



State of California – Natural Resources Agency  
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE  
South Coast Region  
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**GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor**  
**CHARLTON H. BONHAM, Director**



September 24, 2021

Governor's Office of Planning & Research

**September 27 2021**

**STATE CLEARINGHOUSE**

Mr. Evan Lashly  
United Water Conservation District  
1701 N. Lombard Street, Suite 200  
Oxnard, CA 93030  
[EvanL@UnitedWater.org](mailto:EvanL@UnitedWater.org)

**Subject: Freeman Diversion Sediment Management Project, Mitigated Negative Declaration, SCH #2021080524, Ventura County**

Dear Mr. Lashly:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has reviewed United Water Conservation District's (District; Lead Agency) Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) for the Freeman Diversion Sediment Management Project (Project).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding those activities involved in the Project that may affect California fish and wildlife. Likewise, we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments regarding those aspects of the Project that CDFW, by law, may be required to carry out or approve through the exercise of its own regulatory authority under the Fish and Game Code.

#### **CDFW's Role**

CDFW is California's Trustee Agency for fish and wildlife resources and holds those resources in trust by statute for all the people of the State [Fish & Game Code, §§ 711.7, subdivision (a) & 1802; Public Resources Code, § 21070; California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, [§ 15386, subdivision (a)]. CDFW, in its trustee capacity, has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species (Id., § 1802). Similarly, for purposes of CEQA, CDFW is charged by law to provide, as available, biological expertise during public agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect state fish and wildlife resources.

CDFW is also submitting comments as a Responsible Agency under CEQA (Public Resources Code, § 21069; CEQA Guidelines, § 15381). CDFW expects that it may need to exercise regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code, including lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority (Fish & Game Code, § 1600 *et seq.*). Likewise, to the extent implementation of the Project as proposed may result in "take", as defined by State law, of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) (Fish & Game Code, § 2050 *et seq.*), or CESA-listed rare plant pursuant to the Native Plant Protection Act (NPPA; Fish & Game Code, §1900 *et seq.*), CDFW recommends the Project proponent obtain appropriate authorization under the Fish and Game Code.

Mr. Evan Lashly  
United Water Conservation District  
September 24, 2021  
Page 2 of 11

## **Project Description and Summary**

**Objective:** The Project consists of in-channel sediment management activities within the Santa Clara River (SCR), immediately upstream of the Vern-Freeman Diversion (VFD). Project activities are expected to be performed once every two years but may be performed annually if needed. There are two phases of the proposed Project:

### Phase 1: Initial Sediment Management Event

During the first year of the proposed Project, an initial 1.3-acre low-flow channel would be established by excavating sediments to shift the river's thalweg to the southern bank of the SCR. The new low-flow channel would be approximately 40 feet wide, 825 feet long, and three feet deep. Approximately 4,700 cubic yards of sediment would be excavated to form the new low-flow channel. Excavated sediment would be dispersed immediately north of the low-flow channel and will be compacted to conditions consistent with the surrounding riverbed. Phase 1 construction is anticipated to take approximately 13 days. The 1.3-acre total includes all areas within the river channel that will be potentially affected by Phase 1 activities, including equipment travel and site ingress/egress.

### Phase 2: Subsequent Sediment Management Events

Following the implementation of Phase 1, subsequent sediment management events would be conducted as needed and are anticipated to occur approximately every two to three years, but could be conducted annually if needed. Phase 2 would expand the Project footprint by an additional 4.7 acres, resulting in a total Project footprint of six acres. The timing of Phase 2 implementation will be determined by regulatory permit authorizations, weather conditions affecting the level of flows in the SCR, and the establishment of the low-flow channel under Phase 1.

Under both phases, sediment management activities would be conducted during the District's primary maintenance window from mid-September through December, after the end of the bird nesting season and prior to the onset of the steelhead migration season. All project activities would be conducted within the active riverbed, in areas that are regularly subjected to natural cycles of disturbance (i.e., scour and deposition). Sediment management activities would not be conducted in areas with mature riparian vegetation; however, some recently recruited (i.e., emergent or early successional) vegetation may be trimmed or cleared. Continuous maintenance of the channel will prevent mature vegetation from developing within the Project footprint.

The Project's site would be accessed from the District's existing maintenance roads, including the riverbed access point on the south bank of the SCR and from the north bank across the crest of the VFD. The existing developed portions of the VFD would be used as the staging area for the Project, no new access roads would be installed to accommodate Project activities.

**Location:** The Project is located immediately upstream of the VFD, within the SCR. The VFD is four miles southwest of the city center of Santa Paula, Ventura County, California.

Mr. Evan Lashly  
United Water Conservation District  
September 24, 2021  
Page 3 of 11

## Comments and Recommendations

CDFW offers the comments and recommendations below to assist the District in adequately identifying, avoiding, and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct, and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife (biological) resources. CDFW recommends the measures or revisions below be included in a science-based monitoring program that contains adaptive management strategies as part of the Project's CEQA mitigation, monitoring and reporting program (Public Resources Code, § 21081.6; CEQA Guidelines, § 15097).

### Specific Comments

#### **Comment #1: Impacts to Aquatic and Riparian Resources; Lake and Streambed Alteration Agreement (LSAA)**

**Issue #1:** Project activities are expected to occur within the SCR, a stream subject to FGC, section 1600 *et. seq.*

**Issue #2:** CDFW is concerned that impacts to biological resources (including groundwater dependent ecosystems and nearby vegetation communities) may be impacted by the proposed Project.

**Issue #3:** Continuous maintenance activities within a specified areas of the SCR should be considered and mitigated as a permanent impact.

**Specific Impact:** The Project proposes to modify the SCR. Modification of the SCR may result in the loss of streams and associated watershed function and biological diversity. Frequent sediment movement activities on or near streams is likely to diminish onsite and downstream water quality. Project activities may also alter natural hydrologic and geomorphic processes of the SCR and may affect groundwater dependent ecosystems.

**Why Impact Would Occur:** The Project will impact the SCR, which is expected to result in loss of natural drainage patterns, soils, and associated vegetation. These actions may also result in changes to the streams, altering hydrologic and geomorphic processes that may impact plant and wildlife species.

**Evidence Impact Would Be Significant:** The Project may substantially adversely affect the existing stream, which absent specific mitigation, could result in substantial erosion or siltation on site or off site of the Project. Debris, soil, silt, oil or other petroleum products, or any other substances which could be hazardous or deleterious to aquatic life, wildlife, or riparian habitat resulting from Project related activities may enter the stream.

#### **Recommended potentially feasible mitigation measure(s):**

**Mitigation Measure #1:** The Project applicant (or "entity") must provide written notification to CDFW pursuant to section 1600 *et seq.* of the FGC. Based on this notification and other information, CDFW shall determine whether a Lake and Streambed Alteration (LSA) Agreement is required prior to conducting the proposed activities. A notification package for a LSA may be obtained by accessing CDFW's web site at <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/conservation/lisa>.

Mr. Evan Lashly  
United Water Conservation District  
September 24, 2021  
Page 4 of 11

CDFW's issuance of an LSA Agreement for a Project that is subject to CEQA will require CEQA compliance actions by CDFW as a Responsible Agency. As a Responsible Agency, CDFW may consider the CEQA document of the Lead Agency for the Project. To minimize additional requirements by CDFW pursuant to section 1600 *et seq.* and/or under CEQA, the CEQA document should fully identify the potential impacts to streams or riparian resources and provide adequate avoidance, mitigation, monitoring, and reporting commitments for issuance of the LSA Agreement.

**Mitigation Measure #2:** Any LSA Agreement issued for the Project by CDFW may include additional measures protective of streambeds on and downstream of the Project such as additional erosion and pollution control measures. To compensate for any on-site and off-site impacts to riparian resources, additional mitigation conditioned in any LSA Agreement may include the following: avoidance of resources, on-site or off-site creation, enhancement, or restoration, and/or protection and management of mitigation lands in perpetuity.

**Mitigation Measure #3:** CDFW recommends fully avoiding impacts to streams and the vegetation communities associated with the streams. If feasible, CDFW recommends redesigning the Project to avoid impacts to the existing drainage features that support sensitive vegetation communities. Design alternatives should attempt to retain as much surface flow and natural hydrologic processes as possible.

**Mitigation Measure #4:** If impacts to vegetation within the stream, such as arroyo willow thicket, mulefat thicket, and cattail marshes cannot be avoided, CDFW suggests mitigation should be achieved entirely on site if possible. CDFW recommends that impacts be mitigated at no less than 3:1. CDFW recommends that an on-site Habitat Mitigation and Monitoring Plan (HMMP) be developed. An HMMP should provide specific, detailed, and enforceable measures.

**Recommendation #1:** CDFW recommends the District provide an in-stream flows analysis and an evaluation of potential impacts on biological resources as part of the final environmental document. At a minimum, the analysis should provide the following:

*Changes to Hydrology and Hydraulics*

1. CDFW recommends the District define the extent of up- and downstream reach of the SCR that may be directly and indirectly affected by the proposed Project and assess potential Project-related impacts on biological resources within this study reach (including any potential groundwater dependent ecosystems).
2. An analysis of potential Project-related changes to river hydraulics in both concrete and soft-bottom reaches. This includes water depth (percent change), wetted perimeter (acres gained/lost), and velocity (percent change). Comparing total wetted area may be useful in quantifying the effects on groundwater dependent ecosystems, assuming that infiltration rates are proportional to wetted area.
3. CDFW recommends using a 2-D hydraulic model of proposed versus existing habitat to determine whether habitat changes are expected and, if so, to what degree.
4. A map of potential changes to channel hydraulics overlain on a map of plant communities and habitat for sensitive wildlife species and birds.
5. A discussion of Project-related impacts on biological resources in relation to changes in hydrology throughout the reach.

Mr. Evan Lashly  
United Water Conservation District  
September 24, 2021  
Page 5 of 11

6. CDFW recommends using Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) and Normalized Difference Moisture Index (NDMI) to assess habitat health for the reach on an annual basis.

## **Comment #2: Impacts to Least Bell's Vireo**

**Issue:** The District is proposing to perform Project activities that would occur in the SCR, outside of the nesting bird season. CDFW agrees with this approach. However, Project activities, such as vegetation crushing/clearing, may result in the destruction of least Bell's vireo nests. A search of the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) indicates Least Bell's vireo are known to occur within the immediate vicinity of the proposed Project (CDFWb). In addition, recent studies performed by Griffith Wildlife Biology indicate several least Bell's vireo nests have been observed within the immediate vicinity of the proposed Project (Griffith Wildlife Biology 2019). Impacts to least Bell's vireo nests is an issue because they are known to have high levels of site fidelity (Salata 1983b).

**Specific impact:** Project construction and related activities may result in the destruction of nesting habitat, which may result in temporal or permanent loss of bird nesting habitat.

**Why impacts would occur:** The Project as proposed would clear/trim vegetation that could provide bird nesting habitat (e.g., ground cover and shrubs). The temporal or permanent loss of vegetation may substantially impact birds that could return to the Project site year after year (Figueira et al. 2020; Haas 1998). Site fidelity exhibited across the avian taxa reflects the benefits associated with previous knowledge of a particular location, likely improving territory acquisition, foraging efficiency, potential breeding partners, and predator avoidance (Figueira et al. 2020). Least Bell's vireo exhibit especially high rates of site fidelity, with many birds not only returning to the same territory but placing nests in the same shrub used the previous year (Salata 1983b).

**Evidence impacts would be significant:** Nests of all birds and raptors are protected under State laws and regulations, including Fish and Game Code, sections 3503 and 3503.5. Take or possession of migratory nongame birds designated in the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 50, § 10.13) is prohibited under Fish and Game Code section 3513. The loss of occupied habitat or reductions in the number of sensitive and special status bird species, either directly or indirectly through nest abandonment or reproductive suppression, would constitute a significant impact absent appropriate mitigation.

## **Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s):**

**Mitigation Measure #1:** CDFW recommends that a qualified avian biologist familiar with least Bell's vireo nests conduct a thorough assessment of all suitable nesting areas and known nesting sites that could be impacted by Project activities (including site access/egress). Surveys should be conducted in the immediate work/disturbance area plus a 25-foot buffer. Positive detections of known nests should be recorded with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in the field.

**Mitigation Measure #2:** If least Bell's vireo nests are identified in the project area, a qualified biologist should mark the location and determine an appropriate buffer for protecting nest habitat from impacts related to construction activities including site access/egress. Temporary

Mr. Evan Lashly  
United Water Conservation District  
September 24, 2021  
Page 6 of 11

fencing and signage delineating nesting habitat should be maintained for the duration of the Project as determined by the qualified biologist. A qualified biologist should advise workers of the sensitivity of the buffered areas. Workers should be advised not to work, trespass, or engage in activities inside the buffer.

Additional mitigation, separate from impacts to vegetation communities, would be necessary to compensate for the temporal or permanent loss of occupied nesting habitat within the Project site. CDFW recommends the qualified biologist/District consult with CDFW to determine proper mitigation for impacts to occupied habitat. Mitigation would be based on acreage of impact and vegetation composition. Depending on the status of the bird species impacted, replacement of habitat acres should increase with the occurrence of an SSC. Replacement acres would further increase with the occurrence of a CESA-listed species.

**Recommendation #1:** Take under the ESA is more broadly defined than CESA; take under ESA also includes significant habitat modification or degradation that could result in death or injury to a listed species by interfering with essential behavioral patterns such as breeding, foraging, or nesting.

### **Additional Recommendations**

**Mitigation and Monitoring Reporting Plan:** Per Public Resources Code section 21081.6(a)(1), CDFW has provided the District with a summary of our suggested mitigation measures and recommendations in the form of an attached Draft Mitigation and Monitoring Reporting Plan (MMRP; Attachment A). A final MMRP shall reflect results following additional plant and wildlife surveys and the Project's final on and/or off-site mitigation plans.

### **Filing Fees**

The Project, as proposed, would have an impact on fish and/or wildlife, and assessment of filing fees is necessary. Fees are payable upon filing of the Notice of Determination by the District and serve to help defray the cost of environmental review by CDFW. Payment of the fee is required for the underlying Project approval to be operative, vested, and final (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, § 753.5; Fish & G. Code, § 711.4; Pub. Resources Code, § 21089).

### **Conclusion**

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Project to assist the District in adequately analyzing and minimizing/mitigating impacts to biological resources. CDFW requests an opportunity to review and comment on any response that the District has to our comments and to receive notification of any forthcoming hearing date(s) for the Project [CEQA Guidelines, § 15073(e)]. If you have any questions or comments regarding this letter, please contact Baron Barrera, Environmental Scientist, at [Baron.Barrera@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:Baron.Barrera@wildlife.ca.gov).

Mr. Evan Lashly  
United Water Conservation District  
September 24, 2021  
Page 7 of 11

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

*Erinn Wilson-Olgin*

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Erinn Wilson-Olgin  
Environmental Program Manager I  
South Coast Region

cc: CDFW

Steve Gibson, Los Alamitos – [Steve.Gibson@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:Steve.Gibson@wildlife.ca.gov)

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Frances Alet, The Calabasas Coalition – [fmalet@sbcglobal.net](mailto:fmalet@sbcglobal.net)

## References:

[CDFWa] California Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2020. Scientific Collecting Permit.

Available from: <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Licensing/Scientific-Collecting#53949678>

[CDFWb] California Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2020. Submitting Data to the CNDDDB.

Available from: <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDDB/Submitting-Data>

[CNPS] California Native Plant Society. 2020. Rare Plant ranks. Available from:

<https://www.cnps.org/rare-plants/cnps-rare-plant-ranks>

Figueria, L., Martins, P., Ralph, C.J., Stephens, J.L., Alexander, J.D., and Wolfe, J.D. Effects of breeding and molt activity on songbird site fidelity. *The Auk* 137:1-15.

Godefroid, S., et al. 2011. How successful are plant species reintroductions? *Biological Conservation* 144: 672-682.

Griffith Wildlife Biology, The Status of the Least Bell's Vireo and Four Other Riparian Species at United Water Conservation District, Saticoy, and Piru, California in 2019. 2019.

Sawyer, J.O., Keeler Wolf, T., and Evens J.M. 2009. *A manual of California Vegetation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. ISBN 978 0 943460 49 9.



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**GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor**  
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### Attachment A: Draft Mitigation and Monitoring Reporting Plan

CDFW recommends the following language to be incorporated into a future environmental document for the Project. A final MMRP shall reflect results following additional plant and wildlife surveys and the Project's final on and/or off-site mitigation plans.

Biological Resources (BIO)			
Mitigation Measure (MM) or Recommendation (REC)		Timing	Responsible Party
<b>Mitigation Measure #1 - Impacts to Rare Plants – Consolidate Plant Studies</b>	<p>The Project applicant (or “entity”) must provide written notification to CDFW pursuant to section 1600 <i>et seq.</i> of the FGC. Based on this notification and other information, CDFW shall determine whether a Lake and Streambed Alteration (LSA) Agreement is required prior to conducting the proposed activities. A notification package for a LSA may be obtained by accessing CDFW’s web site at <a href="https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/conservation/lisa">https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/conservation/lisa</a>.</p> <p>CDFW’s issuance of an LSA Agreement for a Project that is subject to CEQA will require CEQA compliance actions by CDFW as a Responsible Agency. As a Responsible Agency, CDFW may consider the CEQA document of the Lead Agency for the Project. To minimize additional requirements by CDFW pursuant to section 1600 <i>et seq.</i> and/or under CEQA, the CEQA document should fully identify the potential impacts to streams or riparian resources and provide adequate avoidance, mitigation, monitoring, and reporting commitments for issuance of the LSA Agreement.</p>	Prior to Project construction and activities	District/Applicant
<b>Mitigation Measure #2 - Impacts to Aquatic and</b>	<p>Any LSA Agreement issued for the Project by CDFW may include additional measures protective of streambeds on and downstream of the Project such as additional erosion and pollution control measures. To compensate for any on-site and off-site impacts to</p>	Prior to Project construction and activities	District/Applicant



Mr. Evan Lashly  
 United Water Conservation District  
 September 24, 2021  
 Page 9 of 11

<b>Riparian Resources – Lake and Streambed Alteration Agreement</b>	riparian resources, additional mitigation conditioned in any LSA Agreement may include the following: avoidance of resources, on-site or off-site creation, enhancement, or restoration, and/or protection and management of mitigation lands in perpetuity.		
<b>Mitigation Measure #3 - Impacts to Aquatic and Riparian Resources – Replacement Habitat</b>	CDFW recommends fully avoiding impacts to waters and riparian/wetland vegetation communities when accessing/egressing the boring and test pit sites. If feasible, CDFW recommends redesigning the Project to avoid impacts to the existing drainage features that support sensitive vegetation communities. Design alternatives should attempt to retain as much surface flow and natural hydrologic processes as possible.	Prior to Project construction and activities	District/Applicant
<b>Mitigation Measure #4 - Impacts to Aquatic and Riparian Resources – Interdisciplinary Approach</b>	If impacts to riparian habitat, such as arroyo willow thicket, mulefat thicket, and cattail marshes cannot be avoided, CDFW suggests mitigation should be achieved entirely on site if possible. CDFW recommends that impacts be mitigated at no less than 3:1. CDFW recommends that an on-site Habitat Mitigation and Monitoring Plan (HMMP) be developed. An HMMP should provide specific, detailed, and enforceable measures.	Prior to Project construction and activities	District/Applicant
<b>Mitigation Measure #5 - Impacts to Aquatic and Riparian Resources – Replacement Habitat</b>	As part of the LSAA Notification process, CDFW requests a map showing features potentially subject to CDFW’s broad regulatory authority over streams. CDFW also requests a hydrological evaluation of the 200, 100, 50, 25, 10, 5, and 2-year frequency storm event for existing and proposed conditions.	Prior to Project construction and activities	District/Applicant

Mr. Evan Lashly  
 United Water Conservation District  
 September 24, 2021  
 Page 10 of 11

<b>Mitigation Measure #6 - Impacts to Least Bell's Vireo</b>	CDFW recommends that a qualified avian biologist familiar with least Bell's vireo nests conduct a thorough assessment of all suitable nesting areas that could be impacted by Project activities (including site access/egress). Surveys should be conducted in the immediate work/disturbance area plus a 25-foot buffer. Positive detections should be reported to CDFW prior to any Project-related ground disturbing activities or vegetation removal.	Prior to Project construction and activities	District/Applicant
<b>Mitigation Measure #7- Impacts to Least Bell's Vireo</b>	<p>If least Bell's vireo nests are identified, a qualified biologist should determine an appropriate buffer for construction activities including site access/egress. Temporary fencing and signage should be maintained for the duration of the Project as determined by the qualified biologist. A qualified biologist should advise workers of the sensitivity of the buffered areas. Workers should be advised not to work, trespass, or engage in activities inside the buffer.</p> <p>Additional mitigation, separate from impacts to vegetation communities, would be necessary to compensate for the temporal or permanent loss of occupied nesting habitat within the Project site. CDFW recommends the qualified biologist/District consult with CDFW to determine proper mitigation for impacts to occupied habitat. Mitigation would be based on acreage of impact and vegetation composition. Depending on the status of the bird species impacted, replacement of habitat acres should increase with the occurrence of an SSC. Replacement acres would further increase with the occurrence of a CESA-listed species.</p>	Prior to Project construction and activities	District/Applicant
<b>Mitigation Measure #8 - Impacts to Least Bell's Vireo</b>	Take under the ESA is more broadly defined than CESA; take under ESA also includes significant habitat modification or degradation that could result in death or injury to a listed species by interfering with essential behavioral patterns such as breeding, foraging, or nesting.	Prior to Project construction and activities	District/Applicant
<b>Recommendation #1 – Impacts to Hydrology and</b>	CDFW recommends the District provide an in-stream flows analysis and an evaluation of potential impacts on biological resources as part of the final environmental document. At a minimum, the analysis should provide the following:		

Mr. Evan Lashly  
United Water Conservation District  
September 24, 2021  
Page 11 of 11

<b>Groundwater Resources</b>	<p><i>Changes to Hydrology and Hydraulics</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. CDFW recommends the District define the extent of up- and downstream reach of the SCR that may be directly and indirectly affected by the proposed Project and assess potential Project-related impacts on biological resources within this study reach (including any potential groundwater dependent ecosystems).</li><li>2. An analysis of potential Project-related changes to river hydraulics in both concrete and soft-bottom reaches. This includes water depth (percent change), wetted perimeter (acres gained/lost), and velocity (percent change). Comparing total wetted area may be useful in quantifying the effects on groundwater dependent ecosystems, assuming that infiltration rates are proportional to wetted area.</li><li>3. CDFW recommends using a 2-D hydraulic model of proposed versus existing habitat to determine whether habitat changes are expected and, if so, to what degree.</li><li>4. A map of potential changes to channel hydraulics overlain on a map of plant communities and habitat for sensitive wildlife species and birds.</li><li>5. A discussion of Project-related impacts on biological resources in relation to changes in hydrology throughout the reach.</li><li>6. CDFW recommends using Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) and Normalized Difference Moisture Index (NDMI) to assess habitat health for the reach on an annual basis.</li></ol>		
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