

August 25, 2024

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor of the State of California
1021 O Street, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: AB 2503 - Zero Emission Rail Streamlining - Request for Signature

Dear Governor Newsom,

SPUR (the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association) writes to urge your signature on AB 2053 from Assemblymember Lee. AB 2503 will streamline the planning and delivery of zero emission rail projects in California to help reduce vehicles mile traveled, greenhouse gas emissions and local particulate matter.

SPUR supports the transition to a more sustainable transportation system and to higher speed, more reliable, and more frequent intercity and regional rail service as contemplated in the State Rail Plan. Zero emission rail, especially electrified rail powered by overhead catenary wires, is a critical component for realizing fast, frequent and reliable rail service for Californians.

The [top 5 counties with the worst air quality](#) in the United States are all located in California, concentrated in locations with more poverty, more residents of color, and more impacts from industry on environmental justice communities. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced by [43% by 2030 to avoid catastrophic warming](#). Transportation is the largest source of both [greenhouse gas \(36.4% from cars and trucks\)](#) and [ozone \(>35%\)](#) emissions in the state. These high emissions are a consequence of car dependency and poor public transit as well as the logistics industry. Passenger and freight rail rely on diesel locomotives that emit greenhouse gas emissions and ‘criteria’ emissions (NO_x, SO_x, CO, ozone, particulate matter), ~7% of [2017 statewide NO_x emissions](#). Electrification of passenger rail with overhead catenary wire (OCS) has the potential to substantially reduce rail emissions directly and car emissions indirectly through mode shift.

OCS electric rail technology is mature for both freight and passenger applications, and has existed for over 100 years, yet California lags behind domestic and international peers in electrification. Domestic examples of successful electric rail include the Northeast Corridor, which includes the Acela, the fastest trains operating in the United States, Denver RTD commuter rail, and California's newly opened electric Caltrain.

The saga of Atherton, California, serves as a stark reminder of the challenges we face. The town's legal challenge against the Caltrain electrification project exemplifies how protracted environmental reviews and subsequent litigation can dramatically inflate costs and delay the environmental and public health benefits these projects are designed to deliver. Such legal battles have not only added significant expenses to the state but have also postponed the vital transition from diesel to zero emission rail systems.

If signed, AB 2503 can streamline sensible zero emissions rail projects, including rail electrification by OCS, to help deliver the benefits of modern rail trips to passengers as well as cleaner air for nearby residents and businesses.

We thank you for your consideration and leadership in making California more sustainable across every industry.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Laura Tolkoff', written in a cursive style.

Laura Tolkoff
Transportation Policy Director
SPUR