

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

This document constitutes a draft Environmental Assessment (draft EA) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to evaluate the environmental impacts of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' (USACE) decision to consent to requests made the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation (LACDPR) and the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority (Authority)¹ to construct and operate the proposed San Gabriel River Discovery Center at Whittier Narrows Project (Discovery Center or proposed action); to consent to a sublease for the property requested for the proposed action; and to issue utility easements required by the Authority for the construction and operation of the Discovery Center.

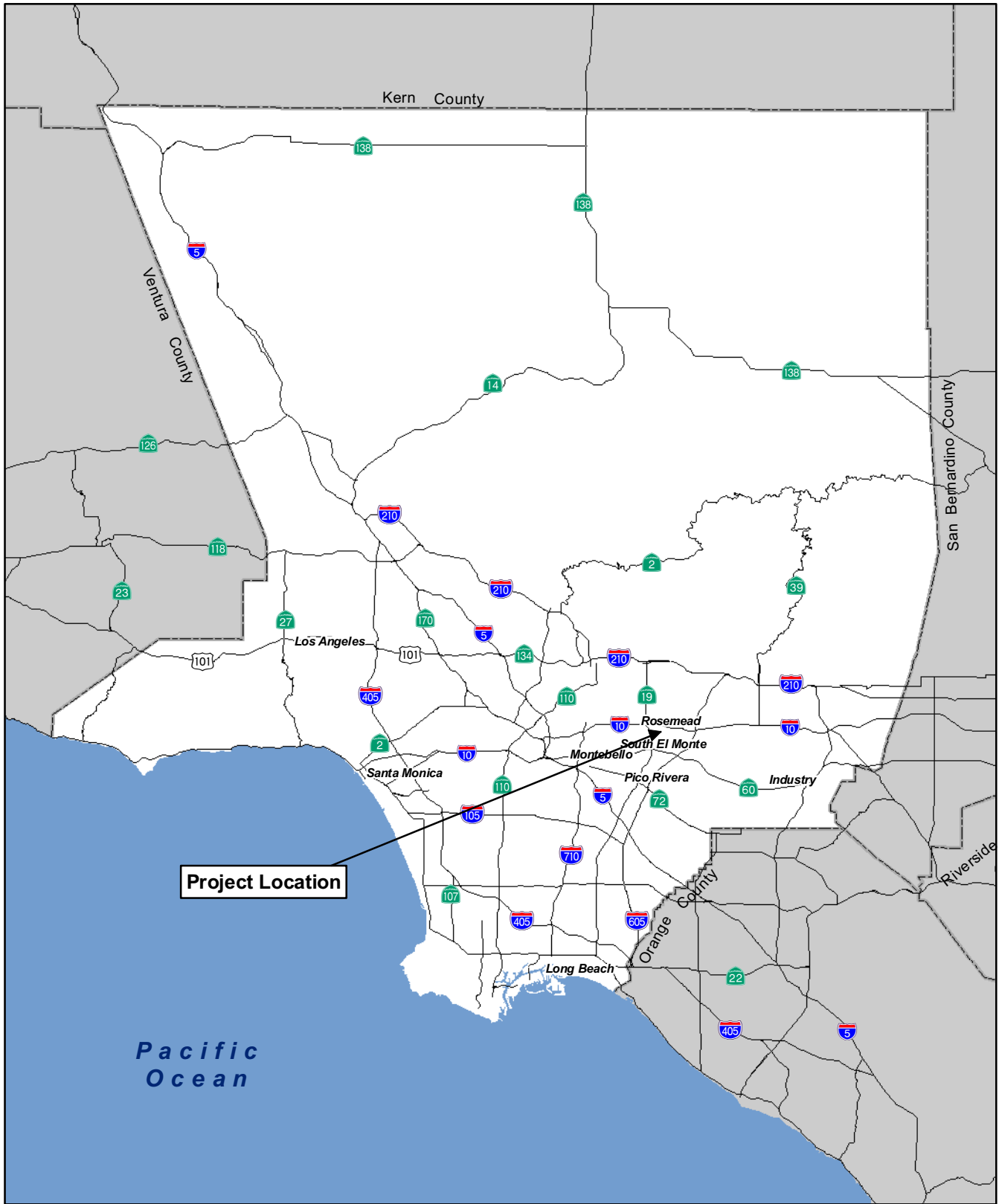
The Authority is seeking USACE consent to construct an 18,230 square foot (sf) interpretive center on an approximately 10.58-acre site located within the Whittier Narrows Natural Area (Natural Area) (see Figure 1-1) that is owned by the United States. The Natural Area is currently under lease (Master Lease) to LACDPR. As the agent acting on behalf of the United States, USACE consent is required for the construction of the Discovery Center. All plans for construction are subject to review and approval of USACE.

The existing Whittier Narrows Nature Center (WNNC) is currently located on an approximately 0.63-acre parcel owned by the County of Los Angeles, not the United States. USACE consent to demolish the existing structure is not required. Any environmental impacts arising from demolition of the WNNC is considered in another document and will not be considered herein.

Second, the Authority is seeking USACE consent to a sublease agreement between LACDPR and the Authority, which would permit the Authority to construct, operate, and maintain the Discovery Center within the parameters set forth by the Master Lease. The sublease agreement will be negotiated by LACDPR and the Authority subject to the review and approval of USACE. Provisions of the Master Lease will be attached and incorporated by reference into the sublease agreement.

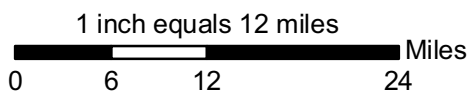
This analysis seeks to determine whether a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is appropriate for the proposed action, or if an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would be required. The draft EA describes the environmental effects of the proposed action.

¹ The Authority is a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) under the Joint Exercise of Powers Act (Gov. Code §§ 6500-6599) consisting of the following agencies: Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District (Upper District), Central Basin Municipal Water District (Central Basin), County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation (LACDPR) and the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy (RMC).



Source: California Geospatial Information Library (2003-5)

**Figure 1-1
Regional Location Map**



1.2 PURPOSE

The proposed action's overall purpose is to: (1) replace the existing nature center (WNNC) with a new, larger and more modern interpretive center (the San Gabriel Discovery Center at Whittier Narrows) to provide expanded educational resources that interpret the San Gabriel River watershed to encourage exploration and to increase understanding, appreciation, and stewardship of the revitalized San Gabriel River region; and (2) receive approval of the lease between the USACE and LACDPR and a sublease and operating agreement between LACDPR and the Authority to allow construction and operation of a new interpretive center on land owned by USACE and LACDPR and operated by LACDPR.

1.2.1 History

The U.S. Congress has charged the USACE, Los Angeles District with the responsibility for maintaining flood control and other missions at this location. The authorized purpose of the Whittier Narrow Dam is flood control, as set forth by the Flood Control Act of 1941. The dam protects a 554-square mile densely populated area comprised of residential, commercial, and industrial land. The San Gabriel River, the Rio Hondo Channel, and the flood-flow channel are within the reservoir. The secondary purpose of the Whittier Narrows Dam is recreation, as authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1944. The act, as amended, authorizes the USACE to construct, maintain, and operate public parks and recreational facilities as water resource development projects. A third authorized purpose of the Whittier Narrows Dam is water conservation (USACE 1996).

The proposed action would provide a modern, state of the art interpretive center that would educate students and community members about the importance of the San Gabriel and Whittier Narrows flood control dam and basin to USACE's flood control mission and other missions (i.e., recreation), as well as watershed conservation, the cultural heritage of the site, and the wildlife value provided by the Natural Area. The interpretive center would continue to offer the existing programs offered at the WNNC and described in Table 2-2, while providing expanded watershed education programs described in Table 2-4.

The Whittier Narrows Dam Master Plan serves as a guide for the use and development of all resources within the approximately 1,400-acre Whittier Narrows Recreation Area (Recreation Area). The goal of the plan is to provide guidelines for public use of public lands, while preserving the wildlife habitat, vegetation, and cultural resource values, in addition to supporting the authorized project purposes of flood control and water conservation. Local agencies with leases in the flood control basin are required to operate and maintain their own recreation facilities. Any development within the Recreation Area behind the dam cannot impede the primary purpose of flood control (USACE 1996).

The majority of land behind the dam, referred to as the Recreation Area, is operated and maintained by LACDPR for recreational use. Facilities within the Recreation Area include fishing lakes, comfort stations, picnicking areas, playgrounds, the Natural Area, the WNNC, an equestrian facility, trails, a multipurpose athletic complex, a military museum, soccer fields, volleyball courts, golf course, and

1.0 Introduction

archery, skeet, pistol and trap ranges. The Natural Area occupies approximately 300 acres in the southern portion of the Recreation Area, and it includes over 200 acres of open space including four man-made lakes, three of which are periodically dry to control for West Nile Virus. The fourth lake, Lake Aquatecos, is partially filled and provides a winter sanctuary for migrating waterfowl. The Natural Area is intended to be less intensively used than the Recreation Area. It is maintained by LACDPR for its habitat value, passive recreation, habitat restoration potential, and regional educational programs.

The WNNC is the only nature center within the Natural Area and the Recreation Area. It is operated on land owned by both USACE and LACDPR. It serves as an educational facility for school children, a meeting place for nature walks and bird watching, and a recreational center for members of the community. In its current form, the WNNC is comprised of a small converted home with teaching spaces, aquaria, topical and live plant and animal exhibits, and a small gift shop. This facility is owned and operated by LACDPR. A series of smaller outbuildings contain maintenance equipment and provide additional storage space.

1.2.2 Need

Efforts to expand and improve the WNNC have been contemplated for many years. The facility serves as an educational resource for the area and hosts numerous educational programs for visiting school children from across Los Angeles. However, the existing facilities are aging and small in size. The aquaria, topical, and live plant and animal exhibit space is limited to strictly interpreting the Natural Area and the exhibits are outdated. Further, due to the size of the existing facility, only a limited number of visiting students can be accommodated at any one time. The basic objective for the project proponent (the Authority) is to educate the general and school-age population within a 25-mile radius of the site about the San Gabriel River watershed at one accessible location that integrates indoor and outdoor exhibits and interpretive features. The current programming would be maintained and expanded upon, including live animal exhibits. This could not be accomplished in the existing facility due to its limited size.

The proposed action would not interfere with the USACE flood control activities behind the Whittier Narrows Dam, the first authorized purpose of the Whittier Narrows Dam. The new interpretive center would be constructed above the taking line and level of the 100-year floodplain so as not to interfere with the flood storage level behind the dam. All structures associated with the proposed action located below the taking line and within the 100-year floodplain would be designed to flood. No permanent structures would be constructed that would impede flood flows. Thus, the proposed action would not interfere with the flood control activities behind the dam. Further, construction, operation, and maintenance of the Discovery Center would not result in floatable debris within the floodplain. The site would be constructed, operated, and maintained in accordance with the terms of the Master Lease and the County's Management Plan.

The proposed action would be consistent with the USACE's second authorized purpose of the Whittier Narrows Dam to provide open space and recreational facilities. The portion of the Natural Area within

the project site would be enhanced by restoring it with locally indigenous, native vegetation and existing trails would be maintained. It is expected that a revegetation of the site would improve the recreational experience for visitors to the Natural Area, as well as improve the habitat value of the area.

The proposed action would be consistent with the third authorized purpose of Whittier Narrows Dam, which is water conservation. The proposed action would employ recycled water and be constructed to meet the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum-level standards to reduce water and energy consumption. It would serve as a model facility of conservation. Further, the programs offered at the new interpretive center would include water conservation, education programs about the watershed, water quality, history of the area, and the benefits of flood control. The proposed action would be consistent with and enhance the USACE's mission with respect to the Whittier Narrows Dam.

1.3 PROPOSED ACTION

1.3.1 Decision To Be Made

The decision to be made is twofold. The first action is whether or not to approve a new sublease agreement between the USACE and LACDPR and a sublease and operating agreement between LACDPR and the Authority to allow construction and operation of the a new approximately 18,230 sf interpretive center on an approximately 11.21-acre site located within the Natural Area. The second action is whether or not to approve the removal of the existing WNNC and associated facilities to construct the new interpretive center on an approximately 10.58-acre site owned by USACE. The responsible official for this action is the commanding officer for the USACE, Los Angeles District. Once the environmental review process has been completed, design would be completed, and funding secured. Construction is estimated to take approximately 19 months.

1.3.2 Scoping

Internal scoping was accomplished with USACE personnel. As part of the concurrent Environmental Impact Report (EIR) process, a public scoping meeting was held on September 27, 2006. The scoping meeting introduced the proposed action, outlined the environmental review process, and invited public comment on the content of the environmental review. Approximately 10 citizens attended the meeting, and 6 people spoke at the meeting to express their concerns regarding the potential environmental effects of the proposed action. Through this process, several key issues were identified, including:

- Public access to the project site, including access for bicyclists and equestrians;
- Effects on existing vegetation along Durfee Avenue;
- Need for a westbound right turn-lane on Durfee Avenue into the project site;
- Effects on raptors and other birds that have been seen on-site;

1.0 Introduction

- Preservation of existing vegetation located on-site, especially for raptor foraging and tree canopy coverage; and
- Effects of the constructed wetland on the hydrology of the project site and the San Gabriel River.

In addition to the comments provided at the scoping meeting, 9 comment letters were received. The primary areas of controversy identified by the public and agencies included the following potential issues:

- Effects related to air quality during construction and operation;
- Fire Department access and water flow requirements;
- Effects on County and City roadways in the project vicinity;
- On-site flood hazards and water quality issues;
- Large size truck trips and heavy construction equipment on nearby state highways;
- Wastewater discharge from the project site; and
- Proximity of the project site to Metrolink's San Gabriel line right-of-way.

Public Comments will be solicited when this EA is available for public review.