BY JOE SANO

## WORLD'S LONGEST SUSPENSION BRIDGE

Italy will finally build a bridge connecting Sicily to the country's mainland first envisioned by the Romans thousands of years ago



on't get your toll money out quite yet. The long-promised proposal to build a bridge linking the Italian mainland to Sicily has been approved. It would be the longest single-span suspension bridge in the world, handling both road vehicles and trains, and would link the towns of Messina in Sicily and Villa San Giovanni in Calabria through the straits of Messina.

The 3.7-kilometer (2.3-mile) structure has long been proposed as a tool to develop the impoverished south of Italy. The proposed \$15.6 B (13.5B euros) price tag structure is slated to begin with preliminary work and some land acquisition in September/October 2025. The bridge completion is scheduled for 2032-33.

The Italian transport and infrastructure minister, Matteo Salvini, announced, "I am absolutely proud of the work we've done so far...This will be a public work that has no precedent in the world."

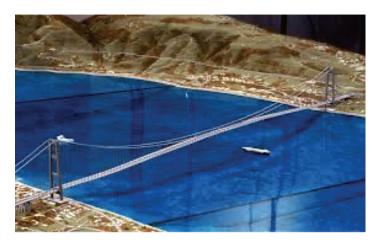


The Strait of Messina Bridge Project was awarded to the Eurolink consortium following an international tender. Italy's largest construction company, Webuild, leads the consortium, which also includes Spanish group Sacyr and Japanese group IHI.

This however is Italy and very few public works projects ever go as planned. The environmental and economic impact, coupled with project funding and societal concerns are yet to be fully realized.

The government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni made funding this project a priority and has set aside 13.5 billion euros over the next 10 years to build it and surrounding facilities. The critics question what is "not getting done" to move the money over to this project and to date those concerns have gained no response.

In March 2023, the Italian government decreed that the bridge should be considered a "fundamental infrastructure" that could be used to move military equipment and troops, given the "important NATO bases in southern Italy," including in Sicily. The government also declared that the planned bridge was of "significant national interest."



Webuild, the Italian company heading the consortium chosen to construct the bridge, said in a statement that it would be a "catalyst for investment in Southern Italy," generating jobs in an area where unemployment is double the national average — 13 percent compared with 6.5 percent unemployment throughout the rest of Italy. This company estimates over 100,000 jobs will be created during the construction phase with an economic boom to follow which will absorb those jobs and create even more.

Not everyone is jumping with joy. Several organizations, lawmakers and activists have filed lawsuits with regional and national courts and have called on oversight institutions to closely examine the project and ensure it is legally, financially and constitutionally sound.

Residents on both sides of the strait of Messina have voiced concern about changes the bridge will bring to their neighborhoods, and environmental groups say

they fear its effect on the area's flora, fauna and overall ecosystem, including bird migration routes.

Environmental critics have pointed out that the bridge would be built in an area prone to earthquakes. In 1908, a devastating quake struck Messina, killing about half of the population when 90 percent of the city's buildings collapsed.

Additionally, fears have also been expressed about organized crime groups becoming involved in the project through dummy companies. The two regions involved, Sicily and Calabria, have deeply rooted local mafia cultures and their involvement in past public works projects is well known.

This year, the Italian General Confederation of Labor, the country's largest union, wrote to the European Commission, the executive arm of the European Union, with concerns about the project, citing "serious technical, environmental, regulatory and social-critical issues." The union demanded that the commission review the project; the commission has not yet responded. It is highly probable that before one spade of dirt is dug there will be numerous legal challenges to the financial, environmental, technical and regulatory rules authorizing the project.

Rome wasn't built in a day and it's probably a safe bet that this bridge will not be ready for 2032.

