

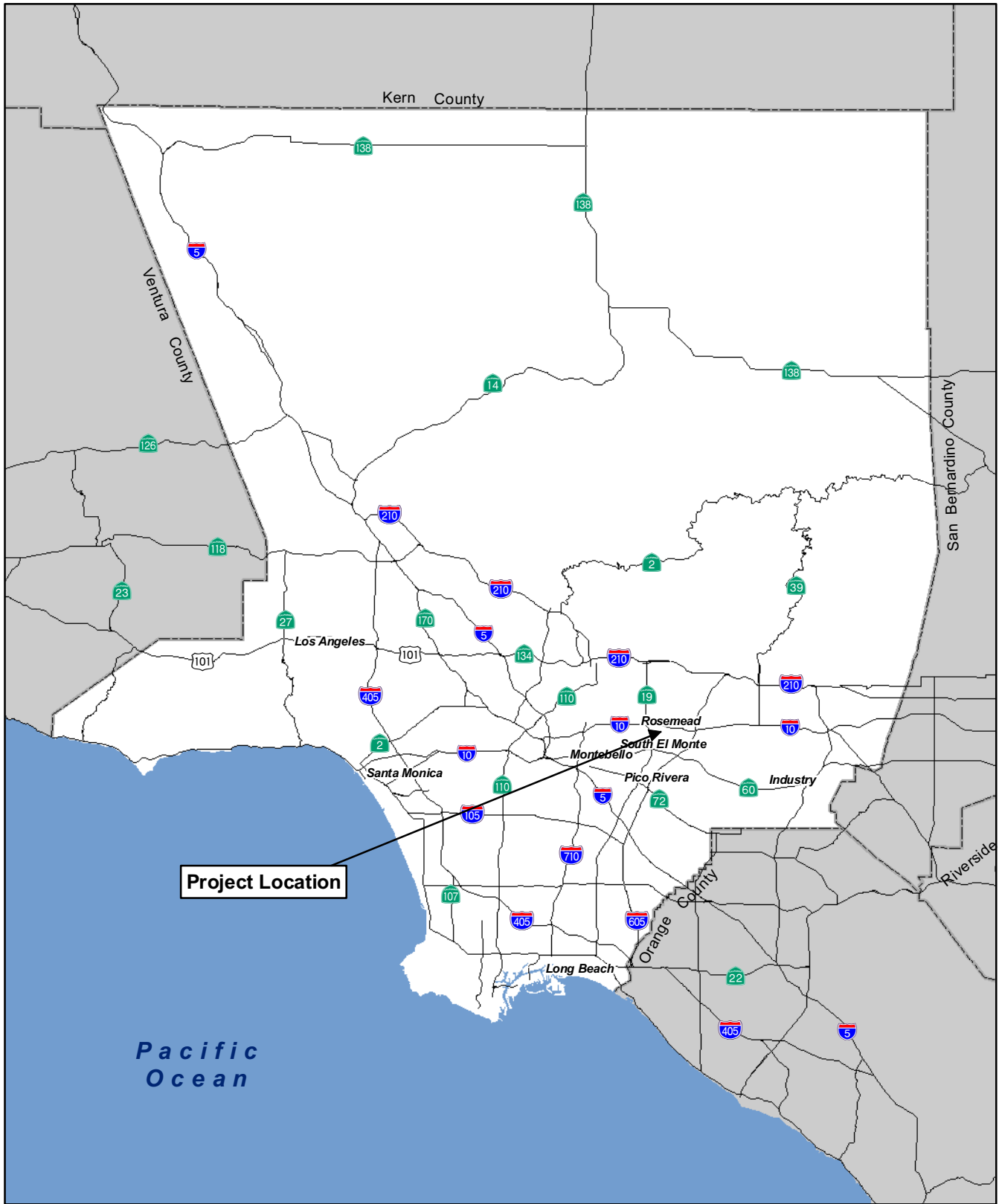
1.0 INTRODUCTION

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The United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) operates an outgrant program which provides procedures to permit non-Federal entities to use Federal land for purposes that are compatible with the Federal project, laws, regulations and policies. This document constitutes a Final Environmental Assessment (final EA) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to evaluate the environmental effects of alternatives pursuant to a request from the County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation (LACDPR) and the San Gabriel River Discovery Center Authority (Authority)¹ to develop, operate and maintain Federal land located within the Whittier Narrows Natural Area (Natural Area) (see Figure 1-1). This Final EA 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.

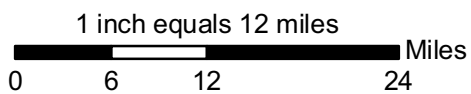
Part of the Natural Area is currently under lease (Master Lease) to LACDPR. The existing Whittier Narrows Nature Center (WNNC) is located on an approximately 0.63-acre parcel owned by the County of Los Angeles adjacent to Federal land. The County of Los Angeles is a partner in the Joint Powers Authority (JPA). The Authority has initiated planning studies to demolish the existing structure in favor of a different structure more suitable to current needs of the public. The USACE consent to demolition of the existing structure is not required. By contrast, the Authority has submitted a request to USACE for permission to further develop Federal land to accommodate for an expansion of the existing WNNC and/or facilities. Facilities that shall be considered in forming the alternatives include: encroachment of the new physical structure on Federal land, construction of a semi-permeable parking lot on Federal land and addition of outdoor classrooms, maintenance buildings, habitat restoration and preservation, walkways, lighting, utilities and a constructed riparian/wetland area on Federal land.

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 AND NEED

1.2.1 History

The U.S. Congress has charged USACE, Los Angeles District with the responsibility for maintaining flood control and other missions at Whittier Narrows. The authorized purpose of the Whittier Narrows 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. A secondary purpose of the Whittier Narrows Dam is recreation, as authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1944. The act, as amended, authorizes USACE to construct, maintain, and operate public parks and recreational facilities as water resource development projects. A third purpose of the Whittier Narrows Dam is water conservation (USACE 1996).

The Whittier Narrows Dam Master Plan serves as a guide for approved use and development of resources within the approximately 1,400-acre Whittier Narrows Recreation Area (Recreation Area). The plan provides guidelines for public use of public lands, while reserving the wildlife habitat, vegetation, and cultural resource values, in addition to supporting the authorized project purposes of flood control and water conservation. It identifies areas within the Whittier Narrows flood control basin that may be available for recreational purposes.

Third parties submit requests to develop these recreational areas to USACE for review and approval. If approved, USACE issues a lease and requires that the lease holder operate and maintain their own recreation facilities without cost to the Federal government. The majority of land behind the dam, referred to as the Recreation Area, is operated and maintained by LACDPR for recreational use. Any development within the Recreation Area behind the dam cannot impede the primary purpose of flood control (USACE 1996). The Natural Area is a section of the larger Whittier Narrows' Recreation Area that occupies approximately 300 acres in the southern portion and includes over 200 acres of open space. 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 Recreation Area. The WNNC main building, outbuilding (restrooms and storage) and County Police Substation are located on a 0.63-acre parcel owned by LACDPR and located outside of the Natural Area. The other associated facilities, including a maintenance building, parking lot, and trails are located on land owned by the USACE. The WNNC 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

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restrooms, a covered outdoor classroom, a building for maintenance equipment and additional storage, walkways and trails, a small pond and a parking lot.

1.2.2 Purpose

- To process the Authority's request in a timely manner, identifying whether the request is consistent with USACE's Whittier Narrows Master Plan, Federal laws, regulations and policies; determine whether development of the Federal land identified would impact operations of the Federal project; and determine whether development of this kind is desirable to the Federal Government and/or to the public.
- To provide expanded educational resources that interpret the San Gabriel River watershed; encourage exploration; increase understanding, appreciation, and stewardship of the revitalized San Gabriel River region; have one accessible location that integrates indoor and outdoor exhibits and interpretive features; and to accommodate a greater and more expansive population in the greater Los Angeles Metropolitan area.

1.2.3 Need

The Authority has submitted a request seeking USACE's consent to a sublease agreement between LACDPR and the Authority and permission to construct, operate, and maintain improved nature facilities and/or part of a new interpretive center WNNC on Federal land subject to the terms set forth in the Master Lease. Terms of a sublease agreement would be negotiated by LACDPR and the Authority subject to the review and approval of USACE.

The Authority has recognized that 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 inside the WNNC or within the outdoor gathering area. The Authority has requested that USACE approve the construction of a new interpretive center outdoor facilities, creation of habitat, and expansion of the parking lot to accommodate larger groups of students and the public to provide improved facilities that include the existing programs provided by LACDPR at the WNNC and expanded programming to include watershed education and interpretation.

The basic objective of the proposed action is to operate an interpretive center to educate the general and school-age population within a 25-mile radius of the project site about the San Gabriel River watershed at one accessible location that integrates indoor and outdoor exhibits and interpretive features. The proposed action would provide a site where a comprehensive educational program about the watershed can be displayed in a single facility. The site and interpretive center together would deliver a program about all aspects of watershed education: geologic setting, natural history, water quality and conservation, human reliance on river resources, flood management, and river restoration.

Currently, the WNNC is estimated to serve approximately 9,600 school children annually. One of the primary objectives of the Authority is to develop a new interpretive center in order to increase accessibility and appropriate programming to reach 18,000 to 25,000 students annually. There are presently 2.8 million schoolchildren attending 1,823 schools located in 100 school districts within a 25-mile radius of the project site. No comparable interpretive center exists that can provide a similar level of watershed education to that proposed by this project. In order to effectively reach this underserved population, any new facility would include a comprehensive and accessible reference library, appropriately sized indoor and outdoor classrooms, as well as topical and live animal exhibits all tied to age-appropriate hands-on outdoor programming for school children. An interpretive center designed to facilitate this objective and meets the needs of this culturally diverse population should be able to accommodate varying learning levels, language proficiency and age groups, and include a variety of delivery methods and learning modes.

The Authority seeks to build an architecturally unique interpretive center that would attract visitors. By situating it in the unique Natural Area, the Authority intends for the facility to serve as gateway to the outdoors for the area's dense, primarily urban population. There is presently a substantial service gap for the 10 million people living within the 25-mile radius. Because the interpretive center costs would be fully supported by the Authority, there would be no entry or parking fees, making the interpretive center financially accessible to all residents. The site selection process considered the unique characteristics of the location, as well as the tolerance for travel distance and travel time for visitors who use public and personal transportation to access the interpretive center. The location is within 0.75-miles of the junction of two major area freeways: State Route 60 (SR 60) and Interstate 605 (I-5).

With its proximity to the San Gabriel River and the San Gabriel River bikeway, the project site is intended to serve as a new staging area and trailhead to the Emerald Necklace Park Network via a short trail connecting the exhibit hall to the bikeway. This trailhead would also provide an opportunity for users of the San Gabriel River bikeway trail, which extends from Azusa to Seal Beach and connects through Whittier Narrows to the Los Angeles Rio Hondo (Lario) Trail along the Rio Hondo River. Trail users would be able to stop in at the Discovery Center to gain further knowledge about the rivers.

Locating an interpretive center in the Recreation Area, already the County's most visited park with 1.4 million visitors yearly, is a way to expose visitors to other recreational opportunities in the watershed region. The natural setting of the site offers a unique opportunity to draw people to this particular setting. It would provide a gateway to the Recreation Area and the County's larger park system, as well as other open space resources in the San Gabriel Watershed, such as the Angeles National Forest.

1.3 PROPOSED ACTION

1.3.1 Description

The Discovery Center, or 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' 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 and serve a larger user base offered by LACDPR at the WNNC and described in Table 2-2, while providing expanded watershed education programs described in Table 2-4. 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 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 which would include permission to allow construction and operation of the a new interpretive center and/or facilities within the Natural Area. If so, the second action would be to evaluate whether or not the proposed action facilities to support a maximum of a 18,320 sf building on approximately 10.58-acres owned by USACE in the Natural Area, or an alternative is the most desirable Federal action. The responsible decision-making official for this action is the commanding officer for the USACE, Los Angeles District.

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.

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.

1.3.2 Scoping

Internal scoping was accomplished with USACE personnel. While NEPA does not require scoping for an EA, as part of the concurrent California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) process, a public scoping meeting was held on September 27, 2006. The scoping meeting introduced the proposed action, outlined the State of California environmental review process, and invited public comment on the content of the environmental review. Information from the CEQA scoping meeting was used to prepare the draft EA because key issues would be similar for the EA. It was not the intent of the USACE for the CEQA scoping meeting to be held as a joint scoping meeting for the purposes of NEPA. Approximately 10 citizens attended the CEQA scoping meeting, and 6 people spoke at the meeting to express their concerns regarding the potential environmental effects of the proposed action. Through this CEQA 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;
- 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 CEQA 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 were solicited when this EA was available for public review during the 30-day public review period of the draft EA from July 22 to August 20, 2009.

In accordance with regulations of the Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ; 40 CFR 1506.6), the USACE did the following for public, federal, state, and local agencies disclosure and involvement: (1) published the notice of the proposed federal action in the San Gabriel Valley Tribune (July 22, 2009); (2) transmitted the notice and the draft EA to the State Clearinghouse for agency review on July 22, 2009; (3)

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mailed the notice to the affected property owners, surrounding cities, and interested parties on July 22, 2009; (4) posted the notice on- and off-site from July 22, 2009 to August 20, 2009; (5) made the draft EA available at the following three local libraries from July 22, 2009 to August 20, 2009.

- South El Monte Library, 1430 North Central Avenue, South El Monte, CA 91733
- El Monte Library, 3224 North Tyler Avenue, El Monte, CA 91731
- Pico Rivera Library, 9001 Mines Avenue, Pico Rivera, CA 90660