

Notice of Preparation and Notice of Public Scoping Period Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project Subsequent Environmental Impact Report

Date: September 14, 2020
To: Residents, Agencies, Organizations, and Interested Parties
Subject: Notice of Preparation of a Subsequent Environmental Impact Report for the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project

This Notice of Preparation (NOP) has been prepared to notify agencies and interested parties that the Ventura County Public Works Agency – Watershed Protection (Watershed Protection or VCPWA – WP), as the Lead Agency, is beginning preparation of a Subsequent Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the proposed Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project (proposed Project).

Watershed Protection is soliciting input from reviewing agencies and the public regarding the scope and content of the SEIR. In accordance with CEQA, VCPWA – WP requests that agencies review the Project description provided in this NOP and provide comments on environmental issues related to the statutory responsibilities of the agency. The SEIR will be used by VCPWA – WP when considering approval of the proposed Project and by other Responsible and Trustee Agencies to support their discretionary actions related to the Project.

Submitting Comments: Comments may be sent anytime during the 30-day NOP comment period. The NOP review and comment period begins **September 14, 2020** and ends **October 14, 2020**. All comments must be received during the comment period. Please include the name of a contact person for your agency, if applicable. All comments should be directed to:

Ventura County Public Works Agency - Watershed Protection
Attn: Tyler Barns
800 S. Victoria Ave., #1600
Ventura, CA 93009

Comments may also be emailed to MDERP@ventura.org.

If you do not have internet access or for general questions, please contact Tyler Barns at (805) 654-2064.

Scoping Period: To avoid physical gatherings in compliance with restrictions caused by COVID-19, Watershed Protection will conduct an online virtual public scoping comment period instead of the traditional Scoping Meeting. Scoping materials are provided on the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project webpage on the VCPWA website (<https://www.vcpubliworks.org/wp/mderp/>) to provide an



overview of the proposed project and an opportunity for the public to ask questions and submit comments. Comments and questions may also be emailed to mderp@ventura.org. Scoping comments will be addressed in the SEIR analyses.

Project Overview and Location

Overview

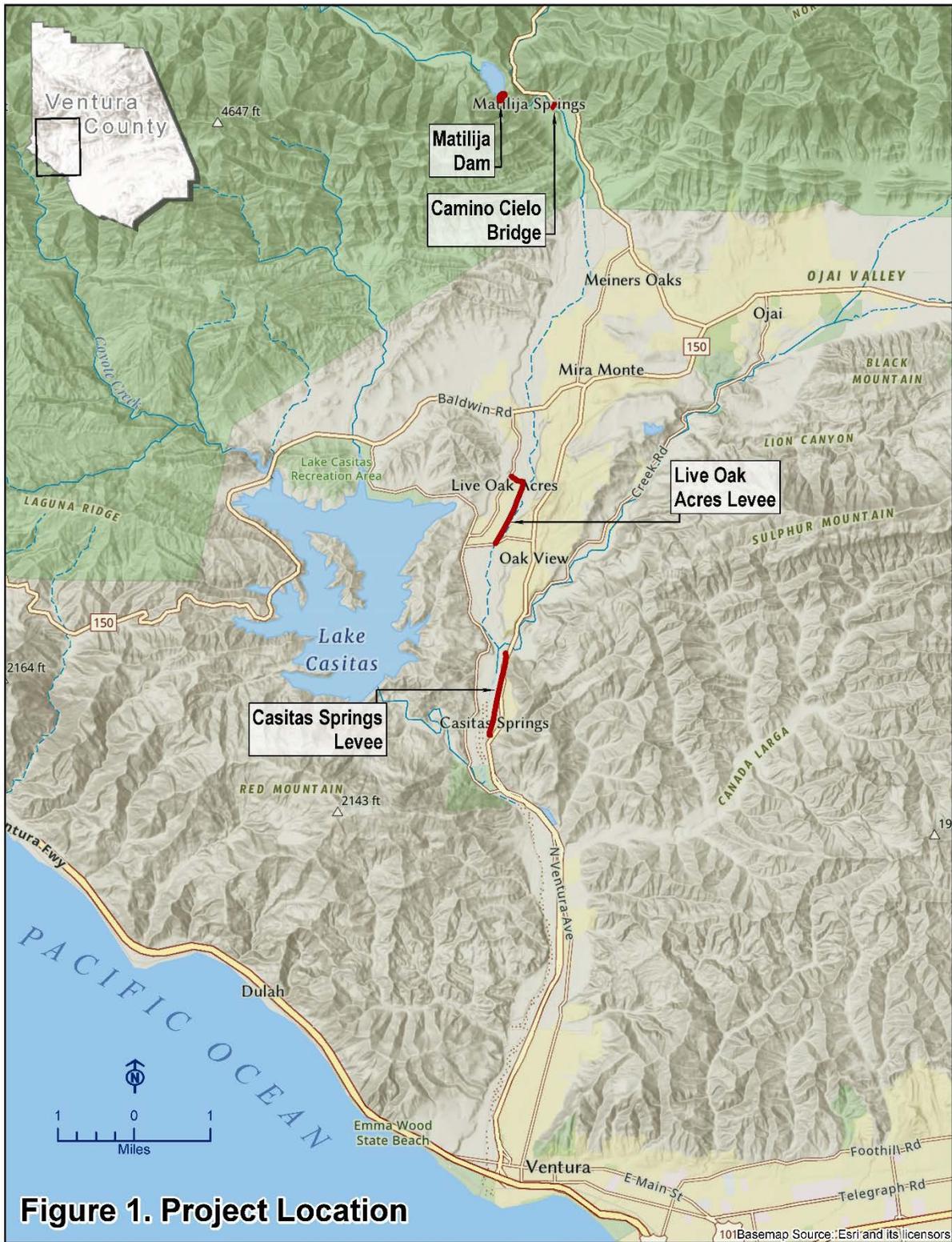
In October 2000, VCPWA – WP, then the Ventura County Flood Control District, initiated the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Study as a joint effort between Watershed Protection and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop a project resulting in the removal of Matilija Dam. The primary Project objectives included: aquatic and terrestrial habitat improvement, facilitating the return of a viable and abundant run of steelhead trout; and restoration of natural sediment transport processes along Matilija Creek and the Ventura River. The secondary objective was enhancement of recreational opportunities along these two waterways. The joint Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR) certified in 2004 evaluated alternatives combining dam removal, sediment relocation, flood protection (levees), two bridge replacements, new recreation features, giant reed removal, and water supply improvements. Technical studies to refine project features continued between 2008 and 2016, resulting in a new dam removal method and reevaluation of other project components. In June 2017, VCPWA – WP received funding to implement the Matilija Dam Removal 65% Design Planning Project, comprising additional technical studies, construction design, and CEQA analyses. The VCPWA – WP has determined that preparation of a Subsequent EIR is warranted to provide a complete and objective analysis of the revised Project components developed to date. Per State CEQA Guidelines Section 15162(d), a subsequent EIR shall be given the same notice and public review as required for a draft EIR.

Location

Matilija Dam is located approximately 16 miles north of the Pacific Ocean and just over half a mile northwest from the Matilija Creek confluence with the Ventura River in western Ventura County, California. Matilija Creek and North Fork Matilija Creek join approximately 15.5 miles north of the coast to create the Ventura River, which has a drainage area of approximately 226 square miles. Matilija Creek exits the Los Padres National Forest approximately seven miles north of Matilija Dam, and then flows south through mostly private land, surrounded by the Los Padres National Forest. South of the confluence of Matilija Creek and North Fork Matilija Creek, the Ventura River flows past the western edge of the City of Ojai, and through the unincorporated areas of Meiners Oaks, Live Oak Acres, Oak View and Casitas Springs. In its lower reaches, the Ventura River flows south through the City of San Buenaventura until it reaches its estuary with the Pacific Ocean.

In addition to dam removal, the Project includes the construction of downstream improvements in the unincorporated Ventura County communities of Meiners Oaks, Live Oak Acres, and Casitas Springs (Figure 1).





Proposed Project Description:

This section briefly describes the four components of the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project to be analyzed in the SEIR. The Project includes the removal of Matilija Dam as well as downstream improvements constructed prior to dam removal: Camino Cielo Bridge Replacement, and improvements to the Live Oak Acres and Casitas Springs Levees.

Matilija Dam and Reservoir

The proposed removal of Matilija Dam would enhance aquatic and terrestrial habitat along Matilija Creek and the Ventura River and restore a more natural hydrologic and sediment transport regime for the Ventura River. Two 12-foot diameter orifices would be drilled near the dam base and opened via controlled blasting in advance of a large storm event expected to transport sediment from behind the dam. A new creek channel will form through old lake bed; not all trapped sediment will mobilize downstream. Full removal of the dam structure is anticipated to occur during the next dry season.

Camino Cielo Bridge Replacement

Camino Cielo Bridge is located approximately one mile downstream of Matilija Dam on the Ventura River. The existing triple-box concrete culvert structure is currently inadequate to convey large storms and requires maintenance after each large storm event. VCPWA – WP is considering two alternatives for replacing Camino Cielo culvert structure. Each alternative would involve removal of the existing structure and construction of a new bridge, increased elevation of the bridge, and installation of bank protection to protect the new bridge and roadway infrastructure and accommodate future sediment flows.

Live Oak Acres Levee

The Live Oak Acres Levee is situated along the west embankment of the Ventura River in the unincorporated community of Live Oak Acres, approximately six miles downstream of Matilija Dam. This approximately 1.3-mile long levee extends from the Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge upstream to the Live Oak Diversion outlet at Burnham Road. The levee currently consists of an earthen berm protected by loose and concreted rock riprap. Reconstruction will bring the existing levee up to flood control standards of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to protect the Oak View community and to accommodate future sediment flows.

Casitas Springs Levee

The Casitas Springs Levee is located along the east embankment of the Ventura River in the unincorporated community of Casitas Springs, approximately nine miles downstream of Matilija Dam. This approximately 1-mile long levee system currently consists of embankment levees, floodwalls, high ground, and side drainage penetrations. Watershed Protection has explored two alternatives for this project component to bring it up to FEMA flood control standards to protect the Casitas Springs community and to accommodate future sediment flows. The first alternative includes upgrading the existing levee at its current location and the second alternative would construct a new set back levee starting from upstream of the Mobile Home Park and merging with the existing levee upstream of Ranch Road.



Project Components Not Included in the SEIR Project Description

- **Recreation:** VCPWA-WP completed construction of a new trailhead at Old Baldwin Road in 2011 following analysis in the 2010 Mitigated Negative Declaration. Other recreation component details are not yet available.
- **Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge Replacement:** VCPWA-WP will begin construction in 2021 following the 2019 completion of an Addendum to the 2004 EIS/EIR.
- **Giant Reed Removal:** This ongoing habitat enhancement component has been conducted along Matilija Creek and several segments of the Ventura River since 2007. Further CEQA analysis is not necessary at this time.
- **Robles Diversion Structure Modification.** The Robles Diversion Dam is located 2.3 miles downstream of Matilija Dam and includes a small rockfill and timber crib wall dam across the Ventura River, fish ladder, intake screens, and four miles of concrete channel (Robles Casitas Canal). Design alternatives to accommodate increased sediment loads require additional technical studies prior to CEQA analyses.
- **Meiners Oaks Levee.** The proposed Meiners Oaks Levee would be located along the east side of the Ventura River and connect to the existing levee located adjacent to the Robles Diversion forebay and extend downstream to provide flood protection to the adjacent community. Design alternatives require additional technical studies prior to CEQA analysis.

Proposed Scope of the Subsequent EIR

In accordance with Section 15162 of the CEQA Guidelines, the VCPWA – WP has determined that an SEIR is warranted to evaluate substantial changes to the previous EIR and to consider new environmental effects. The SEIR will assess the physical changes to the environment that would likely result from the revised dam removal, bridge replacement, and levee improvements including direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts, as well as growth-inducing effects [CEQA Guidelines Section 15126]. The SEIR will analyze all environmental resources required by CEQA and will identify mitigation measures to reduce potentially significant impacts of the proposed Project. The SEIR will also discuss alternatives to the proposed Project, including the no project alternative [CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.6(e)]. The alternatives discussion in the SEIR will evaluate alternatives considered as a means for lessening or avoiding any potentially significant environmental impacts of the proposed Project.

The VCPWA – WP anticipates that the updated plan to remove Matilija Dam and conduct downstream project components will have a significant effect on the environment that will require mitigation. In accordance with CEQA Guidelines Section 15063(a), the VCPWA – WP has determined that an SEIR will satisfy environmental review for the proposed Project, as an Initial Study is not required if there is substantial evidence that a project may cause a significant effect on the environment. Given the extent of analysis that has occurred for this Project through the 2004 EIS/EIR and subsequent technical studies, the VCPWA – WP has elected to issue this NOP and seek public input on the scope and content of the SEIR. To enable interested parties to provide a meaningful response, the VCPWA – WP has identified potential impacts from Project implementation to include the following:

- **Agricultural Resources-** Areas of Important Farmland (i.e., Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Local Importance) are located downstream of Matilija Dam. Impacts may occur if proposed improvements to levees and floodwalls extend into Farmland, or if Farmland is lost from increased flooding following dam removal.



- **Air Quality/Greenhouse Gases-** Proposed dam removal and construction of downstream components would result in temporary air quality and greenhouse gas emissions from diesel exhaust (e.g., on-site construction equipment and vehicles). The Project would also generate fugitive dust emissions.
- **Biological Resources-** The Project would result in the temporary and permanent removal of sensitive habitats including lacustrine, riverine, palustrine, and upland habitat types, creating direct and long-term impacts to the California red-legged frog. The project will benefit southern steelhead through habitat improvements and removal of the barrier to upstream spawning grounds.
- **Community Character-** The SEIR will evaluate impacts from new or taller flood control structures to the community character of adjacent communities.
- **Cultural Resources-** The SEIR will evaluate whether Matilija Dam or Ojala/Soper's Ranch would qualify as an historic structure.
- **Hazards-** The SEIR will evaluate the risk of landslides, fire, flood, and hazardous waste from the Project.
- **Noise/Vibration-** The Project would generate temporary noise and vibration from construction equipment and controlled blasting during dam removal.
- **Paleontological Resources-** Ground-disturbing activities associated with Project construction have the potential to damage or destroy unknown buried paleontological resources.
- **Recreation-** Project construction of downstream components would require temporary restrictions to recreation facilities. Dam removal would open portions of Matilija Creek to recreational use.
- **Scenic Resources-** Construction activities (e.g., equipment, materials, staging areas, demolition) would create temporary impacts to the scenic character of the Project area.
- **Transportation-** Project construction activities would temporarily contribute to traffic congestion along State Route 33 and Highway 150, which could adversely impact roadway safety and general performance of the circulation system.
- **Water Resources-** Turbidity and sedimentation following dam removal would create temporary impacts to water resources, which could interfere with water supplies, including groundwater flow or groundwater recharge.

Possible Alternatives

The 2004 EIS/EIR evaluated several alternatives using a variety of methodologies and over a range of variables, examining hydrologic input, downstream sediment and turbidity, flooding, flood protection improvements, beach nourishment and ocean sediment yield, environmental resources, topography, groundwater impacts, completeness, effectiveness, efficiency, acceptability, costs, benefits, and contributions to National Ecosystem Restoration (NER) goals. The results of those comparative analyses led the USACE to choose Alternative 4b as the Recommended Plan for the Proposed Action.

New technical analyses completed since the adoption of the 2004 EIS/EIR have resulted in modifications and revisions to design features previously described under Alternative 4b. These technical studies include, but are not limited to, hydraulic and sediment transport modeling studies (AECOM/Stillwater Sciences, 2020), geotechnical explorations (NV5 West, Inc., 2018), peak flow and daily flow series calculations (Stillwater Sciences, 2018), estuarine and coastal modeling (Integral Consulting, 2019), as well as comprehensive analyses of similar dam removal efforts (Cui et al., 2016). Technical analyses were also



completed for siting and design of the downstream levee components (Tetra Tech, 2020). Studies included evaluation of many design alternatives, which were evaluated and refined to develop the alternatives presented in the SEIR.

Project Scoping Process and Scoping Period

In accordance with CEQA Guidelines Section 15063(a), the VCPWA – WP has determined that an SEIR will be required to satisfy environmental review for the proposed Project as this Project may have a significant effect on the environment. While the SEIR will focus on significant environmental effects, it will also discuss the effects found not to be significant under CEQA Guidelines Section 15128 and potential beneficial effects.

The process of determining the focus and content of the SEIR is referred to as scoping under CEQA Guidelines Section 15083. Scoping helps to identify the range of actions, alternatives, environmental effects, and mitigation measures to be analyzed in depth, and eliminates from detailed study those issues that are not pertinent to the final decision on the proposed Project. Scoping is also an effective way to bring together and address the concerns of the public, affected agencies, and other interested parties. Significant issues may be identified through public and agency comments.

Scoping, however, is not conducted to resolve differences concerning the merits of the Project or to anticipate the ultimate decision on the proposal. Rather, the purpose of scoping is to help ensure that a comprehensive and focused SEIR will be prepared that provides a firm basis for the decision-making process. Members of the public; affected federal, State, and local agencies; interest groups; stakeholders; and other interested parties may participate in the scoping process for this Project by providing written comments or recommendations concerning the issues to be analyzed in the SEIR.

All interested parties are invited to submit comments on the scope and content of this SEIR. Responsible and Trustee Agencies may need to use the SEIR when considering permits or other discretionary approvals your agency may issue for the proposed Project.

Written comments can be submitted as described under “Comment Period” at the beginning of this notice.

