

This bill:

- 1) Requires CTC to reach an agreement with the Counties of Merced, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne for the acquisition and adoption of county road J59 into the state highway system by December 31, 2030. The terms of the acquisition must include, at a minimum:
 - a) Repairs for road damage as proposed by the Counties of Merced, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne;
 - b) That the road shall be adopted into the state highway system as part of SR 59; and,
 - c) That the Counties of Merced, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne shall not be required to upgrade county road J59 to meet state highway standards before the road is adopted as part of SR 59.
- 2) Contains a sunset of January 1, 2031.
- 3) Redefines, starting on January 1, 2031, SR 59 as being from SR 152 northerly to SR 99 near Merced, and from that point to the junction of SR 108 and SR 120.

COMMENTS:

- 1) *Purpose of the bill.* According to the author, “SB 1334 provides a practical and locally driven solution to improve transportation efficiency, safety, and emergency response coordination in California’s Central Valley and Sierra foothill regions. At the request of Merced, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne Counties, this bill transfers approximately 26 miles of County Route J59/La Grange Road into the state highway system, creating a continuous State Route 59 corridor that better reflects how the roadway is used. This route serves primarily as a critical connector for regional travel and emergency response, rather than local residential access, and has been heavily relied upon during major wildfire incidents such as the Rim Fire. By reclassifying Route 59 as part of State Highway 59, SB 1334 ensures more consistent maintenance, supports the movement of emergency personnel and equipment, and aligns jurisdiction with the road’s true function as a vital statewide transportation link.”
- 2) *La Grange Road.* La Grange Road, or county road J59, is a roughly 26 mile stretch of road running north-south between the town of Snelling in the south and the interchange of SR 108 and SR 120 in the north. It runs through three

counties, Merced, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne, and is maintained by all three counties. Although this has opened up more avenues for acquiring funding to maintain the road, it has also posed significant coordination problems. For instance, there have been issues with one county obtaining funding intended for the entire road that was subsequently not dispersed to the other two counties.

Despite its designation as a county road, the road primarily serves interregional traffic, acting as a key connector to get from the northern part of the central valley south to United States Highway (US) 99, and on to Fresno, Bakersfield, and beyond. This is best exemplified by the fact that services such as Google Maps will almost always direct users to take J59 if they are traveling from anywhere south of Interstate 80 and east of Sacramento, to south of Merced. Furthermore, the road itself runs through a heavily rural part of the state. There are only 47 residences located along the entire 26-mile stretch, with the majority of these being located along the northern third.

Due to its location, the road is also heavily utilized by crews responding to wildfires in the surrounding area. For instance, 525 engines utilized the road during the 2013 RIM fire causing damage to the road. More recently the road was also utilized during the 2025 TCU Lightning Complex Fire.

- 3) *J59 was supposed to be SR 65.* The state highway network was originally developed in the 1950's. At that time, multiple major north-south highways running along the Central Valley were envisioned. However, only one of these, US 99, along the west side of the Valley, was ever completed.

One of the other envisioned routes was SR 65, which was intended to run along the east side of the valley from Olivehurst to Bakersfield.¹ However, due to financial and technical limitations at the time, focus was instead put on finishing US 99, and SR 65 was never fully completed. Today, only sections of SR 65 exist near Roseville and Bakersfield.

The original route for SR 65 was intended to utilize existing county roads where possible, filling in gaps with new construction. J59 was one of the county roads that was intended to be part of SR 65. Throughout the subsequent changes to the planned highway system, many other county roads in the region were eventually converted into state highways. This includes a section of road contiguous with J59 that became SR 59 which runs from Snelling, south through Merced to SR 152. However, for unknown reasons, the remaining section of the road, the current J59, was never incorporated into the system.

¹ <https://fox40.com/news/california-connection/sr-65-californias-disjointed-north-south-highway/>

- 4) *Previous attempts to integrate J59.* It has long been noted by local officials in the area that J59 effectively serves as a portion of the state highway system, but remains designated as a county road. As noted above, this can be seen in both how the road is utilized and in its history. According to the counties, this mismatch has created financial strain, requiring them to maintain what essentially amounts to a state highway with the resources afforded for local roads.

Indeed, as noted by supporters of SB 1334, “The majority of traffic along this corridor is regional in nature rather than local. That roadway was not designed to serve residential development, but instead functions as a key connector within California’s broader transportation network. As such, continued reliance on county-level maintenance places an inequitable financial and operational burden on local jurisdictions...despite the road’s clear statewide and interregional significance.”

Given this concern, two previous attempts have been made to integrate J59 into the state highway system by making it part of SR 59. The first of these was AB 464 (Olsen, 2011). At that time the counties had just repaired the road and were arguing that it was thus in a good state to be handed over to Caltrans. Caltrans raised concerns about needing to bring the road up to state highway standards, which would come with significant costs. Concerns were also raised that the new route designation proposed at the time would leave a gap in SR 59 north of Snelling to SR 132. AB 464 was ultimately held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

The second attempt was AB 2462 (Gray, 2020). This version would have closed the gap near Snelling, incorporating the entire length of J59 into SR 59. However, given the degradation in the road since the last proposal, Caltrans argued that cost would still be substantial. AB 2462 died in the Assembly Transportation Committee.

SB 1334 is a third attempt at integrating J59 into the statewide system. Following the lessons from the last two bills, the bill would incorporate the entire length of J59, not leaving any gap in the route. Additionally, like AB 464 and unlike AB 2462, the counties have agreed to repair all existing road damage before relinquishing the road to Caltrans.

- 5) *How much will it cost?* As with the previous two attempts, the major question with incorporating J59 is still about the cost. There are two separate costs that must be considered. The first cost is associated with projects required to bring the road up to highway standards. The second cost is associated with long-term

maintenance of the road.

Currently, Caltrans has no official estimates for either of these costs, only stating that they may be significant. In 2011, when AB 464 was being considered, Caltrans put forward an estimate for bringing the road up to standard of \$37 million to \$44 million in 2026 inflation adjusted dollars. The same report estimated annual maintenance costs of \$270,000. However, it is important to note that because of the aforementioned gap in AB 464, both of these estimates were only for a roughly 14 mile stretch of J59 from La Grange to the intersection of SR 120 and SR 108.

Another important cost factor to consider is the current state of State Highway Operation and Protection Program (SHOPP). SHOPP is the primary program that funds the repair and preservation of state highways in California. Any upgrades and maintenance for the new section of SR 59 proposed by SB 1334 would be funded from SHOPP.

Over the past several years SHOPP has faced declining funds, primarily due to decreased gas tax revenues and increasing costs. For example, in the past year, 70% of SHOPP funds for the year were allocated within the first 6 months. Additionally, approximately \$3 billion of projects had to be delayed due to funding considerations. Furthermore, due to increases in the frequency and severity of natural disasters, more and more emergency funds are needed to be allocated every year, eating into the budget for regular projects. Combined, these factors mean SHOPP is facing declining five-year fund estimates and thus is not in a position to easily take on additional projects.

- 6) *What is the current state of the road?* A key factor in determining the cost of incorporating J59 into the state highway system is what upgrades are needed to bring it up to the state highway standard. Unfortunately, it is currently unclear what the exact state of the road is with regards to current standards. While the counties have agreed to fix all existing road damage, the burden would fall on Caltrans to make whatever upgrades are deemed necessary.

Based on the aforementioned analysis Caltrans did as part of AB 464, it is estimated that three of the seven structures along the route will require some form of upgrade. However, the extent of these upgrades is not known. Caltrans also noted at the time that shoulder expansions would be required along many stretches of the route. It is unclear what other upgrades, if any, may be required as Caltrans has not performed a detailed or recent analysis of the road condition.

7) *How to adopt a state highway.* CTC has an existing procedure outlined for how to adopt a local road into the state highway system. This process is laid out in Chapter 23 of the Project Development Procedures Manual.² That process, as described, begins with Caltrans bringing a resolution to CTC in which routing, plans, and agreements have already been made with the local agencies. Any necessary statutes are then updated in omnibus legislation following adoption by CTC. However, a separate part of the document notes that any changes to existing routes which are already described in statute must have their statutes updated before any project can be approved by CTC. It is unclear which of these provisions would take precedence in this case, as the exact procedure would depend in part on what type of highway Caltrans classifies the road as. Given this uncertainty, and Caltrans' previous concerns, it is unlikely the regular process could be utilized to integrate J59 without legislation.

RELATED/PREVIOUS LEGISLATION:

AB 2462 (Gray, 2020) – Would have redefined SR 59 as being from SR 152 northerly to SR 99 near Merced, and from that point to SR 120. *This bill was held in Assembly Transportation Committee.*

AB 464 (Olsen, 2011) – Would have redefined SR 59 as being from SR 152 northerly to SR 99 near Merced, from that point to Snelling, and then from SR 132 to SR 108/120. *This bill was held in Assembly Appropriations Committee.*

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: No

POSITIONS: (Communicated to the committee before noon on Wednesday, April 8, 2026.)

SUPPORT:

Merced County Board of Supervisors
Rural County Representatives of California
Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors
Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors

OPPOSITION:

None received

² <https://dot.ca.gov/programs/design/manual-project-development-procedures-manual-pdpm>

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