

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ES.1 INTRODUCTION

This final Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluates the proposed San Gabriel River Discovery Center at Whittier Narrows (Discovery Center or proposed action). Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the final EA evaluates the environmental impacts of the proposed action and 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) to develop, operate, and maintain Federal land located within the Whittier Narrows Natural Area (Natural Area). 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.

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. The Authority has initiated planning studies to demolish the existing structure for 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 preservation, walkways, lighting, utilities and a constructed riparian/wetland area on Federal land.

Cumulative impacts are considered and analyzed throughout the EA because the construction of the proposed Discovery Center facilities would impact the USACE land.

## ES.2 NEPA PROCESS

The USACE is the NEPA lead agency for the proposed action, which is described below. The USACE published a draft EA to facilitate public participation and comments on the proposed action. A public notice of the proposed federal action was released for a 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) 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 (July 22 to August 20,

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2009); (5) posted a copy of draft EA online at <http://discoverycenterauthority.org/>; and (6) made the draft EA available at the following three local libraries (July 22 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

The names of the commenters and dates of the 25 comment letters received during the draft EA review period are listed below in Section ES.5. The comment letters address EA topic areas, which are listed below along with a reference to applicable sections of the EA for the each topic area. Comments on the draft EA have been taken into account in preparing the final EA. 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.

The final EA was prepared in accordance with the requirement of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the regulations of the CEQ (40 CFR Part 1500). These regulations establish policies and procedures to ensure information on potential environmental impacts of Federal regulatory actions is available to decision makers, regulatory agencies, and the public. Under the USACE standard NEPA policies, this final EA and associated documents constitute the required environmental review for the proposed action (40 CFR 1508.10). A copy of this final EA will be posted online at <http://discoverycenterauthority.org/>.

### ES.3 PURPOSE

The proposed action's overall purpose is:

- To process the Authority's request in a timely manner, identifying whether the request is consistent with USACE' 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.

The proposed action's history and need are described in Chapter 1.0 of this final EA.

## ES.4 PROPOSED ACTION

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 River and the 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 project site, and the wildlife value provided by the Natural Area. The new interpretive center would continue to offer the existing programs offered by LACDPR at the WNNC, while providing expanded watershed education programs and serve a larger use base. The current programming would be maintained and expanded upon, including topical and 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 14,000 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.

Once the environmental review process has been completed, design would be completed, and funding secured. Construction is estimated to take approximately 19 months.

### ES.5 COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT EA

During the 30-day public review period of the draft EA, from July 22 to August 20, 2009, 25 comment letters were received from individuals and organizations listed below. The comments received on the draft EA have been taken into account in preparing the final EA.

1. Marcia Wertenberger – August 19, 2009
2. Diana Bear/Mary O'Brien – August 19, 2009
3. Save Our Community submitted by James Flournoy
4. Julio Bermejo
5. Grace Shinoda and Yoshio Nakamura – August 19, 2009
6. Joan Powell – July 31, 2009
7. Jack Bath – August 20, 2009
8. Diane Tomovich – August 10, 2009
9. Lou Orr – July 27, 2009
10. Letty Brooks
11. Edward Barajas – August 20, 2009
12. Margot Eiser – August 19, 2009
13. Susan Maclean – August 19, 2009
14. Jessica Nava – August 19, 2009
15. Teresa Young
16. Joan Powell – August 20, 2009
17. G Valladolid – August 18, 2009
18. Matthew Perri – August 19, 2009
19. Edward and Beatrice Simpson – August 18, 2009
20. G Valladolid – August 15, 2009
21. Pauline Barraza – August 15, 2009
22. Edna Gomez – August 15, 2009
23. La Habra Vital Community Task Force submitted by Robert – August 17, 2009
24. Richards Spotts – August 17, 2009
25. Yvonne Watson – August 18, 2009

The environmental issue comments and other topics of concern in the comment letters were reviewed and, where necessary, clarifications and corrections were made in the final EA. As shown in Table ES-1 below, the issues areas and corresponding sections that address comments are included for public and agency disclosure in this final EA. None of the corrections or additions in this final EA constitutes significant new information or substantial modifications to the proposed action that would change the conclusions or determinations of direct, indirect, or cumulative effects.

**TABLE ES-1 ISSUES RAISED BY COMMENT LETTERS AND CORRESPONDING SECTIONS OF EA**

Issue Area	Section of the EA
Public notice	ES.2 NEPA Process
Pre-decision of the EA	1.0 Introduction
Scoping	1.3.2 Scoping
Purpose and need of the proposed action	1.2 Purpose and Need
Master Lease/Sublease	1.0 Introduction
Public involvement	ES.2 NEPA Process
Alternatives	2.0 Alternatives; Chapters 3.0 through 3.16
Cumulative impacts	Chapters 3.0 through 3.16
SEATAC involvement	3.1 Biological Resources and Appendix B-1 and B-4
Sensitive species issues	3.1 Biological Resources
Cultural/historic resources	3.2 Cultural Resources
Seismicity/liquefaction concerns	3.6 Geology and Soils
Fees for Discovery Center use	2.0 Alternatives and 3.10 Economics
Docent 'loss' issues	2.0 Alternatives

Certain comments or topics brought up by commenters were determined not to be significant per NEPA or the draft EA provided adequate discussion and evaluation, and therefore, were not included in Table ES-1.

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