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February 28, 2014

Chairman Alex and Members of the Strategic Growth Council  
Cal EPA Headquarters – Sierra Hearing Room  
1001 I Street  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**Re: Agenda Item 7: MPO SCS Self-Assessment – Preliminary Findings**

Dear Chairman Alex and Members of the Strategic Growth Council:

Cleveland National Forest Foundation (CNFF) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) Self-Assessment process (Self-Assessment). While we understand the Strategic Growth Council (Council) anticipates taking no action on the preliminary findings of the Self-Assessment, we believe it is critical to weigh in on the value of this Self-Assessment itself.

Instead of focusing on additional efforts that MPOs could take to meet the goals of SB 375, i.e., reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions through coordinated transportation and land use decisions, MPO staff have been asked to describe their experiences preparing the SCS plans. Inasmuch as the MPOs are focused on the SCS process rather than the SCS *product*, we risk the very real potential of losing sight of the climate change catastrophe that awaits us.

We respectfully request that the Council change its current approach and, instead, ask MPOs to answer the critical question: why did the first round of SCSs fail at achieving real reductions in vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and GHG emissions? Until the MPOs conduct a self-assessment with this question in mind, we will be in grave danger of undermining the very intent of SB 375.

### **Background**

CNFF and SOFAR participated extensively in the last three San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) regional transportation planning (RTP) processes. During the 2003, 2007 and 2050 RTPs processes, CNFF and SOFAR consistently advocated that SANDAG take urgent steps to reduce GHG emissions from transportation sources. CNFF and SOFAR were not alone in this request. Other environmental and public health organizations, and the California Attorney General, lobbied

SANDAG to change its “business as usual” approach to meeting the region’s transportation needs. In connection with the 2007 RTP, for example, SOFAR and the Attorney General negotiated an agreement with SANDAG that called for SANDAG to develop an Urban Area Transit Plan, ([http://sofar.org/pdf/SANDAG\\_SOFAR\\_Settlement2.pdf](http://sofar.org/pdf/SANDAG_SOFAR_Settlement2.pdf)). The purpose of this specific settlement concept was to prompt SANDAG to investigate the necessary transit capital and operational changes that would make transit time competitive with the automobile within the region’s urban core. The hope was that SANDAG would prepare such a plan and include it as an alternative in its next RTP, i.e., the 2050 RTP.

Although SANDAG’s 2050 RTP purported to include an urban area transit plan, that RTP carried over *every single highway project* from the 2007 RTP while deferring many of the much-needed transit projects to the latter years of the 40-year plan. Not surprisingly, the 2050 RTP did not result in a reduction in VMT or a sustained reduction in GHG emissions.

It is critically important to shed light on these historical details because SANDAG’s plans have drastic real world implications. No transportation project can be constructed unless it is included in an RTP. Caltrans, for example, now has a virtual green light to construct its massive highway widening project in San Diego County. The I-5 Project will induce vehicular travel, increase VMT and consequently result in an increase in GHG emissions.

### **Recent Developments**

Two recent developments are about to have a profound influence on SANDAG’s “business as usual” approach to transportation in California. First, in September 2013, Governor Brown signed Senate Bill 743 calling for a substantive change in the way that transportation impacts are analyzed under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Under SB 743, the focus of transportation analysis will shift from driver delay to reduction of GHG emissions and creation of multimodal networks. SB 743 marks a sea change in evaluating transportation impacts since the measurement of impact will likely now include a project’s potential to increase VMT and automobile trips.

Second, a stunning report by the State Smart Transportation Initiative illuminates the systemic flaws in Caltrans’ approach to mobility. This report finds that Caltrans is an agency that is “significantly out of step with best practices in the transportation field and with the state of California’s policy expectations”. “A built environment that reduces vehicle miles driven (VMT) is precisely the goal of the State’s landmark climate policy...and it is precisely the opposite of what Caltrans was organized to do—foster higher auto mobility without regard to land use.” (SSTI, p.20). [SSTI Caltrans Review](#)<sup>1</sup>

But we must carry the Caltrans critique a step further and point out that it is the MPOs that determine regional transportation investment policy. Federal and state law require MPOs to include in the regional transportation plan all projects that will be funded during the life of the plan. No project,

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<sup>1</sup> [http://calsta.ca.gov/res/docs/pdfs/2013/SSTI\\_Independent\\_Caltrans\\_Review\\_1.28.14.pdf](http://calsta.ca.gov/res/docs/pdfs/2013/SSTI_Independent_Caltrans_Review_1.28.14.pdf)

whether sponsored by Caltrans or a local government, can be constructed unless it's in the RTP. Under state law, the MPOs are responsible for prioritizing 75 percent of the federal and state gas tax revenues used for the construction of new capacity increasing transportation facilities.

If the critique of Caltrans is correct, then the MPOs themselves must shoulder much of the responsibility for Caltrans resembling a "large engineering firm" dedicated to "moving cars faster" without regard to sustainability, because the MPOs set the framework for the transportation investments in the state's metropolitan regions.

### **Strategic Growth Council's Efforts**

Against this dramatic backdrop, we are dismayed to find an MPO Self-Assessment process that focuses not on innovative transportation and land use solutions to meet our climate change goals but on MPO agencies' staff frustrations about the planning process itself. Staff have voiced concerns such as having to meet with public and elected officials and educating the community. MPO staff even lashed out at CEQA, calling it "not good for SB 375 or the RTP/SCS process," and asserting that the looming threat of litigation will direct more focus and resources toward preparing a legally defensible EIR, rather than toward better planning.

We find it particularly disingenuous that these MPOs are blaming CEQA rather than their own poor planning for their plans' failures to achieve SB 375's intended goals. Is this exercise really how California's limited financial resources should be spent? Should we be encouraging MPO staff to question the role that CEQA plays when every California jurisdiction tasked with preparing General Plans understands that CEQA does not infringe on good planning, it enhances it. Indeed, without CEQA's mandate that environmental impacts be disclosed and mitigation measures and alternatives be identified for a Project's significant impacts, California's extraordinary natural resources would have been destroyed decades ago. Without CEQA, both the I-5 Project and the SANDAG's 2050 RTP/SCS would have made a mockery of AB 32, Executive Order S-3-05 and SB 375 itself.

While MPOs seek to blame CEQA, we believe the Strategic Growth Council should direct them to look inwardly. When Judge Timothy Taylor recently ruled that SANDAG had "abused their authority" in not revealing the climate change impacts of a plan that was supposed to reduce instead of increase GHG impacts, he was simply adding another chapter to the long sorrowful history of SANDAG's repeated failure to protect San Diego's environment by obsessively clinging to outdated transportation plans and policies.

Self-assessment in fact, turns out to be a contradiction in terms. As the SSTI Report makes crystal clear, the very agencies that have a decades-long investment in business-as-usual planning are the ones least able to criticize or to change their ways. These agencies have demonstrated that they have a fundamental resistance to change and an inability to even imagine alternatives to their business-as-usual approaches.

**Conclusion**

For the reasons set forth above, we respectfully request that the Strategic Growth Council change the direction of this MPO Self-Assessment by requesting that the MPOs assess the efforts that they must take to meet the goals of SB 375, i.e., reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions through coordinated transportation and land use decisions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Duncan McFetridge".

Duncan McFetridge

Director, CNFF

President, SOFAR