

Transportation Observations, Considerations, and Recommendations relative to the Eastern Sierra Expanded Transit System and the Reds Meadow Shuttle

**Provided by the Interagency Transportation Assistance Group (TAG) /
Alternative Transportation in Parks and Public Lands (ATPPL) Program**

**Mammoth Lakes / Bishop, CA
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A field investigation of the current transportation issues and opportunities relative to the Eastern Sierra Expanded Transit System and the Reds Meadow Shuttle by the inter-agency Transportation Assistance Group (TAG) was conducted August 21-23, 2007, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS) in cooperation with the Devils Postpile National Monument (National Park Service (NPS)) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This TAG report was prepared subsequent to the site visit and interaction with numerous federal, state, local and private sector stakeholders. This report documents the conditions observed, transportation issues and considerations, and recommendations arising from the TAG analysis. The site visit and the preparation of this report were facilitated and funded by the Alternative Transportation in Parks and Public Lands (ATPPL) program, administered by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) in coordination with the Department of the Interior (DOI).

Background and Conditions

The Eastern Sierra Expanded Transit System has evolved from concept to reality through the creation of the Eastern Sierra Transit Authority (ESTA) on July 1, 2007. The ESTA service area encompasses a large area stretching from Reno, NV, on the north to Ridgecrest, CA, on the south – with connections from the region to major metropolitan areas (Las Vegas, NV, Los Angeles, CA, and San Francisco, CA). Inyo and Mono counties comprise the majority of the area both in terms of geography and recreational and tourism opportunities.

The Eastern Sierra is dominated by Federal lands (92% of Inyo County and 88% of Mono County) including the Inyo National Forest, the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Devils Postpile National Monument (NPS), Manaznar National Historical Site (NPS), portions of Yosemite National Park, Death Valley National Park, and Sequoia – Kings Canyon National Park to the west, as well as extensive Bureau of Land Management lands along the U.S. 395 Scenic Byway corridor.

The Eastern Sierra area is sparsely populated. The population of Inyo County is roughly 18,000; whereas the Mono County population is about 13,000. In comparison, visitation to the Inyo National Forest is over four million annually.

Tourism and recreation represent the largest portion of the local economy. Major sites from north to south along the U.S. 395 Scenic Byway corridor include:

- Bodie Ghost Town
- Mono Lake / South Tufa Reserve / USFS Visitor Center
- Yosemite National Park
- June Lake
- Town of Mammoth Lakes area
 - Inyo Craters / Earthquake Fault
 - Mammoth Mountain Resort
 - Mammoth Lakes Basin
 - Reds Meadow / Minaret Vista
 - Devils Postpile / Rainbow Falls
 - Hot Creek
 - Convict Lake
- Rock Creek
- Bishop Creek
 - North Lake
 - South Lake
- Manzanar National Monument
- Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest / Visitor Center
- Mount Whitney / Alabama Hills (Film Museum)
- Interagency Visitor Center (Lone Pine)
- Death Valley National Park

The Inyo National Forest contains 14 of the 15 mountains in California with an elevation over 14,000 feet. The highest point (Mt. Whitney, 14,496 feet) and the lowest point (Bad Water, Death Valley National Park, 282 feet below sea level) in the “lower 48” states are in Inyo County, and attract visitors to the Eastern Sierra.

The overwhelming majority of visitors to the Eastern Sierra (upwards of 95%) arrive by private motor vehicles, making alternative transportation more a matter of choice than necessity, as was noted by multiple stakeholders. Most are from Southern California (especially during the winter as highway routes between U.S. 50 and across the Sierras are closed). Increasingly, visitors are coming from Reno and Las Vegas, NV, in part as a result of Angelinos relocating to these areas yet still recreating in the Eastern Sierra. The Town of Mammoth Lakes reports solid international visitation from “fly-drive” and “fly-ride” tours of the American West. Tour itineraries vary, but typically include a leg from Las Vegas to Mammoth en-route to Yosemite (at which overnight accommodations are more difficult to secure than in Mammoth Lakes).

In sharp contrast to the dominance of highway transportation in the Eastern Sierra are the Pacific Crest Trail and the John Muir Trail – both popular trails that intertwine along a 200-mile wilderness section devoid of roads. The John Muir Trail runs from Yosemite National Park in the north to Whitney Portal / Lone Pine in the south. Hikers rely on the

communities along the U.S. 395 corridor to access the Pacific Crest and John Muir trails, secure provisions, and meet up with family and friends along the way. Websites¹ geared to long-distance hikers provide tips about how to access and use available transit services along the corridor to be able to secure supplies and/or return to their starting point after hiking all or a portion of these trails.

The U.S. 395 corridor functions as the transportation backbone of the Eastern Sierra and provides access to Reno, NV, to the north, Los Angeles, CA to the south, and linkages to I-15 and other routes to Las Vegas, NV. Caltrans reports that 40% of the U.S. 395 travel is “through traffic;” 55% is for recreational purposes. Of the 60% of traffic originating in or destined to locations within Inyo and Mono counties, the Town of Mammoth Lakes is the top destination. Caltrans also indicated that increased truck traffic to Reno, NV, from Los Angeles, CA, is projected due to industrial development in the Reno area. There also has been interest in developing rail transportation in the corridor, but Caltrans indicated that at a cost of \$4B this was unlikely in the current budgetary environment.



Figure 1: Map of Eastern Sierra Federal Land Areas

In addition to the U.S. 395 Scenic Byway (both in Inyo and Mono counties), the Eastern Sierra also includes the Ancient Bristlecone Scenic Byway (Route 168), the Lee Vining

¹ <http://alumnus.caltech.edu/~rbell/JMTTransport.html>

Canyon Scenic Byway, the Tioga Road / Big Oak Flat Road Scenic Byway, and the Death Valley Scenic Byway – each of which offers a unique motor touring experience.

The withdrawal of Greyhound intercity bus service from the corridor in 2001 resulted in Inyo and Mono counties instituting the CREST (Carson Reno Eastern Sierra Transit) intercity bus service between the Reno, NV, airport and Ridgecrest, CA. Operating a reduced service (every other day in each direction) in comparison to daily Greyhound service previously, CREST serves to interconnect communities along the corridor and link to other intercity transportation services. A recent survey by LSC Transportation Consultants reported that of the 4,400 annual passengers (comparable to 8,000 for the daily Greyhound service on a per day basis), 55% use CREST to connect with other airline, rail, or bus service. Notably, 72% use CREST for “recreation / vacation” travel, which is consistent with reports that only 45% of the riders reside in California, about 35% reside in other states, and more than 20% are from other countries. Most (70%) of CREST riders are non-disabled adults, 20% are seniors, 5% are persons with disabilities, and 5% are children.

Intercity transportation is a significant issue, particularly with respect to the Town of Mammoth Lakes, which has a resident population of 7,000 (roughly 25% of the regional population) and a peak seasonal population of 35,000 during the summer and winter seasons. The Town purchased the Mammoth June Lake Airport from Mono County in 1992 and now is the Mammoth Yosemite Airport. The airport lacks commercial airline service; however, the Town has been pursuing commercial air service to the Eastern Sierra in cooperation with Mammoth Mountain Ski Area (MMSA) since 1997. Air service is “viewed as a means to help stabilize Mammoth’s economy; provide a broader exposure to the long-term visitor marketplace; and assist in controlling the growth rate in traffic and air quality”.¹ Although there has been opposition to proposed airport expansion on environmental grounds the Town was upheld in Superior Court and a in the final ruling by the California Appeals Court on June 23, 2005, so commercial air service into the area may begin in 2008. Stakeholders anticipate that this will enhance the Town of Mammoth Lakes and MMSA as a destination resort area, but acknowledge that lacking alternative transportation options the airport may blossom with rental car agencies that in turn will inundate the town with additional motor vehicles and traffic.

In consideration of these conditions and a desire to facilitate the connection between people and outdoor recreational opportunities in national forests, the Forest Service requested the TAG visit so as to explore partnering opportunities and strategies for enhancing alternative transportation access to public lands in the Eastern Sierra. Figure 1 below depicts the wealth of Federal lands within the region.

Prospective partners

The Eastern Sierra has an impressive tradition of partnering and presents fertile ground for the cultivation of future opportunities. Paradoxically, the area has a lot of opportunity coupled with a lack of financial capability due to the dominance of federal lands and

¹ <http://ci.mammoth-lakes.ca.us/airport/MLAC2Newsletter.htm>

heavy dependence on recreation and tourism economically. The region is disadvantaged in terms of most traditional alternative transportation funding sources in that most are allocated in proportion to the resident population.

- **The Eastern Sierra Transit Authority (ESTA)** has been established under the California Joint Powers Act, as a cooperative venture of the City of Bishop, the Town of Mammoth Lakes, Inyo County, and Mono County. It began operations in July 2007, and provides an unprecedented opportunity to develop cooperative regional solutions. It is the transit provider for several services in the area, allowing for coordinated service. ESTA runs the inter-city CREST service along U.S. 395 mentioned above; a Dial-a-ride service serving mainly transit dependent populations such as persons with disabilities, senior citizens, and individuals with low incomes; and the Town of Mammoth Lakes Shuttle mentioned below. ESTA has yet to become designated as an Federal Transit Administration (FTA) grantee. Instead, it provides services under contract with the local governments it serves.
- **The Town of Mammoth Lakes** is a major transportation hub for the region and also provides summer transit services (under contract with ESTA). The Town of Mammoth Lakes has a Transportation Development Tax and recently has enacted a 1% increase in Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) to fund its shuttle and trolley services. The TOT generates \$850,000 annually, making the Town a potential partner with a reliable funding source for operations and maintenance. The Town of Mammoth Lakes received a grant in 2006 through the FTA Bus and Bus Facilities program. As a result, the town became an FTA grantee, and purchased twelve vehicles (six replica trolleys and six small cut-away buses) and built a six-bay transit vehicle maintenance facility.
- **Local Transportation Commissions (LTCs)** in Inyo County and Mono County determine how transportation funding provided via Caltrans is allocated. Funds primarily are for planning or capital investment and are used as match for Federal grant funding. ESTA, for example, anticipates requesting LTC funding to develop a service plan and a short range capital investment plan.
- **Caltrans** District 9 covers the Eastern Sierra region. Although most of Caltrans funding is directed via the Local Transportation Commissions, the District 9 staff represents a solid technical resource and offered to assist in providing assistance in preparing grant applications and other requests for funding. Caltrans Division of Mass Transportation (DMT) is the designated FTA grantee for administering Section 5311 formula grant for transit in non-urbanized areas with a population under 50,000; however, due to small resident populations the amount of funding for Inyo and Mono counties is very modest relative to need. The Division also administers the Section 5311(f) program for Intercity Bus Service – a competitive grant program under which CREST has received funding in the past but will face increasing competition going forward.

- **Mammoth Mountain Ski Area (MMSA)** operates and maintains a fleet of about 30 transit buses to serve its patrons and employees. During the ski season MMSA operates a skier shuttle with 22 buses seven days a week, for approximately 150 days. MMSA also operates a shuttle bus service to its mountain bike park from Mammoth Village during the summer. It provides year-round commuter service for its employees who live in Bishop, CA, due to the limited availability of affordable housing in the Mammoth Lakes area. The winter skier bus service is provided as a traffic congestion mitigation measure imposed under the Forest Service permit granted to MMSA for operation of the ski area on the Inyo Forest. The MMSA is responsible for shuttle capital investment, operating and ongoing maintenance costs. Revenues generated under the Forest Service permit and paid by MMSA go to the U.S. Treasury and are not available to offset costs of the Inyo Forest or Forest Service.
- **Yosemite Area Regional Transit System (YARTS)** provides a daily service from Mammoth Lakes to Yosemite during the summer season (June through September). YARTS is a Joint Powers Agency formed by Merced, Mariposa and Mono counties. YARTS partners include the Caltrans, the Federal Highway Administration, the USDA Forest Service, and the National Park Service.
- **CALnections** is a web-based trip planner that provides information about ground transportation serving rural California regions - public buses, commercial carriers, shuttles and social service transportation. Currently, it covers Modoc County and Sage Stage Bus with trips to/from Alturas, California. According to ESTA, plans call for CALnections to include trip planning and travel information capabilities for Lassen, Plumas, Mono and Inyo counties along US 395 in the coming months. CALnections is a joint venture of the Modoc County Transportation Commission in association with HB Software Solutions.
- **Coalition for Unified Recreation in the Eastern Sierra (CURES)** is a nonprofit partnership organization that seeks to enhance and protect outdoor recreational opportunities in the Eastern Sierra as well as the resources upon which such experiences are based. CURES is comprised of a diverse group that includes representatives from outdoor recreation industries, government agencies, user groups, environmental organizations and the community at-large. It worked to establish the U.S. 395 Scenic Byway, and continues to serve as a cooperative forum for these diverse interests to work together toward common objectives.
- **The Sierra Business Council (SBC)** is “a nonprofit association of more than five hundred businesses, agencies, and individuals working to secure the social, environmental, and financial health of the Sierra Nevada region for this and future generations. SBC is a resource for business leaders, government officials, and other decision-makers seeking solutions to local and regional challenges.”¹

¹ <http://sbcouncil.org/>

Existing transportation planning studies

Several transportation plans and studies have addressed Eastern Sierra topics over the past 5-10 years or are ongoing. Notable among these are:

- US 395 Origin & Destination Study, Caltrans District 9, System Planning Branch, 2000
- *Field Report* Eastern Sierra Expanded Transit System, Federal Lands Alternative Transportation Systems Study – Summary of Forest Service ATS Needs, January 2004
- Eastern Sierra Public Transportation Plan – Community-Based Transportation Planning Process and Goals and Objectives, December 2004
- Eastern Sierra Public Transportation Plan – Existing Conditions, August 2004
- *Replacing the loss of Greyhound service in the Eastern Sierra – The CREST Program*, LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. (TRB Presentation 2006)
- Eastern Sierra Transit Authority Business Plan, July 2007
- California Statewide Rural Intercity Bus Study, (Underway 2007)
- U.S. Forest Service Reds Meadow Shuttle Bus Feasibility Study in cooperation with National Park Service Devils Postpile, (Initiated August 2007)

Existing alternative transportation

Alternative transportation in the Eastern Sierra area exists at a number of locations but is fragmented both in terms of service, user information, fare structure, and interconnection. The notable services are highlighted below.

- **ESTA/CREST** provides alternating day, intercity bus service between the Reno / Tahoe International Airport and Ridgecrest, CA. The CREST route comprises a northern and a southern section that overlap from Mammoth Lakes to Bishop. ESTA also operates a demand responsive service throughout its service area; this however, is not promoted as a visitor oriented service. ESTA also operates the Town of Mammoth Lakes transit services described below.
- **Yosemite Area Regional Transit System (YARTS)** provides a daily service from Mammoth Lakes to Yosemite during the summer season (June/July through September). The service departs Mammoth Lakes at 7:00am, arriving Yosemite at 10:55 am and returns from Yosemite at 5:00 pm, arriving back in Mammoth Lakes at 8:50 pm. The roundtrip adult fare is \$30 and includes the entrance fee for Yosemite National Park. A corresponding one-way fare is \$15. Senior and child fares are half the adult fare. YARTS is popular with hikers who walk the John Muir Trail to or from Yosemite and ride YARTS on the return. YARTS also provides interconnecting service to Amtrak passenger rail service (to SF/Oakland and Los Angeles / San Diego) and the Merced Municipal Airport (service to Las Vegas) in Merced, CA.

YARTS has worked to coordinate services with ESTA/CREST to facilitate transfers at Lee Vining, CA, and appears willing to work on cooperative service offerings along the U.S. 395 corridor (Lee Vining to Mammoth Lakes), where YARTS and CREST services overlap. YARTS received \$582,579 in FY 2006 funds through the ATPPL program to construct two park and ride lots. YARTS applied for \$264,000 in ATPPL funds in FY2007 for leasing vehicles.

- **MMSA** provides extensive winter shuttle bus service within Mammoth Lakes as well as the summer Bike Park Shuttle which takes mountain bikers from the Village to the Adventure Center every 30 minutes. Operates 9:00 am to 5:30 pm daily, from late June – late Sept. The service is for Bike Park pass holders with bikes but also offered FREE for pedestrians with no bike. The bike park shuttle can be used as a transit connection to the Reds Meadow Shuttle.
- **The Town of Mammoth Lakes** provides three free transit services during the summer. This service uses vehicles owned by the Town and operated by ESTA.
 - **The Trolley:** Operates from the Village to Main Street to Old Mammoth Road daily, 9am to 10pm. Every 15 minutes June 15 to Sept. 3; every half hour Sept. 4 to Nov. 1, 2007.
 - **Lakes Basin Trolley:** Operates from the Village to Horseshoe Lake. Every hour from 8am to 6pm, July 1 to Sept. 3, 2007.
 - **The Lift:** Operates from the Village to Main Street to Old Mammoth Road daily, 7am to 6pm. Every half hour. 9am to 6pm on weekends.
- **The Reds Meadow Shuttle** is operated cooperatively by the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service. Since 1979 the shuttle has provided the primary visitor access to Reds Meadow and Devils Postpile National Monument from the Mammoth Adventure Center. The one-lane road into Reds Meadow and Devils Postpile is only open in the summer. With few exceptions, all visitors are required ride the shuttle, which operates from mid-June to mid-September. It runs at least every 45 minutes (and up to every 20 minutes during peak periods) from 7:15 am to 7 pm. The roundtrip adult fare is \$7. The Forest Service contracts with a private transportation company to provide this service.

Other alternative transportation services:

- **Sierra Express Transportation** offers door-to-door taxi service connecting to and from Mammoth Lakes from locations throughout the Eastern Sierra, including Reno International Airport.

Transportation Findings

The Eastern Sierra presents an array of ripe opportunities, as previously outlined in the Federal Lands Alternative Transportation Systems Study – Summary of Forest Service ATS Needs. Prospects for strong and growing recreational visitation is anticipated not only from Southern California but also from the growing Reno and Las Vegas areas. In

addition, the region benefits from outstanding and dedicated professional Forest Service, National Parks Service, and Bureau of Land Management staff willing to participate in transportation planning and mobility improvements with a wide variety of stakeholders.

The partnering climate and tradition is exceptional. The Reds Meadow shuttle is a great example of collaboration – a pioneering effort over 28 years. The recent creation of ESTA underscores the regional intent to pursue coordinated transportation services in the Eastern Sierra. Throughout the region there are volunteers who have a pioneering spirit for increased transit to become a way of life in the region. There is cohesive spirit of cooperation in support of initiatives by the Town, MMSA and others. It is easy to see alternative transportation successes in the near future

The prospects for alternative transportation in this automobile dominated area are quite hopeful given the environmental ethic and commitment that is evidenced among visitors and residents alike. The Town of Mammoth Lakes “Feet First” motto is emblematic of their commitment to alternative transportation solutions. The replica trolley and shuttle service in the Town of Mammoth Lakes, along with planned construction of a bike path along Lake Mary Road all speak to this intent.

Success going forward will depend on the development of and further refinement of existing plans, policies, and procedures. Selection of the proper transit service in various locations with proper supporting infrastructure will offer an opportunity to provide highly effective mobility. The planning the region has completed sets a positive course for future success in improved mobility and alternative transportation options.

Financing (actually the lack thereof) is the primary controlling factor. Whereas capital improvement funding comparatively is easy to obtain, funding for ongoing operations and maintenance is problematic. Excepting the Town of Mammoth Lakes and MMSA, few agencies in the Eastern Sierra have funding for transportation operations. The Forest Service has been struggling to sustain the Reds Meadow Shuttle for nearly three decades. Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (REA) revenue currently funds the shuttle; REA funding varies from year to year based on the number of visitors – the costs, however, are for the most part fixed. It is impressive that the Forest Service has been able to fund in the range of 90% of the capital and operating costs for the shuttle service from passenger fares. Being able to fund 25% to 40% of operating expenses and no capital expenses out of passenger fares is considered good by transit industry standards. As such, the Forest Service’s 90% fare box recovery ratio indicates strong cost controls. It may also indicate that lands managers may be able to charge more in passenger fares or entry fees than the typical transit agency can charge for a trip. In other words, members of the public may be willing to spend \$7 on a passenger fare / entry fee to see a geological wonder while they are only willing to pay \$1.50 to take a bus to work everyday. The Forest Service will need to consider funding options going forward if it intends to pursue highly desirable alternative transportation options for several popular recreational sites, including Whitney Portal, Bishop Creek, Rock Creek, and Convict Lake. Forest Service campgrounds and parking areas experience very high occupancy rates throughout the summer season, 80-95%. Visitors to such areas often park along

side the road or far away from the trailheads or lakes they seek to enjoy. Given that many visitors come from the Southern California area where forest access fees are in place, consideration of a similar funding approach may be warranted.

Most concepts outlined in the Federal Lands Alternative Transportation Systems Study – Summary of Forest Service ATS Needs, are reasonable, and could be pursued. Some are more suitable for near term pursuit, whereas others are longer term candidates. Although the report presents these as “feasible transit alternatives”, the TAG interprets feasibility to mean suitable for transit – recognizing that further implementation planning and analysis will be necessary to determine projected visitor use and associated financial feasibility. A summary of TAG perspectives on the study concepts is provided in the table below.

Findings, Recommendations, and Possible Next Steps

The TAG recommends pursuing planning and implantation activities in parallel. There is a sufficient planning base to move forward with site specific planning initiatives while a unified, long-term cooperative regional transportation planning framework is developed. Advancing implementation activities is viewed as essential to sustaining the cooperative spirit among the stakeholders, who are as interested (if not more so) in pursuing near term results than further longer range planning. Exceptional opportunities exist to provide alternative transportation access to high sierra wilderness day hiking experiences from the Town of Mammoth Lakes and elsewhere in the region.

Federal Lands Alternative Transportation Systems Study – Summary of Forest Service ATS Needs	
“Feasible” Transit Alternatives	TAG Perspective
<i>Interregional and Regional Transit Service Expansion and Implementation Alternatives</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expand CREST service to daily operation at a cost of \$690,000 initially and \$500,000 per year thereafter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Impractical until a viable operations and maintenance funding strategy can be identified.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Extend YARTS service to other Eastern Sierra communities at a cost of \$525,000 initially and \$115,000 per year thereafter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Impractical until a viable operations and maintenance funding strategy can be identified.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement a Route 178 Shuttle Bus to serve Kern County and Sequoia / Kings Canyon National Parks at a cost of \$245,000 initially and \$410,000 per year thereafter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Impractical until a viable operations and maintenance funding strategy can be identified.
<i>Local Transit Service Expansion and Implementation Alternatives</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Continue the Reds Meadow / Devils Postpile Shuttle Service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Essential to any future strategy. ▪ Funding is an ongoing concern.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement a Mammoth Lakes Basin Summer Shuttle Service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Essential to any future strategy. ▪ Implemented in 2007
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Convert MMSA winter shuttle service to Town of Mammoth Lakes (or ESTA) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Worthwhile goal but requires thoughtful transition planning. ▪ Institutional and financial aspects and equitable conversion are daunting.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implement Recreational Shuttle Service at sites on the Inyo National Forest and the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ TAG did not consider the Humboldt-Toiyabe needs; so offers no opinion. ▪ Inyo recreational shuttle opportunities are suitable for pursuit selectively as noted in the recommendations section below.
<p><i>Integrated Transit Expansion and Implementation Alternatives</i></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increase scheduled inter-community transit service and demand responsive service with CREST in Bishop, Lone Pine, the Town of Mammoth Lakes, Walker, and Benton 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Worth considering subject to funding availability for ongoing operations and maintenance.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Expand CREST to provide regional and local inter-connections with recreational shuttle services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Suitable for pursuit selectively in conjunction with Inyo recreational shuttle opportunities.

Five interrelated thrusts are outlined below by the TAG, along with recommendations. In total there are more planning recommendations than can be reasonably pursued; therefore it will be necessary to prioritize and select which to advance. The TAG anticipates that in addition to pursuing regional transportation planning on a continuing basis, the Forest Service and its partners will consider pursuing opportunities in Whitney Portal and in the Mammoth Lakes area.

1. **Regional Transportation Planning** is a continuing process. Although the region has a remarkable transportation planning legacy, the area will benefit from the developing unified regional transportation plans, policies, and procedures in support of ESTA and other alternative transportation initiatives. Opportunities exist under ESTA to unify disparate rural, human services, and recreational transit services. A regional transportation planning study is needed to develop detailed operational and financing plans. This planning should build on the vision of the Eastern Sierra Expanded Transit System planning study and should integrate with other planning efforts.

The overarching theme should be need for regional, seamless, and sustainable transit that is integrative and supportive of land agency management plans. For example, a General Management Plan is scheduled to start in 2009, and would benefit from coordination with other agencies regarding the transportation element. Likewise, plans for commercial air service into Mammoth Lakes present a rare opportunity to consider how alternative transportation service might be used to facilitate visitor mobility without a proliferation of rental cars in the area. Likewise, opportunities for facilitating “fly-ride” tour services in the Eastern Sierra region should be evaluated with respect to multiple destination travel (i.e., Death Valley National Park, Whitney Portal / Alabama Hills, Mammoth Lakes / Reds Meadow / Devils Postpile / Lakes Basin, Mono Lake, Yosemite and Sequoia / Kings Canyon National Parks).

Recommendation: The Federal agencies should work cooperatively with the other stakeholders in the area to review and coordinate plans in order to unify mobility and management strategies in the region. The Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management should incorporate transportation in their management

plan updates. The new regional transit authority, ESTA, plans to develop a regional service plan and a short term capital investment plan over the coming year. This is an opportune time to engage with other stakeholders in defining the future of alternative transportation in the Eastern Sierra region.

The Federal agencies should work cooperatively with ESTA, the Town of Mammoth Lakes, Inyo and Mono counties, and Caltrans to apply for ATPPL funding to develop a long-range, alternative transportation strategy for the Eastern Sierra region to extend and complement existing regional transportation plans. The plan should consider the ways and means for cooperatively addressing priority needs that have been identified already, particularly as it relates to lifecycle operation and maintenance costs. Such a plan will develop and analyze options for transit routes, vehicle and fuel technologies, unified trip planning, way finding / information systems, fare payment systems, marketing, and supporting infrastructure. The plan could help alleviate the fragmentation that now exists among alternative transportation systems and services in the Eastern Sierra. The plan should consider multiple planning horizons and financial contingencies by creating mobility policies and programs with respect to: immediate needs, (now-2 years), intermediate needs (2-5 years) and longer term (10-20 years).

The long range study needs to take a serious look at financial feasibility and explore various ways and means to finance transit service at price points commensurate with various market segments. The possibility of using REA or other funds, such as TOT and/or corporate contributions / sponsorship, should be explored. Although the study could be led by ESTA, the financial analysis component needs to be done in close cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, and the National Park Service to explore opportunities for providing recreational services with funding sources that can reliably sustain operational and maintenance needs over the long term.

If partners were to receive an ATPPL planning award, partners could hire a consultant to carry out the study or use the funds to pay the salary of new or existing staff working on the planning study. ATPPL funds can cover that portion of the staff person's time that is devoted to working on the planning study.

2. **Integrate, Enhance, and Promote Existing Services.** Alternative transportation services, particularly in the vicinity of Mammoth Lakes, appear to have untapped potential that can be exploited more effectively. Opportunities exist with respect to improving signage, providing more widespread information about schedule, stops, fares, and payment options. Several recommendations are provided for consideration, any or all might be the basis for an ATPPL planning or implementation grant(s).

Recommendation: Pursue development of a web-based trip planner in conjunction with CALnections. An for accelerating development of information related to the ESTA service region should be considered. Include linkages to other web sites that

typically are accessed by visitors (e.g. land management agency sites, hotel, tourist attractions, etc.).

Recommendation: Consider extending the Mammoth Lakes Trolley route to serve the Reds Meadow / Devils Postpile Shuttle and the Welcome Center, possibly with shuttle ticket sales at the Welcome Center.

Recommendation: Consider enhancing trolley and shuttle stops, with updated signs and bus schedules posted at the bus stops. There is a particular opportunity here for the Lakes Basin trolley which currently does not appear to be well marked.

Recommendation: Participate in the development of a unified regional fare policy and payment system that provides incentives for transit use with a seamless pass, connecting a wider range of origins and destinations. A regional pass could also offer reduced fare, possibly in conjunction with business promotions (i.e. goods and services discounts for pass holders).

Recommendation: Investigate the possibility of corporate sponsorship and/or other contributions to offset transit operating and maintenance costs to afford more fare free or pass based services, and/or increase Mammoth Trolley service frequency.

Recommendation: Develop a marketing plan and promotional materials beyond the Mammoth Lakes Transit Map. Consider innovative uses of social “word of mouth” marketing strategies. Emphasize the Town’s “Feet First” motto and bus – hike options, such as the ability to take the Lakes Basin Trolley then a trail into the wild, connecting to the Reds Meadow Shuttle on a day hike! A series of transit accessible hikes and activities could be highlighted for visitors and residents alike.

Recommendation: In order to close the funding gap for the Reds Meadow Shuttle, the Forest Service should continue to seek ATPPL implementation funding the capital portion of the shuttle bus service contract. The ATPPL program does not fund operating expenses, so it cannot pay for the part of the service contract that goes to driver salaries, fuel, etc., but it can pay for the part of the contract that covers the capital costs of the vehicles. The Forest Service requested this from FY2007 ATPPL funds and could request it again in future years should the current shuttle feasibility study determine continuation of the service contract to be prudent.

3. **Save Paradise – Put Up a Transit Stop.** Managing over-loaded parking lots is a topic that should be addressed at a number of locations. Strategies as to what should be done if there is limited parking and what policies should be in place need to be developed. Methods to manage parking demand (i.e., parking fees) should be considered along with increased transit capacity.

The need is most evident at Whitney Portal, where the District Ranger expressed a strong desire to consider alternatives to parking as the only option. Options to reduce the parking footprint and take pressure off the land in order to “save paradise” through the implementation of shuttle service from the Interagency Visitor Center

(Lone Pine) to the Whitney Portal / Alabama Hills area merit immediate study. As with the visitor center, this would require coordination with Federal partners to determine how costs might be shared. A need exists as well to demonstrate the economic and long term resource preservation benefits of implementing a transit alternative. The time to do something at Whitney Portal is at hand, with or without partners. The issue goes beyond parking needs (i.e., day use multi-day, and extended term parking for long-distance hikers) to providing connectivity to allow hikers the ability to avoid having to position multiple vehicles to accommodate return to origin travel after a lengthy hike.

Recommendation: Apply for a site specific ATPPL planning grant to study transit alternatives in conjunction with parking management strategies to alleviate parking issues. The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management should share primary responsibility, using REA funds to get started on proposing transit. This study should be consistent with the regional planning thrust outlined in Item 1 above, and provides an excellent pilot opportunity to work with ESTA.

4. **Recreational Shuttle Services.**

The Eastern Sierra area provides a lot of recreation sites for visitors both in the summer and winter seasons. Although most visitors come to the area via private motor vehicles, an attempt should be made to convert users to alternative transit. Planning with creativity and ingenuity is needed to inspire individuals to want to get out of their vehicle and onto alternative transportation. The demand for mobility in rural towns and areas differs from that in urban areas in that the demand is less efficiently located. The density of movement, with its attendant economies of size, is very low. High costs per trip result from the lack of rural consolidation and longer mileage trips especially in the Eastern Sierra region. A demand-responsive service may be the only cost-effective way to accommodate the small number of riders in less populated areas. Providing specialized transit services along the U.S. 395 corridor that tie into recreational opportunities for hiking, biking, and other activities merits further consideration, particularly as a means of improving day-use access to areas where parking is oversubscribed.

Recommendation: Apply for an ATPPL planning grant to develop and assess recreational shuttle alternatives, including those that provide on-demand and/or selective day service to popular hiking and fishing areas off of U.S. 395. A likely approach is to build services out from population centers such as Mammoth Lakes. This study should be consistent with the regional planning thrust outlined in Item 1 above.

5. **Alternative Transportation “Extension Agent”.** The Forest Service acknowledges its lack of technical expertise in transportation planning, as do the other Federal land management agencies. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of participating in transportation planning meetings and contributing to system planning relative to recreational travel interests. The notion of having a Transit Extension Agent – a person to work locally with staff to help put together these pieces – was discussed

by the TAG. Whereas an on-site, federal staff presence would be ideal the ability to achieve such given staffing and budgetary constraints is unclear. It may be possible to establish a position such as has been done in the Lake Tahoe area, or possibly share this person. It also was noted that during its formative stage, YARTS was able to “borrow” a transit planner from Yolo County. Note, however, that none of these strategies alleviates the need for ongoing management attention on the part of the agencies.

Recommendation: Seek an ongoing transportation planning capability to work with Federal land management agencies in the Eastern Sierra. Successful application for ATPPL funding on planning initiatives outlined above could provide some funding to support a planner. Paying the salary of a staff person working on a planning study funded through the program is an eligible expense. ATPPL funds can cover that portion of the staff person’s time that is devoted to working on the planning study. Likewise, Forest Service transportation planning funds might be available as well. Alternatively, the Federal land management agencies could try to cooperatively request the assistance of a transportation scholar from the National Park Foundation; recognizing that such proposals need to be based on National Park needs, which may not be too difficult if a regional planning effort were undertaken given the number of major national park sites in the region.

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NOTICE

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