

## **Comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and 4(f) Evaluation for the Mid County Parkway Project**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has reviewed the draft environmental impact statement/environmental impact report (DEIS/DEIR) and section 4(f) statement from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC) for the construction of the Mid County Parkway project between Interstate 15 and State Route 79.

We recommend the following issues be addressed prior to issuance of a final environmental impact statement (FEIS).

The Service has issued Incidental Take Permits in association with several habitat conservation plans pursuant to section 10(a)(1)(B) of the Endangered Species Act within the project area. The Service will continue coordination on the proposed project through policies and procedures identified in the Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (Western Riverside MSHCP), Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan for the El Sobrante Landfill (El Sobrante HCP), Lake Mathews Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan and Natural Communities Conservation Plan, and the Habitat Conservation Plan for the Stephens' Kangaroo Rat (SKR HCP).

The proposed project would construct an approximately 32-mile regional transportation facility. The DEIS/DEIR includes analyses of five alternatives in addition to two no project/no action alternatives. The five build alternatives have varying alignments with some road segments in common. Alternative 1A (No Project/No Action-Existing Ground Conditions) includes implementation of the County of Riverside's approved General Plan circulation element with the exception of improvements to Cajalco Road and Ramona Expressway.

Alternative 1B (No Project/No Action-General Plan Circulation Element) fully implements the circulation element including planned improvements to Cajalco Road and Ramona Expressway. Although FHWA has not identified a preferred alternative, RCTC has selected Alternative 9 (Far South-Placentia Avenue) with the Temescal Wash Design Variation as the locally preferred alternative.

### *Cajalco Road*

According to the DEIS, the County of Riverside would still move forward with realignment and widening of Cajalco Road consistent with the circulation element because of concerns with available funding and project timing for construction of a Mid County Parkway alternative. The DEIS states (page 1-35) that while much future travel demand on Cajalco Road would be met by the Mid County Parkway project, there would be continued need for Cajalco Road to provide local access and circulation for existing and planned residential uses.

The DEIS further states that funds have been programmed for widening and roadway improvements to 16 kilometers (10 miles) of Cajalco Road located south of Lake Mathews (Temescal Canyon Road to Harley John Road) although environmental reviews have not been

completed.

The DEIS is not clear as to how the Cajalco Road circulation element improvements the County of Riverside is contemplating to construct prior to a Mid County Parkway alternative affects the DEIS analysis of no build Alternative 1A (No Project/No Action-Existing Ground Conditions except for improvement to Cajalco Road and Ramona Expressway). It appears that Alternative 1A would not be valid if impacts of widening and realignment of Cajalco Road are to occur irrespective of a Mid County Parkway build alternative. This issue needs to be further clarified in the FEIS.

The DEIS states that the County of Riverside and RCTC have agreed if Cajalco Road circulation element improvements precede the Mid County Parkway, any existing improvements at the time Mid County Parkway is constructed would be subject to the design considerations identified in the Western Riverside MSHCP.

Specifically, when the Mid County Parkway is constructed, any portions of existing or future improved Cajalco Road south of Lake Mathews from Gavilan Road west not needed to provide local access will be removed and restored to a natural state. The DEIS is correct that the Western Riverside MSHCP does not give priority to Cajalco Road circulation element improvements or a major transportation facility south of the lake.

However, the Western Riverside MSHCP did not anticipate the impacts from implementation of both the circulation element improvements to Cajalco Road and a major transportation corridor south of Lake Mathews, but rather that circulation element improvements would occur or a realignment and widening of the existing Cajalco Road would accommodate a major transportation corridor provided it met the conditions of section 7.2.3 of the MSHCP.

Because of the extent of existing conservation lands south of Lake Mathews, the Service is concerned with impacts associated with construction of both Cajalco Road circulation element improvements as well as build alternatives south of the lake. While we acknowledge that the Far South alignment (Alternative 9) compared to the other alternatives identified south of Lake Mathews affords more opportunity to minimize impacts to existing conservation lands particularly in terms of habitat fragmentation, the Western Riverside MSHCP did not address circulation element improvements (e.g., realignment and widening) to Cajalco Road separate from a major transportation facility alternative south of Lake Mathews.

The Service disagrees that Cajalco Road improvements preceding construction of a Mid County Parkway alternative south of Lake Mathews are consistent with the Western Riverside MSHCP.

#### *Habitat Conservation Plan for the Stephens' Kangaroo Rat (SKR HCP)*

The DEIS states that the proposed project will need an encroachment permit for impacts to Bureau of Land Management (Bureau) lands located within the Lake Mathews/Estelle Mountain Reserve area; however, location and extent of impacts need to be disclosed. Please note that in

addition to the proposed encroachment permit, the SKR HCP Implementation Agreement obligations need to be addressed. According to the SKR HCP, Bureau lands within the area of the Lake Mathews/Estelle Mountain Reserve contribute to the SKR conservation area. The SKR HCP Implementation Agreement (section III, Obligations of the Parties, page 17) to which the Bureau is signatory states that the Bureau "...shall not authorize, permit, or sanction any activity on the Bureau contributed land which results in disturbance of occupied SKR habitat or take of SKR within any Core Reserve, ....".

This issue will need to be addressed prior to issuance of the FEIS.

### **Specific Comments**

3.1.2.2 Reserves and Habitat Conservation Plans, El Sobrante Landfill Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, pp. 3.1-32. Please note that the 5 percent impact threshold is not the criterion used to determine if a standard amendment to the El Sobrante HCP is necessary for the proposed project. Rather, the proposed project is not identified as a covered activity pursuant to the El Sobrante HCP; therefore, a standard amendment would be necessary.

3.17.3.1 Environmental Consequences, Permanent Impacts, Table 3.17.F Impacts to Habitat Suitable for Long-term Conservation of Narrow Endemic Plant Species, pp. 3.17-35. The Service recommends that this table identify all impacts including those determined not to have long-term conservation value. In addition, the table should include the number of individuals that would be impacted by the project alternatives.

3.17.3.1 Environmental Consequences, Permanent Impacts, Table 3.17.G Impacts to Habitat Suitable for Long-term Conservation of Additional Survey Species, pp. 3.17-37. The Service recommends that this table identify all impacts including those determined not to have long-term conservation value. In addition, the table should include the number of smooth tarplant and coulter's goldfields individuals that would be impacted by project alternatives.

3.17.4.1 Effects on Habitats, pp. 3.17-55. In order to assess impacts of various Mid County Parkway alternatives, project-specific vegetation mapping was conducted for purposes of accurately determining project related impacts. However, in addressing equivalency analysis and potential availability of mitigation lands, the DEIS utilizes the landscape level vegetation mapping generated by the California Native Plant Society. In order to identify appropriate mitigation lands, field mapping of any proposed mitigation lands will ultimately need to be conducted to ensure project related habitat impacts are appropriately offset.

3.17.4 MSHCP Equivalency Analysis-Summary, pp. 3.17-53. We recommend that a map be provided to depict the north of Lake Mathews alignment that will be compared to a south of the lake alignment.

3.20.3.1 Environmental Consequences, Permanent Impacts, Build Alternatives, Burrowing Owl, pp. 3.20-3. According to the DEIS, only Alternative 9 with the Rider Street Design Variation

would impact burrowing owls. However, the Natural Environmental Study for the Mid County Parkway project identifies 8 burrowing owls (site 1) within the Alternative 9 footprint just north of Lake Mathews Drive which is common to all the Alternative 9 variations. In addition, 6 burrowing owls were located within the biological study area just outside the road footprint (site 2) north of Lake Mathews Drive and just east of site 1 observations. Based on the suitable habitat and survey information within and immediately adjacent to Alternative 9 near Lake Mathews Drive, this area appears to support a number of burrowing owls that could be impacted by Alternative 9.

Potential impacts include the loss of suitable burrowing and foraging areas as well as the fragmentation of a colony of burrowing owls. Fragmentation of burrowing and foraging habitats is likely to result in higher road kill mortalities. We recommend that the direct and indirect impacts to burrowing owls in the area of Lake Mathews Drive be addressed.

3.17.5 Avoidance, Minimization, and/or Mitigation Measures, pp. 3.17.5. The Service recognizes the efforts to incorporate wildlife movement as project features in order to minimize adverse effects of habitat fragmentation. The Service recommends continued coordination as further detailed engineering designs commence. The Service also recommends that the project include a detailed monitoring and maintenance plan to determine and maintain efficacy of the crossings for target wildlife species.