations.

Advance mitigation can establish larger and better-connected ecological reserves and conservation areas. Advance mitigation will allow Caltrans to combine

forecasted mitigation needs that are anticipated from multiple future transportation projects within the same general area. With advance mitigation, Caltrans can meet conservation goals in addition to regulatory requirements.

And if Caltrans cannot use all its mitigation “credits,” the California Streets and Highways Code allows the sale of excess credits to other transportation agencies with mitigation needs.

Caltrans was in the process of finalizing its advance mitigation planning guidelines as of press time, and workshops to solicit public comment were held in January 2019. More information can be found at [advancemitigation.dot.ca.gov](http://advancemitigation.dot.ca.gov). **MM**

*Source: Caltrans’ Project Delivery Quarterly, Summer 2017 issue; Amy Bailey, Office Chief, Caltrans Division of Environmental Analysis*



*A pond on the La Purisma Conservation Bank property nourishes wildlife that live on the land dedicated to habitat conservation.*



*The California tiger salamander is under threat in its historic range, and Caltrans is helping preserve the species with habitat purchases.*