

Comparison of GNSS Combinations within California Department of Transportation Real Time Network

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1 Abstract

2 Network Real-Time Kinematic (NRTK) surveys are in traditional boundary and construction surveys.
3 However, legacy standards do not address NRTK surveys. With advancement in Global Navigation
4 Satellite System (GNSS) technology, standards have not kept pace with providing guidance
5 regarding GNSS constellation pairings.

6 California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) currently operates the Caltrans Spatial
7 Reference Network (CTSRN) with more than 200 Continuous Global Navigation Satellite System
8 (cGNSS) Stations, providing precise positioning services to various programs, without knowing what
9 satellite constellation pairings are optimal.

10 Within the CTSRN, two networks of different sizes, along with 3 testing sites yielding various
11 baseline lengths, are used to determine the most optimal pairings of GNSS constellations. At each
12 of the three test sites, all possible combinations of GPS, GLONASS, GALILEO, and BEIDOU (15 total
13 combinations) were tested every 40 minutes over multiple continuous 24-hour periods.

14 CTSRN performance results show that the GPS constellation is the only constellation able to
15 initialize on its own during the whole 24-hour period. GPS proves foundational to any constellation
16 pairing and should always be used for optimal precision. Further testing shows that any triplet
17 pairings with GPS are optimal to achieve the highest precision.

18 Introduction

19 In California, there are 3 main NRTK service
20 providers, Leica SmartNet, Trimble VRS, and
21 Caltrans with their own independent Trimble
22 VRS called CTSRN. With technological
23 advancements in GNSS, NRTK surveys tied
24 to the CTSRN have increased, greatly
25 improving productivity and time efficiency
26 which support a variety of Caltrans survey
27 applications, including surveys,
28 construction, inspections, as-builts,
29 automated machine guidance, and building
30 information management. To save the taxpayer
31 money, Caltrans needs to be efficient in its time
32 and use of resources and equipment. NRTK

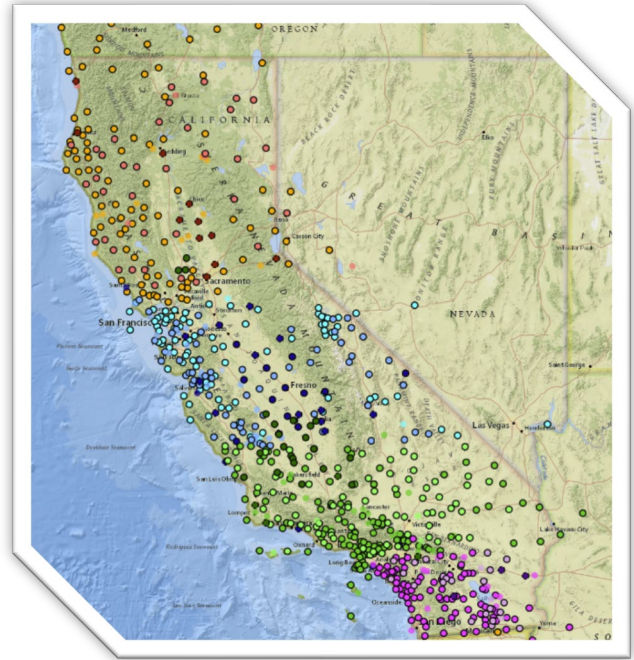


Figure 1 - CTSRN

33 eliminates the use of additional setup and equipment (Allahyari, et al. 2018). The end user only
34 needs to set up a rover and connect to the CTSRN to receive real-time updates and corrections
35 without the constraint of distance from a base station (Edwards, Clark and Penna 2010). Caltrans
36 currently relies on legacy standards that do not address NRTK designs, namely baseline spacing of
37 the cGNSS, occupation time, constellation pairings, time of day, tropospheric interaction,
38 ionospheric interaction, and seasonal measurements. Any combination of all NRTK settings will
39 influence the accuracy and precision of any given measurement at any given time and location.

40 There are currently four usable GNSS satellite constellations that the CTSRN has the ability to
41 connect to: United States GPS, Russia's Globalnaya Navigazionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema
42 (GLONASS), China's BeiDou, and the European Union's Galileo. The expansion of satellite
43 constellations introduces new opportunities for potentially improving positional stability,
44 repeatability, and accuracy. In 2018, previous studies utilized only GPS and GLONASS which had
45 global coverage (Allahyari, et al. 2018). With advancements from other agencies globally, currently
46 all four constellations, GPS, GLONASS, Galileo and BeiDou, provide global coverage. Past studies
47 have evaluated the accuracy and precision of GPS and GLONASS constellations. But, with the
48 addition of Galileo and BeiDou as newly developed global constellations, no study has explored the

49 optimal pairing amongst the four (GPS, GLONASS, Galileo, and BeiDou). Although Henning
50 (Henning 2014) suggests that dilution of precision nor the number of satellite vehicles does not
51 contribute significantly to the precision of the measurement, this study was done in 2014 and only
52 had global constellations of GPS+GLONASS. With a lack of understanding, typical users will want
53 to use all constellations or a combination with the hopes that they all jointly provide greater
54 redundancy and to safeguard the precision of the work performed.

55 The CTSRN is a Trimble Based network utilizing virtual reference stations (VRS) method running on
56 the Trimble Pivot software. Trimble Pivot models the ionosphere and troposphere and transmits the
57 corrections to the rover. Janssen (Janssen 2009) and Petovello (Petovello 2011) describe how
58 networks model the ionosphere and troposphere to provide a pseudo single base station result for
59 seamless and reliable work, which is what the VRS represents. The Trimble Pivot modeling of the
60 ionosphere and troposphere allow for the rover within the CTSRN to go greater distances which
61 greatly benefits an organization like Caltrans that covers a vast network of roads and infrastructure.

62 This study explores the performance of the CTSRN with regards to all possible combinations of
63 pairings of GPS, GLONASS, Galileo and BeiDou while working within the CTSRN evaluating the
64 precision of occupations at three sights over the course of a 24-hour period. Each of the three test
65 sites will each vary in character within the network. This study will provide recommendations of
66 optimal constellation pairings, and optimal time to make NRTK measurements within the CTSRN.
67 From the collected data and presented data, further insights can be concluded with reference to
68 baseline lengths, accuracies, interaction with the ionosphere and troposphere, although only
69 constellation pairing will be addressed in this report. Although baselines will provide differing
70 results (Henning 2014), each site will be independently evaluated so as to only compare
71 constellation pairings. Further studies will evaluate other influencing factors.

72 This research fills the gap in literature where it will expand across all current combinations of
73 constellations across a consecutive period of 24 hours. As presented herein, GPS is foundational to
74 any constellation pairing for optimal results. An orbital period for GPS satellites is roughly 12 hours.
75 This study used two GPS periods (24 hours) for redundancy and to provide the most varied data
76 with all other pairings with different orbital periods.

77 Background

78 The primary goal of the CTSRN is to provide a simple procedure for all programs with the California
79 Department of Transportation, to be efficient in their time management, use of equipment, and
80 ability to provide accurate and precise results on all observed data. Caltrans desires to know the
81 performance capabilities of the CTSRN with respect to constellation pairings, baseline length,
82 occupation time, and seasonal changes.

83 Repeatable real-time positioning is critical for transportation infrastructure development, asset
84 management, and construction surveying. The CTSRN delivers NRTK positioning across California
85 using a statewide array of Continuously Operating Reference Stations (CORS). While GPS forms the
86 core of this service, modern receivers increasingly support additional constellations, including
87 GLONASS, Galileo, and BeiDou. This expansion introduces new opportunities for improving
88 positioning stability, particularly in challenging geometries or degraded environments. Traditional
89 practice is to enable all constellations, or those that are available without understanding why, only
90 with the assumption that more constellations mean better quality.

91 Both legacy standards, the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC) defined horizontal
92 positional precision at the 95% confidence level (FGDC 1998), and the Caltrans Survey Manual
93 Chapter 5 (Caltrans 2015) reinforces this requirement by recommending that internal precision be
94 expressed using confidence circle methods when error ellipses are unavailable. Although many
95 CORS networks continue to rely on GPS-only solutions, the increased availability of multi-
96 constellation signals invites a re-evaluation of NRTK performance under real-world field conditions.

97 This study was conducted through a partnership between Caltrans and the Fresno State
98 Department of Geomatics Engineering to assess how various constellation combinations affect
99 internal horizontal precision in a NRTK environment. Caltrans maintains a CORS network with some
100 operating with all constellations and others operating with a reduced amount, many older CORS
101 running with only GPS and GLONASS. Caltrans desires to know

- 102 1. Given the cost of ~\$1500 connection fees to each individual constellation, and given that
103 Caltrans has over 200 CORS within the CTSRN, are all constellations needed at each CORS
- 104 2. which subset of constellation pairing can achieve the highest precision and accuracy. Can
105 Caltrans continue to use legacy standards of GPS+GLONASS
- 106 3. what is the capability of the CTSRN amongst all pairs of constellations

107 4. when is the optimal time to achieve the highest degree of precision and accuracy

108 This portion of the study evaluates the constellation pairings. Although studied previously by
109 Henning (Henning 2014), it is determined that for this procedure the effects of baseline length, will
110 not contribute to the analysis of deciding which pairs of constellations are optimal. The results will
111 show the effects of baselines, however, a future report will address baseline length with respect to
112 the CTSRN. This process will mimic any random location and outline the process to best test the set
113 of constellations. Each site will act independently, while measuring the reported precision and
114 accuracy at that given location.

115 Utilizing Trimble Pivot, two dedicated Caltrans networks were constructed to support this analysis.

116 Baselines are given as a reference to show the expanse of the project areas:

117 • **Main-net:** A 6-station network with a ~312 km perimeter,

118 • **Sub-net:** A 5-station network with a ~151 km perimeter.

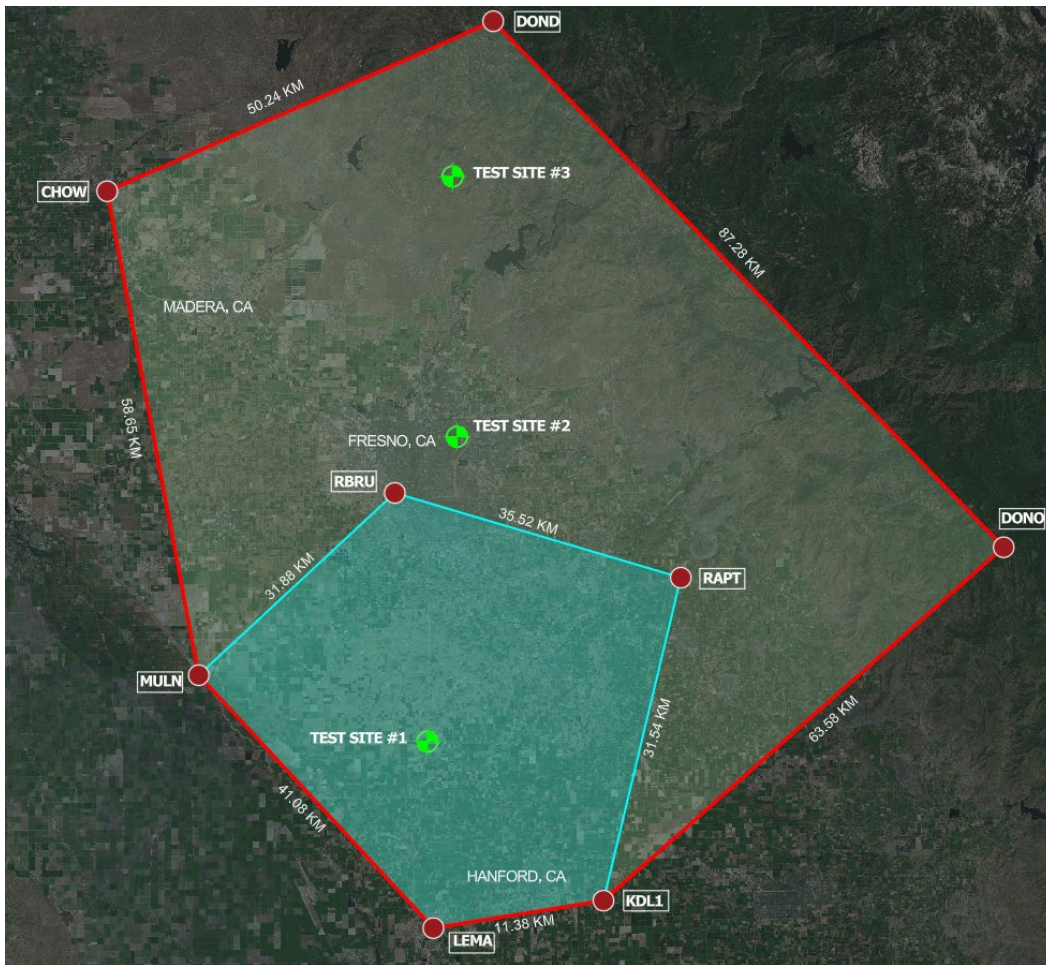


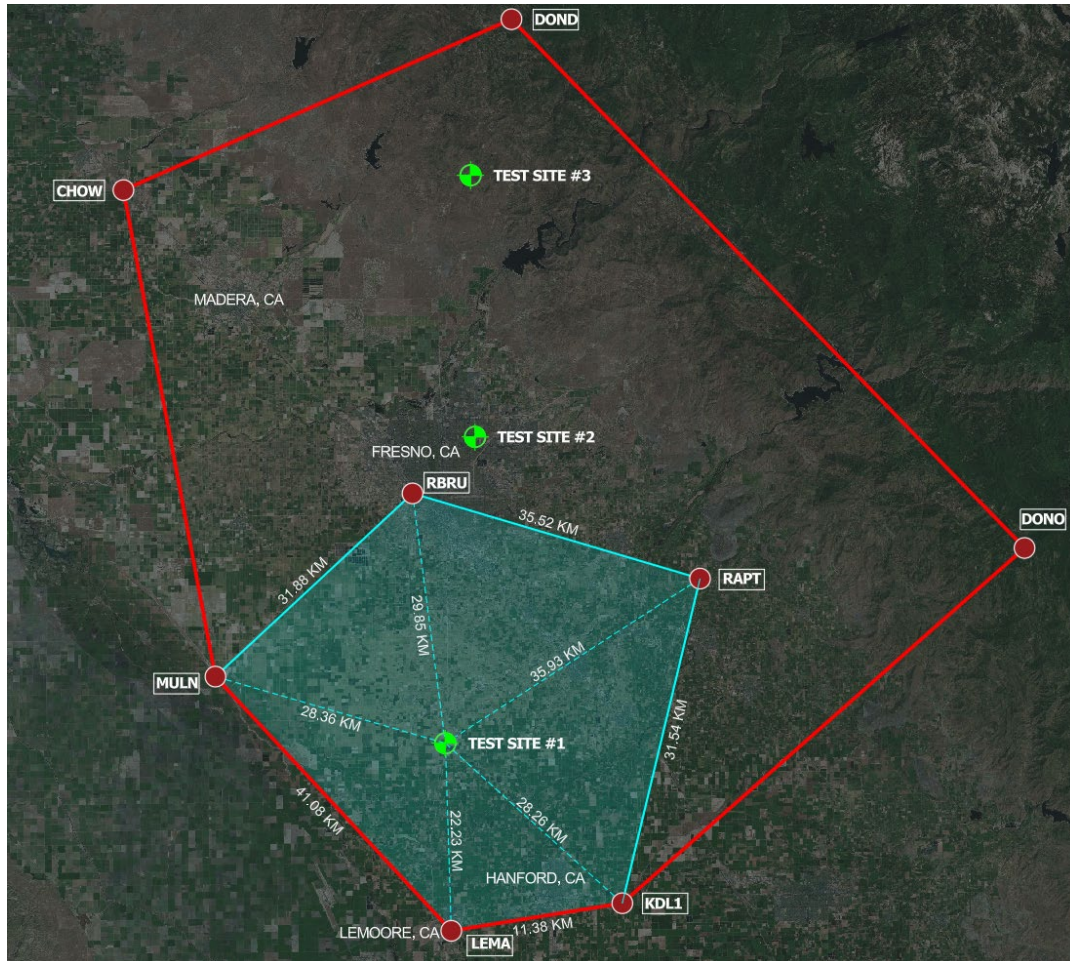
Figure 2 - Main-net and Sub-net within CTSRN

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120

121 Three test sites were strategically selected to represent a range of geographic conditions:

- 122 • **Site 1** (Sub-net center): ~28.9 km average baseline length (22.2-35.9 km range), central to
 123 the sub-net COR stations, and within Caltrans right-of-way for easy and permittable access,
 124 with an average orthometric elevation of 110m.



125

126 *Figure 3 - Subnet showing Location of Test Site #1*

127

- 128 • **Site 2** (Main-net center): ~54.2 km average baseline length (41.9-66.4 km range, located on
129 Fresno State Campus, central to the main-net. It too has an average orthometric elevation
130 of 100m.

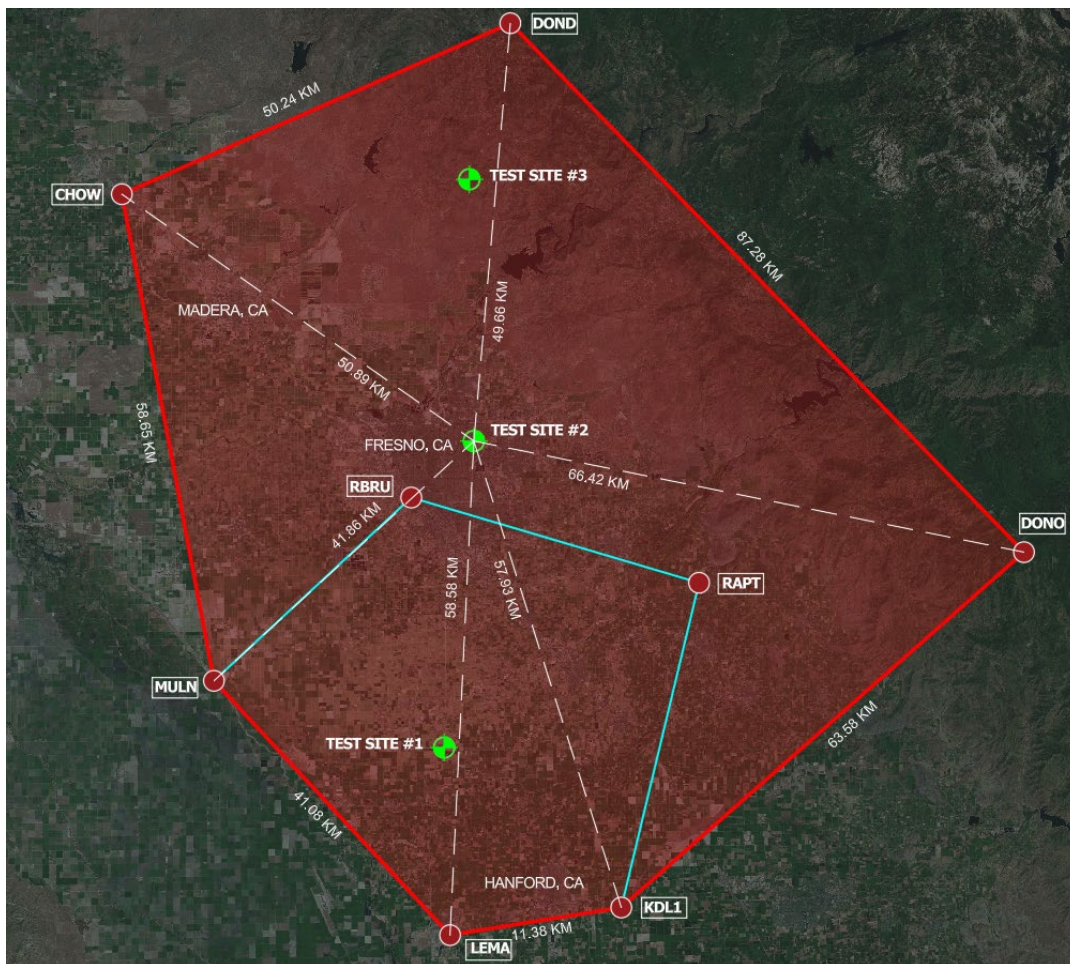
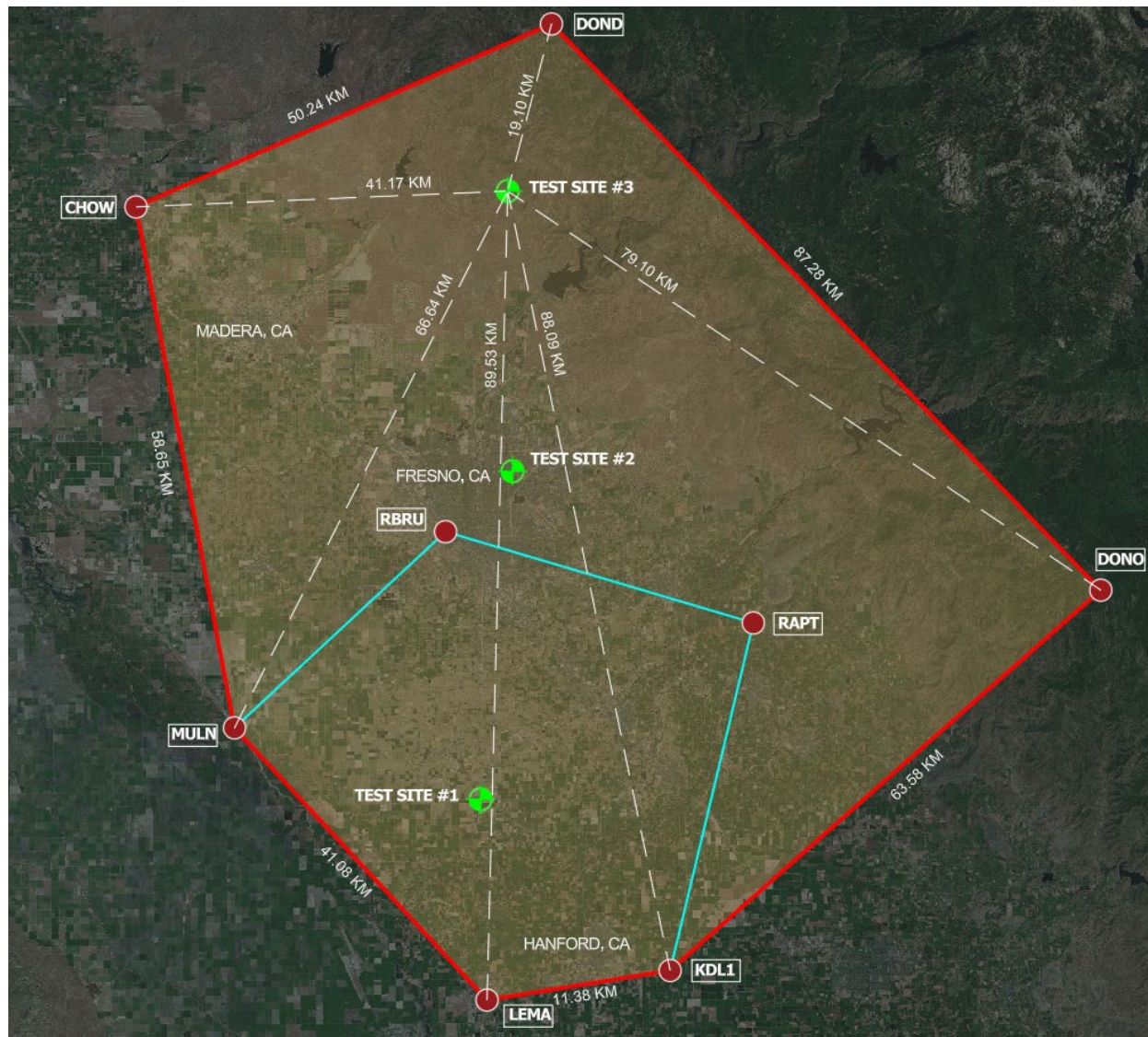


Figure 4 - Main-net showing location of Test site #2

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132

- 133 • **Site 3** (Main-net edge): ~63.9 km average baseline length (19.1–89.5 km range), located
 134 roughly 25 north of Fresno State at a shared research area with the Forest Service named
 135 the San Joaquin Experimental Range. It has an average orthometric elevation of 330m.



143 level, and the S95 values computed using the Caltrans-approved method for circular horizontal
 144 accuracy.

145 Methodology

146 Site Construction and Equipment Setup

147 Three permanent test sites were established across the
 148 Central Valley of California. At each site, two fixed 7.6cm -
 149 diameter steel posts, 3.048 meters in length, were
 150 installed to ensure structural integrity and repeatability.
 151 Each post was embedded in a 0.3048m diameter
 152 borehole, with approximately 1.52 meters encased in
 153 concrete below ground and approximately 1.52 meters
 154 exposed above ground. The interior of each post was fully
 155 filled with concrete to maximize rigidity. Each post was
 156 placed approximately 6 meters apart.



Figure 6 - Permanent Mounting Post for GNSS Receiver

157 A 3-inch SECO Tilt Mount Adapter was installed at the top
 158 of each post and paired with a Trimble Quick Release
 159 system, maintaining a consistent 0.050-meter vertical offset. All mount hardware was sealed and
 160 secured using industrial-grade Loctite to ensure permanence throughout the study. Only the GNSS
 161 receiver was removed between sessions, guaranteeing consistent antenna orientation and
 162 geometry.

163 Each observation session used a Trimble R12i GNSS receiver connected to a TSC5 data collector
 164 via Bluetooth. The survey type was configured as RTK using broadcast corrections from the
 165 Caltrans Spatial Reference Network (CTSRN) in Virtual Reference Station (VRS) format. The tilt
 166 function and the xFill feature was disabled to ensure all positioning was based strictly on real-time
 167 corrections provided by CTSRN.

168 Observation Protocol and Constellation Configurations

169 A total of 15 GNSS constellation combinations were evaluated, covering all practical permutations
170 of GPS (G), GLONASS (R), Galileo (E), and BeiDou (C). These combinations were grouped into two
171 categories:

- 172 1. Post #1: GPS-Inclusive Combinations – using GPS with one or more additional
173 constellations, reflecting standard compatibility across CTSRN base stations.
- 174 2. Post #2: Non-GPS Combinations – excluding GPS, to analyze the independent performance
175 of alternative constellations and the value of GPS in multi-constellation NRTK.

176 At 40-minute intervals, the receiver was re-initialized to start a new 60-second NRTK session. This
177 process was repeated across a 24-hour period, yielding 36 observations per constellation
178 combination per site. The total observation campaign produced a large, time-distributed dataset
179 under uniform hardware and environmental conditions.

180 Data Processing and Statistical Analysis

181 Horizontal precision metrics were extracted using TBC (Trimble Buisness Center n.d.), specifically
182 from the Trimble QC3 quality reports. The reported horizontal DRMS values were scaled using a
183 1.9599 multiplier to represent 95% internal confidence level.

184 To further evaluate local precision, the S95 value was calculated for each constellation group using
185 actual observables. This method follows the Caltrans Surveys Manual (Caltrans 2015) which
186 approximates the 95% confidence circle without requiring a covariance matrix. Only groups with 30
187 or more valid observations were included in S95 analysis to maintain statistical reliability.

188 All numerical processing and visualization were conducted in MATLAB and Microsoft Excel. Mean
189 precision, S95, minimum, maximum, and range values were calculated for each constellation
190 group, and the top four performers at each site were highlighted for further consideration in
191 subsequent phases.

192 Results

193 Horizontal precision statistics were calculated for each GNSS constellation group across the three
194 test sites. Results include the reported horizontal precision at the 95% confidence level and the
195 S95 (observed standard deviation at the 95% confidence level) positional precision. S95 was

196 calculated per Caltrans Chapter 5 (Caltrans 2015), using deviations from the mean northing and
197 easting to estimate a 95% confidence radius. S95 values are only reported for groups with at least
198 30 valid observations.

Constellation	Reported Precision				Observed Precision S95 (m)	Constellation
	Min (m)	Max (m)	Range (m)	2-sigma (m)		
G1	0.007	0.023	0.016	0.016	0.012	G1
G2	0.011	0.034	0.023	0.017	0.010	G2
R	0.016	0.040	0.024	0.025	N/A	R
E	0.010	0.028	0.018	0.016	0.012	E
C	0.012	0.067	0.055	0.024	0.019	C
RE	0.009	0.026	0.017	0.014	0.011	RE
RC	0.011	0.079	0.068	0.021	0.019	RC
EC	0.008	0.020	0.012	0.012	0.012	EC
REC	0.007	0.023	0.016	0.012	0.016	REC
GR	0.010	0.021	0.012	0.014	0.011	GR
GE	0.007	0.016	0.009	0.010	0.009	GE
GC	0.008	0.018	0.011	0.012	0.012	GC
GRE	0.007	0.014	0.007	0.010	0.009	GRE
GRC	0.006	0.019	0.013	0.011	0.012	GRC
GEC	0.006	0.014	0.008	0.009	0.013	GEC
GREC	0.006	0.016	0.009	0.009	0.012	GREC

Table 1 - Site #1 Precision Statistics for all 15 possible combinations of constellations

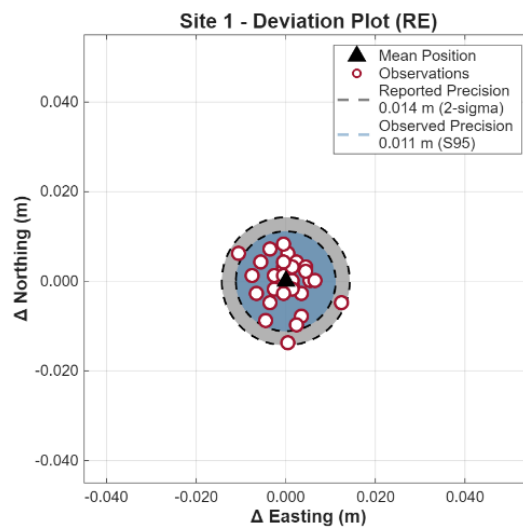
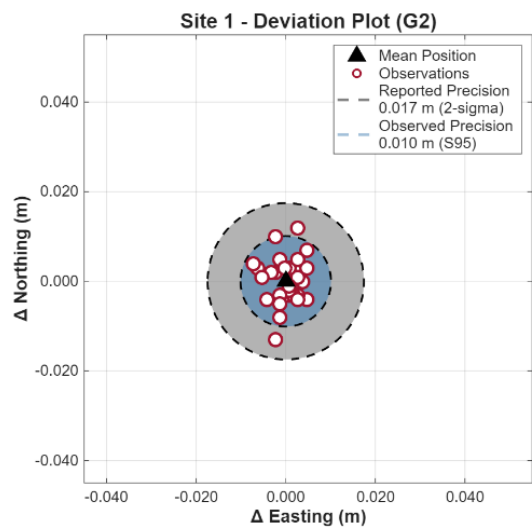
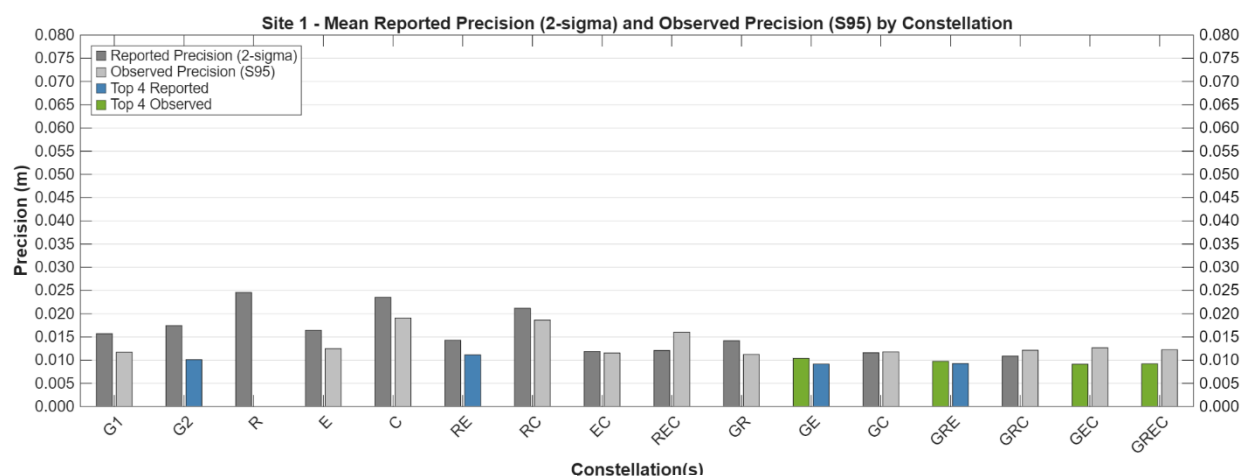


Figure 7 – Top = Overall results of 15 Constellation combinations at Site #1, Bottom Left = Scatter plot showing actual observations with respect to the mean from Post #2 @ site #1 with GPS only constellation, Bottom Right = Scatter plot showing actual observations with respect to the mean with GLONASS + Galileo

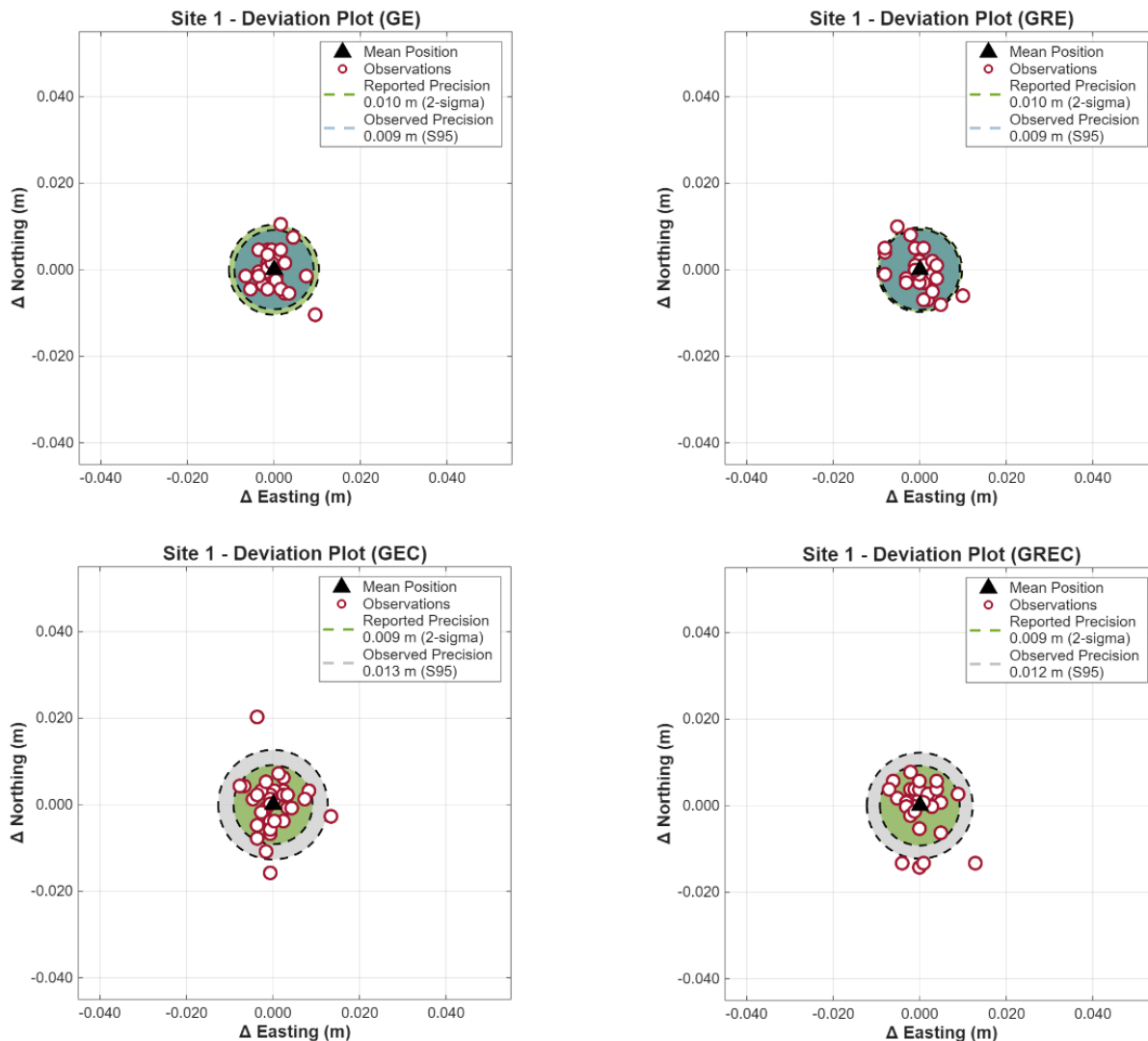


Figure 8 - Scatter plots showing actual observations with respect to the mean Site #1 – GPS + Galileo (GE), GPS + GLONASS + Galileo (GRE), GPS + Galileo + BeiDou (GEC), GPS + GLONASS + Galileo + BeiDou (GREC)

200 Site 2

201

Constellation	Reported Precision				Observed Precision S95 (m)	Constellation
	Min (m)	Max (m)	Range (m)	2-sigma (m)		
G1	0.015	0.095	0.080	0.031	0.041	G1
G2	0.013	0.072	0.059	0.030	0.024	G2
R	0.023	0.031	0.007	0.027	N/A	R
E	0.016	0.097	0.081	0.034	N/A	E
C	0.012	0.081	0.069	0.028	N/A	C
RE	0.013	0.069	0.056	0.027	0.039	RE
RC	0.011	0.073	0.062	0.026	0.062	RC
EC	0.011	0.055	0.044	0.022	0.029	EC
REC	0.009	0.055	0.046	0.021	0.071	REC
GR	0.015	0.081	0.065	0.030	0.034	GR
GE	0.011	0.063	0.052	0.022	0.022	GE
GC	0.009	0.053	0.044	0.022	0.032	GC
GRE	0.011	0.056	0.045	0.021	0.027	GRE
GRC	0.009	0.057	0.047	0.021	0.044	GRC
GEC	0.008	0.036	0.027	0.017	0.026	GEC
GREC	0.008	0.055	0.047	0.019	0.028	GREC

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Table 2 - Site #2 Precision Statistics for all 15 possible combinations of constellations

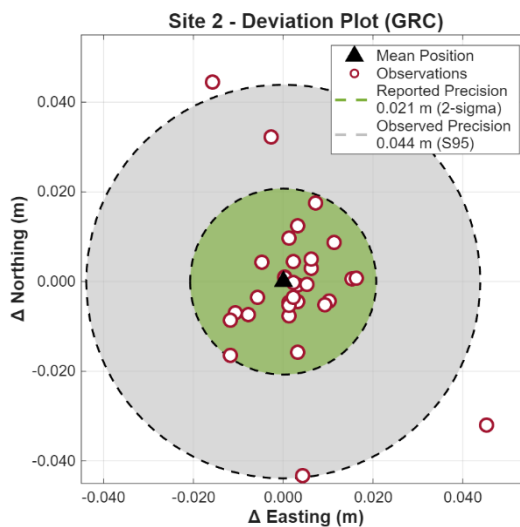
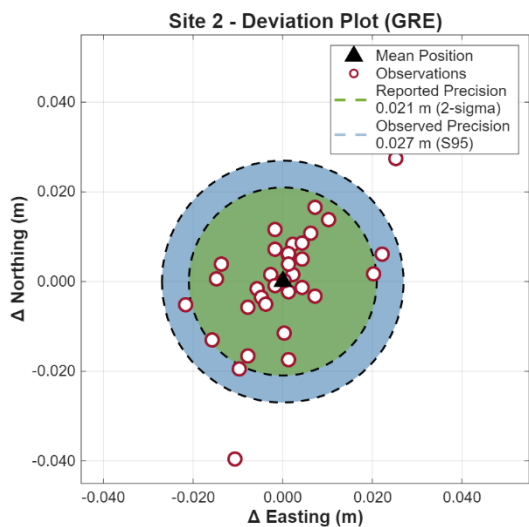
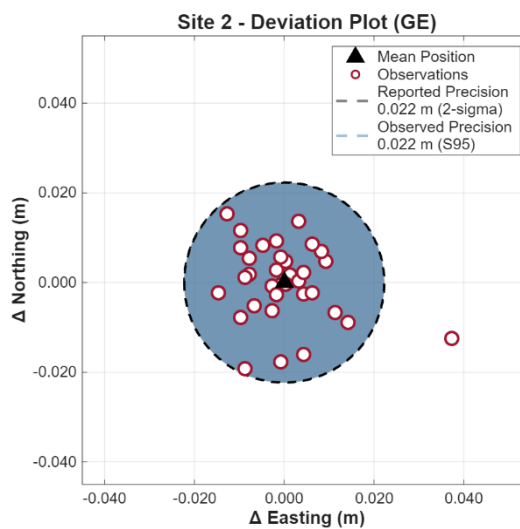
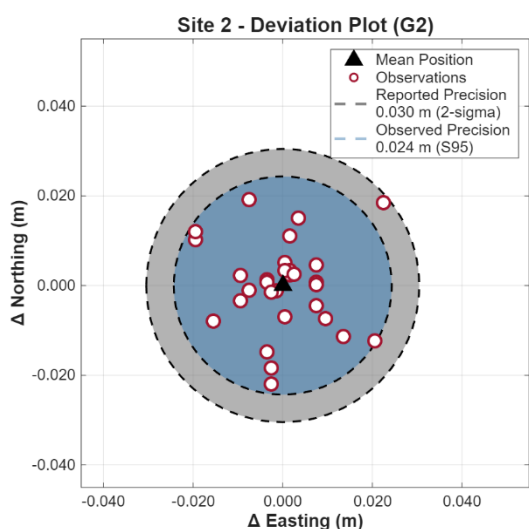
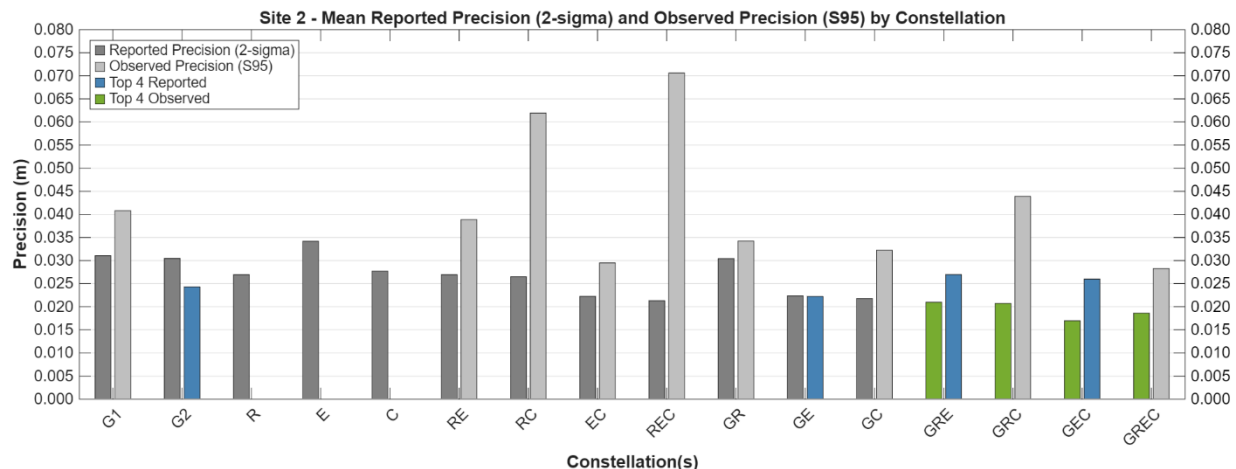


Figure 9 - Top = Overall results of 15 Constellation combinations at Site #2, Middle Left = Scatter plot showing actual observations with respect to the mean from Post #2 @ site #2 with GPS only constellation, Middle Right = Scatter plot showing actual observations with respect to the mean - GPS + Galileo, Bottom Left = Scatter plot showing actual observations with respect to the mean - GPS + GLONASS + Galileo (GRE), Bottom Right = Scatter plot showing actual observations with respect to the mean - GPS + GLONASS + BeiDou (GRC)

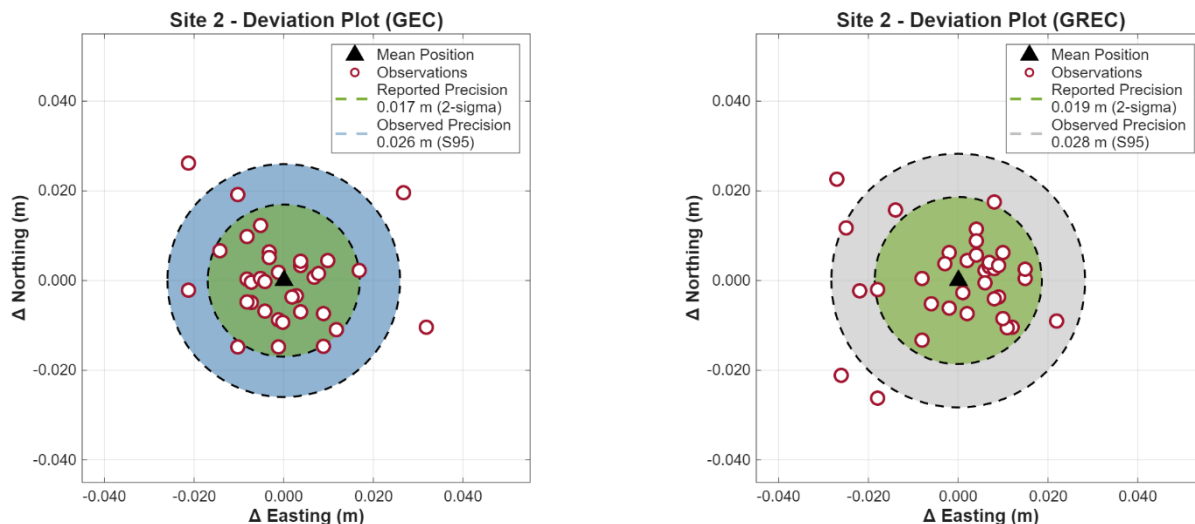


Figure 10 – Left = Scatter plot showing actual observations with respect to the mean Site #2 - GPS + Galileo + BeiDou (GEC), Right = Scatter plot showing actual observations with respect to the mean Site #2 - GPS + GLONASS + Galileo + BeiDou (GREC)

210 Site 3

Constellation	Reported Precision				Observed Precision S95 (m)	Constellation
	Min (m)	Max (m)	Range (m)	2-sigma (m)		
G1	0.009	0.050	0.041	0.027	0.022	G1
G2	0.014	0.062	0.047	0.027	0.019	G2
R	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	R
E	0.014	0.065	0.052	0.026	N/A	E
C	0.017	0.071	0.054	0.031	N/A	C
RE	0.013	0.047	0.034	0.023	0.015	RE
RC	0.011	0.048	0.036	0.022	0.020	RC
EC	0.010	0.042	0.032	0.018	0.014	EC
REC	0.009	0.053	0.044	0.017	0.023	REC
GR	0.013	0.037	0.024	0.021	0.014	GR
GE	0.010	0.028	0.018	0.017	0.012	GE
GC	0.010	0.037	0.027	0.017	0.024	GC
GRE	0.009	0.026	0.017	0.016	0.013	GRE
GRC	0.009	0.027	0.017	0.016	0.012	GRC
GEC	0.008	0.044	0.036	0.014	0.015	GEC
GREC	0.007	0.023	0.016	0.013	0.011	GREC

Table 3 - Site #3 Precision Statistics for all 15 possible combinations of constellations

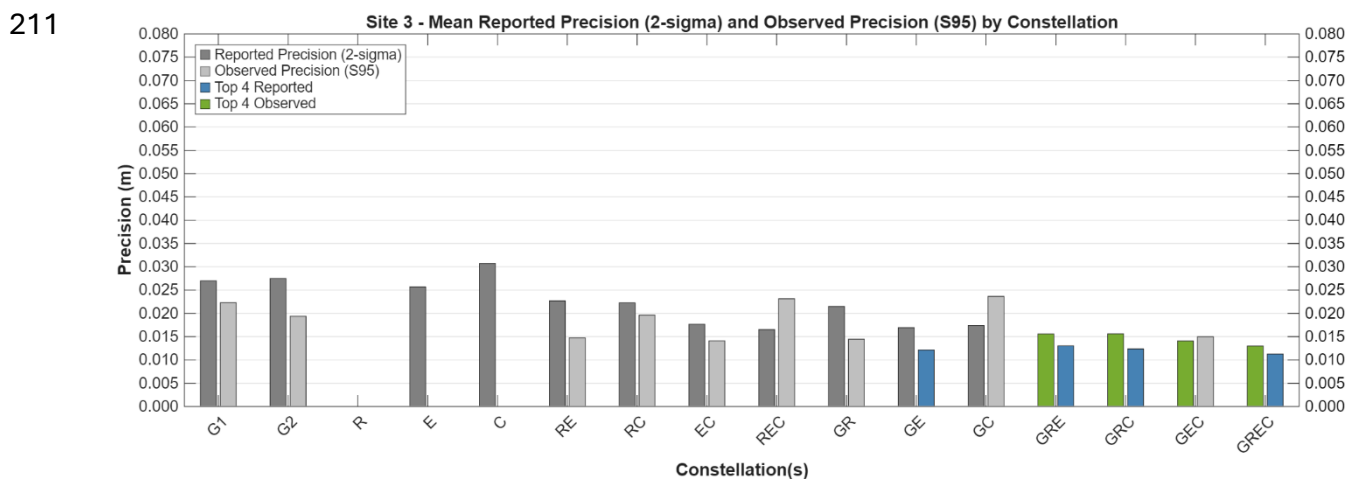


Figure 11 – Overall results of 15 Constellation combinations at Site #3

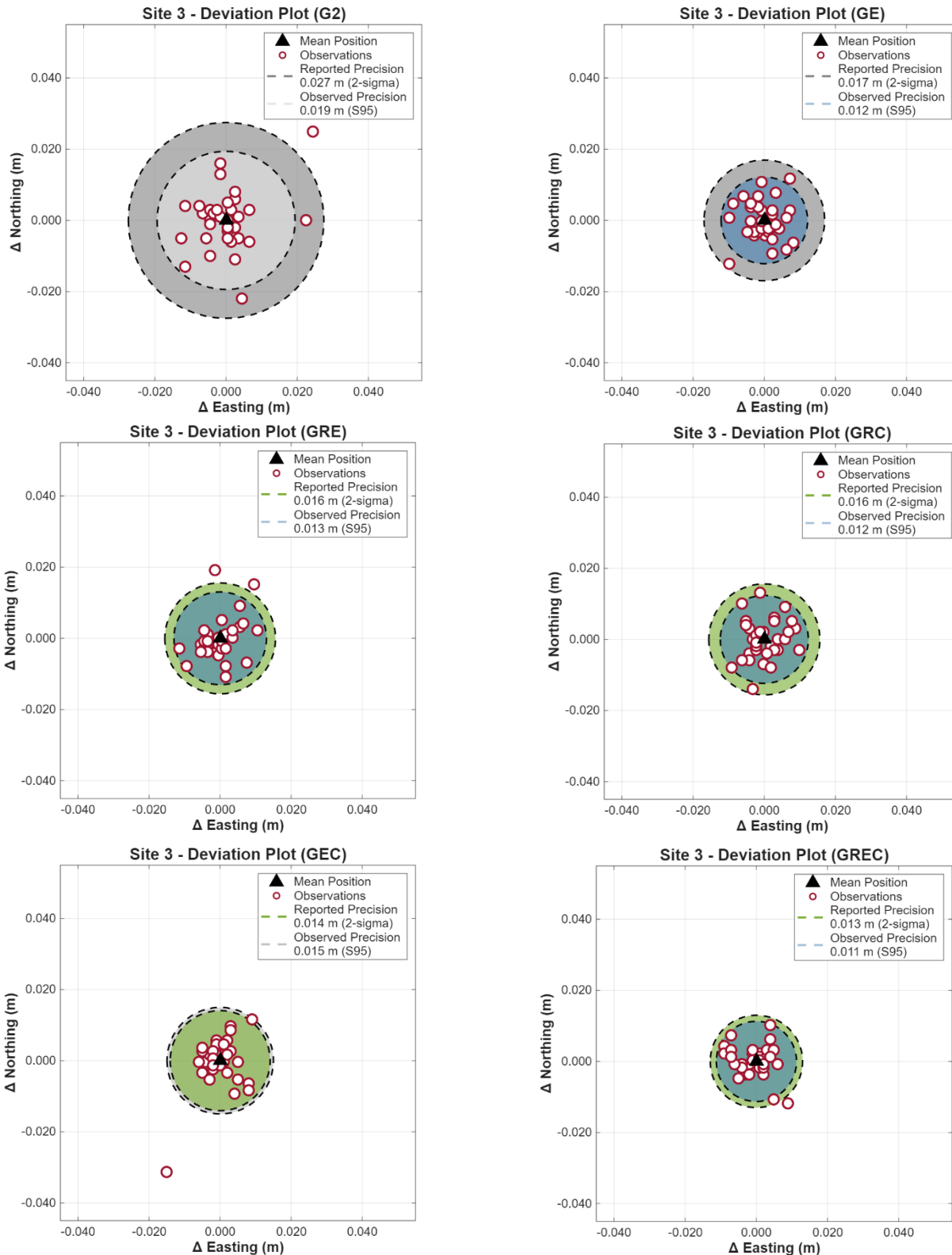


Figure 12 – Scatter plot showing actual observations with respect to the mean Site #3 – GPS only at Post #2 @ Site #3, GPS + Galileo (GE), GPS + GLONASS + Galileo (GRE), GPS + GLONASS + BeiDou (GRC), GPS + Galileo + BeiDou (GEC), GPS + GLONASS + Galileo + BeiDou (GREC)

213 Discussion

214 The results of this precision evaluation support several important conclusions regarding GNSS
215 constellation selection in NRTK surveying, particularly under Caltrans network configurations. The
216 findings align with Caltrans and FGDC (FGDC 1998) positional accuracy standards, which define
217 95% confidence as the reporting baseline for both internal precision and external positional
218 uncertainty.

219 According to the Caltrans Surveys Manual (Caltrans 2015) horizontal accuracy must be reported as
220 a 95% confidence circle. This study applied that requirement using the Caltrans-recommended
221 method for deriving a confidence radius from observed deviations in northing and easting, allowing
222 meaningful comparison across test sites and configurations.

223 *1. Full-constellation (GREC) superiority*

224 The GREC configuration (GPS + GLONASS + Galileo + BeiDou) consistently achieved the highest
225 precision across all test sites. Its mean horizontal precision remained below 0.020 m at every site,
226 with S95 values consistently in the lowest quartile. GREC's superior performance is attributed to
227 satellite redundancy, improved geometry, and signal diversity. These results affirm current best
228 practices of enabling all available constellations in high-precision NRTK work, especially when
229 consistent reliability is required.

230 *2. GPS-based combinations outperform non-GPS*

231 Every configuration that excluded GPS (e.g., R, E, C) performed poorly, either due to insufficient
232 valid observations or consistently higher mean values. In contrast, GPS-inclusive configurations—
233 particularly those combining GPS with Galileo and BeiDou—consistently ranked in the top tier. This
234 reinforces the importance of GPS as a foundational system within the CTSRN and supports policies
235 that require GPS compatibility for baseline station networks.

236 *3. Multi-constellation configurations mitigate baseline effects*

237 Test Site 3, with longer and more irregular baseline geometry, predictably showed increased
238 positional variance. However, top-performing configurations (such as GREC, GEC, and GRE)
239 maintained sub-0.020 m precision across all metrics. This suggests that signal diversity, rather than
240 just satellite count, plays a key role in preserving NRTK quality in marginal conditions—such as
241 when operating at the network edge.

242 *4. Practical limitations of GLONASS and BeiDou alone*

243 GLONASS-only and BeiDou-only groups underperformed and often failed to meet the minimum 30-
244 epoch threshold for confidence estimation. This outcome may reflect the limited constellation
245 health or satellite geometry when used in isolation. For this reason, reliance on any single non-GPS
246 constellation is not recommended for standalone NRTK operations in Caltrans field conditions.

247 *5. Implications for Caltrans RTK operations*

248 Based on this study, enabling full-constellation tracking (GREC) on compatible equipment is
249 strongly recommended. If technical or policy constraints limit constellation inclusion, GPS
250 combined with Galileo and BeiDou (e.g., GEC, GRE) still provides robust sub-2 cm performance. In
251 contrast, restricting receivers to only GPS or GLONASS should be avoided unless supported by
252 extremely short baselines and favorable environmental conditions.

253

254 **Conclusion**

255 In the early 2000s, GLONASS emerged as an additional global aid to GPS to increase satellite count,
256 and to decrease the need for GNSS planning, which resulted in overnight campaigns in many
257 instances. GPS + GLONASS was and has maintained as a legacy standard until today. The results
258 show that it is time to move on from the Legacy standards and move forward with different pairings
259 of constellations within the CTSRN.

260 This study evaluated the horizontal precision of various GNSS constellation configurations using
261 NRTK within two Caltrans real-time networks. Through the analysis of over 1,600 observations
262 across three test sites, consistent trends emerged regarding constellation performance under
263 standardized operational conditions.

264 For the CTSRN, the results clearly demonstrate that multi-constellation configurations yield
265 superior internal positional confidence, as reflected in both mean horizontal precision and 95%
266 confidence circle metrics (S95). The most stable and precise results were consistently produced by
267 triple- and quad-constellation combinations.

268 Based on these findings, the following operational recommendations are made:

- 269 • Preferred Configuration: Use all four constellations (GREC – GPS, GLONASS, Galileo,
270 BeiDou) whenever possible. This full configuration provides the highest overall precision
271 and resilience across varied baseline lengths and network geometries.
- 272 • If limited to three constellations: Prioritize GEC (GPS, Galileo, BeiDou), which ranked
273 consistently among the top performers at all sites and offered sub-2 cm mean precision in
274 every test.
- 275 • If limited to two constellations: Use GE (GPS + Galileo). This pairing balances redundancy
276 and geometric diversity, and outperformed most other dual-constellation options.
- 277 • If restricted to one constellation: Use GPS (G) as the sole source. While not optimal alone,
278 GPS remains the most reliable and stable core system within the CTSRN and should be
279 enabled at minimum.

280 The next steps for the evaluation of the CTSRN is to evaluate the effects of baselines, observation
281 time, accuracy, and seasonal measurements. Moving forward, only GREC, GRE, GRC, and GEC
282 configurations will be retained for future testing phases. These groups demonstrated the most
283 consistent and precise horizontal positioning results across the board. They will now undergo
284 additional validation under varied temporal and geographic conditions to assess long-term network
285 robustness.

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