

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

Date: November 15, 2023

To: Residents, Agencies, Organizations, and Interested Parties

Subject: Reissued Notice of Preparation of a Subsequent Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) for the Proposed Modified Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project (MDERP)

State Clearinghouse Number (SCH#): 2002011094

On September 14, 2020, the Ventura County Public Works Agency – Watershed Protection (VCPWA – WP) issued a Notice of Preparation (NOP) to notify agencies and interested parties that the VCPWA – WP, as the Lead Agency, was beginning preparation of a Subsequent Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the proposed Modified Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project (hereafter referred to as “MDERP” or “the Project”) as a result of new information of substantial importance and substantial changes in the Project under State CEQA Guidelines Section 15162 .

This Reissued NOP is being provided because new technical information pertaining to sedimentation and flooding that would be associated with the Matilija Dam Removal component of MDERP was obtained after September 14, 2020. This new information: 1) resulted in a delay in the preparation of the SEIR; 2) necessitated revisions to the MDERP components being considered as the proposed Project for the purposes of this SEIR (which will primarily focus on the Matilija Dam removal component); and 3) resulted in a modification to the specific environmental issues intended to be evaluated in the SEIR to address new environmental issue considerations currently mandated by CEQA. Due to these factors and the desire of VCPWA – WP to solicit additional input from parties (including from persons new to the geographical areas of concern) that may have an interest in the Project and scope of the SEIR, it was determined that this reissued NOP is warranted.

VCPWA – WP is soliciting input from reviewing agencies (including but not limited to State of California Responsible and Trustee Agencies and federal agencies with approval authority over the Project) 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 the VCPWA – WP Board of Supervisors, when considering approval of the proposed Project and by other 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 **November 20, 2023**, and ends **December 20, 2023**. 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: Donna Hebert
800 South Victoria Avenue, #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 Donna Hebert at (805) 477-1976.

Scoping Meeting: A public scoping meeting will be held on Thursday, December 7, 2023, from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM at the County of Ventura Hall of Administration, Lower Plaza Meeting Room, located at 800 South Victoria Avenue, Ventura, CA 93009. The Scoping Meeting is being held to provide an overview of the proposed project and provide an opportunity for the public to ask questions and submit comments relating to the scope of the SEIR. Comments and questions may also be emailed to MDERP@ventura.org. Scoping comments will be addressed in the SEIR.

Scoping materials are provided on the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project webpage on the VCPWA website (<https://www.vcpwpublicworks.org/wp/mderp/>)

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 VCPWA – WP and the United States 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 project alternatives combining dam removal, sediment relocation, flood protection (levees), two bridge replacements, new recreation features, giant reed removal, and water supply improvements. Also in 2004, Alternative 4b was approved by Board of Supervisors of the Ventura County Flood Control District as the approved project. 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 (SEIR) is warranted to provide a complete and objective analysis of the revised Project components. (This SEIR will focus on the Matilija Dam removal component of MDERP, as well as other Project components as necessary.) 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.

The Matilija Dam removal direct impact area would include the Matilija Creek and Ventura River including the 100-year floodplain and adjacent area. See Figure 1.

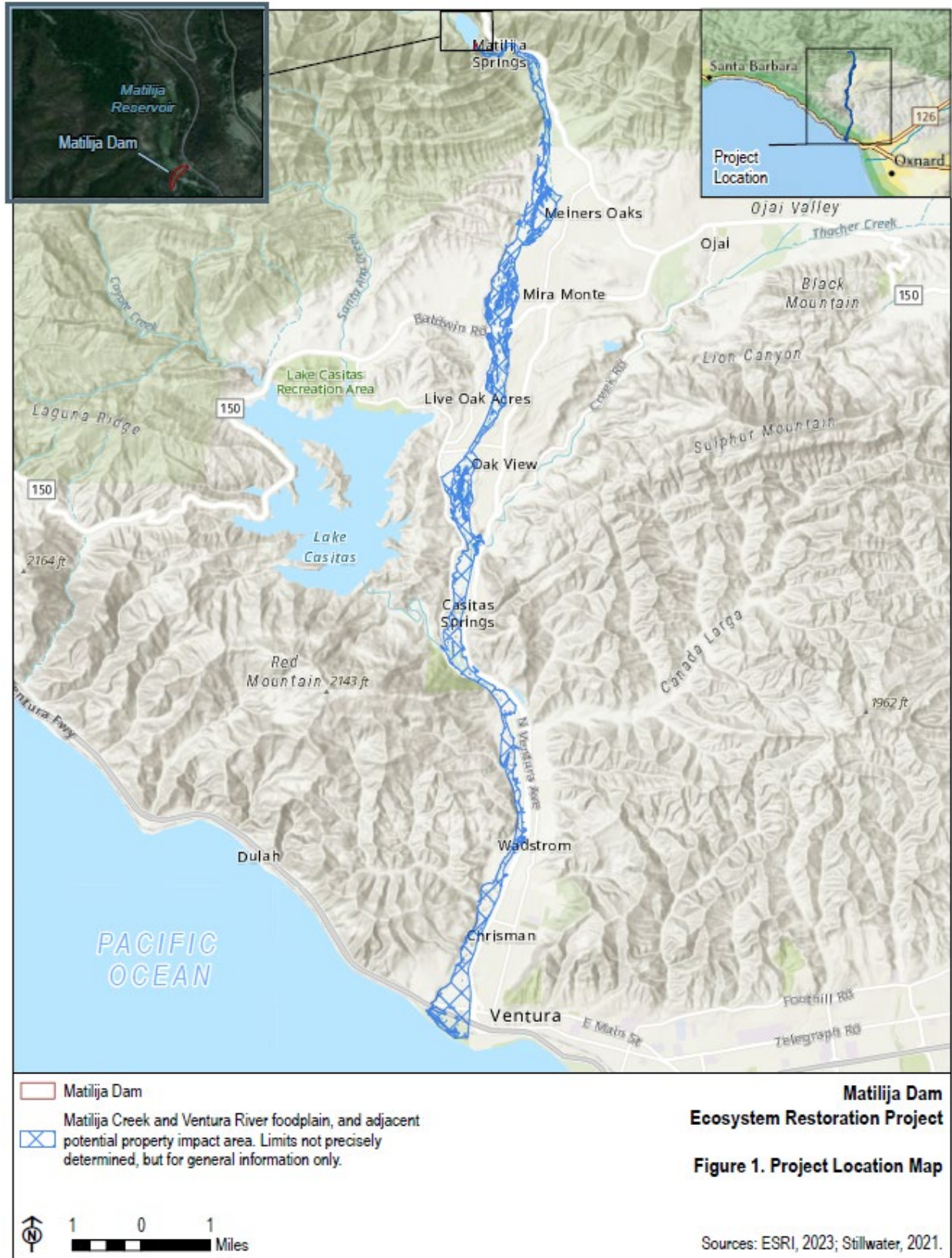
Proposed Modified Project Description

This section briefly describes the Matilija Dam removal component of MDERP which will be the primary subject of analysis in the SEIR. MDERP includes the removal of Matilija Dam as well as downstream elements that need to be constructed prior to dam removal: Camino Cielo Bridge Replacement, improvements to the Live Oak Acres and Casitas Springs Levees, Meiner Oaks flood control improvements and modifications to the Robles Diversion. Other elements of MDERP have been completed or ongoing and include Matilija Hot Springs property acquisition (2008), Foster Park wells construction in 2009 (but not in operation), construction of the Old Baldwin Road trailhead (2011); replacement of the Santa Ana Bridge (2022) and habitat restoration (over 270 acres of invasive plants removed and ongoing). The aforementioned future MDERP elements will require additional compliance with CEQA and will be considered cumulatively in this SEIR as will past and ongoing projects.

The proposed removal of Matilija Dam would ultimately 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. As a modification to the 2004 approved Project (Alternative 4b), the dam removal would be accomplished by creating two 12-foot diameter orifices drilled near the dam base which would be opened via controlled blasting in advance of a large storm event. The ideal storm event would provide a minimum flow rate of approximately 1,700 cubic feet per second through the dam for a period of at least 24 hours. Storm flows would then be expected to transport primarily fine-grained reservoir deposits from behind the dam downstream in what is referred to as Phase I sediment transport. Phase I sediment transport is anticipated to last from a few hours to several days. A new creek channel would form through the old lakebed but not all sediment trapped behind the dam would mobilize downstream during Phase I sediment transport. Full removal of the dam structure is anticipated to occur during the subsequent dry season.

The dam would be removed starting from the dam crest and working down in multiple stages. The dam would be lowered incrementally across the full width of the structure by using controlled blasting, jacking, saw cutting, or other methods. To maintain a dry work area, stream flow would be intercepted upstream of the work area and directed into piping that extends through one of the orifices to downstream of the work area. This water diversion would likely be moved and adjusted as needed to accommodate dam





removal work. After removal from the dam, the concrete debris may be broken into smaller pieces using crushers or jack hammering equipment in situ or at staging sites. Debris would be hauled from the dam to the disposal area by truck.

After dam removal the continued transport of fine sediment and the somewhat slower transport of coarser sediment deposits (sand, gravel, cobbles and boulders) that have accumulated in the reservoir would continue to occur. This is referred to as Phase II sediment transport. Channelization of Matilija Creek through the reservoir site and dam area would continue to form naturally via ongoing flow events that would transport sediment along the Ventura River to the estuary and Pacific Ocean.

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 Project and related changes to the 2004 certified EIS/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 process including direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts, as well as growth-inducing effects [CEQA Guidelines Section 15126]. The SEIR will analyze all environmental issues required by CEQA (CEQA Guidelines Section 15063[a]) and will identify mitigation measures as may be necessary to reduce potentially significant impacts of the proposed Project. 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 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 would have significant effects 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 and that an Initial Study is not required as there is substantial evidence that the proposed 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 certain potential impacts from Project implementation as listed below. All CEQA Appendix G environmental checklist items will be addressed in the SEIR including those not specifically identified below. The SEIR will include an evaluation of impacts relative to the assessment presented in the 2004 EIS/EIR.

- **Water Resources** – Construction and Phase I and II sediment release would create temporary impacts to water quality. Water supplies including surface water and groundwater supplies would also be impacted.
- **Flooding** – Sedimentation caused by the Project would result in increased water surface elevations within the Matilija Creek and Ventura River floodplain. Additionally, the 100-year floodplain would expand in some areas downstream of the dam. Increased water surface elevations and the expanded floodplain would impact property and development within the area of impact.
- **Land Use and Agricultural Resources** – Substantial amounts of downstream sediment deposition are expected to result from the Project. Downstream land uses would be directly impacted to varying degrees with the most substantial impacts occurring closer to the dam site and gradually decreasing



downstream. Such effects may also include impacts to areas of Important Farmland (i.e., Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Local Importance) located downstream of Matilija Dam.

- **Biological Resources** – The SEIR will address the following biological resource impacts. The Project would result in significant impacts to sensitive habitats and species (e.g., steelhead, California red-legged frog, and western pond turtles) particularly in the aftermath of the Phase I sediment transport. During this period existing species that are present within the creek and river downstream of the dam would be extirpated. It is anticipated that over the long-term species recolonization would occur as individuals from unaffected tributaries recruit to the impacted areas.

Other biological impacts would be associated with construction activities such as direct impacts to flora and fauna from the use of heavy equipment and indirect impacts associated with the potential introduction of invasive species. Temporary disturbance of breeding and nesting birds would also have the potential to occur.

The project would benefit southern steelhead and other species over the long-term through habitat improvements and removal of the barrier to upstream spawning grounds.

- **Air Quality/Greenhouse Gases** – Proposed dam removal 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. (Greenhouse gases were not an issue addressed in the 2004 EIS/EIR.)
- **Cultural Resources** – Construction activities associated with Matilija Dam removal could materially alter unknown buried historic resources or human remains. The SEIR will also evaluate whether Matilija Dam would qualify as an historic structure.
- **Tribal Cultural Resources** – Construction activities and sediment release associated with Matilija Dam removal could materially alter unknown Tribal Cultural Resources. This SEIR section will be informed by consultation with tribal representatives. This issue will be evaluated in the SEIR; it was not an issue addressed in the 2004 EIS/EIR.
- **Geology/Soils** – The Project would temporarily introduce workers and others within the construction area to existing seismic and geologic hazards. Construction activities could result in erosion at the Project site.
- **Hazards** – The SEIR will evaluate the risk of hazards to people and the environment that would be associated with the use, transport and disposal of hazardous materials and generation of hazardous waste associated with Project construction and with possible preexisting hazardous material sites. The potential short-term effect of the Project on emergency services will also be evaluated.
- **Noise/Vibration** – The Project would generate temporary noise and vibration from the operation of construction equipment and controlled blasting during dam removal.
- **Paleontological Resources** – Ground-disturbing activities associated with Project construction are not expected to damage or destroy paleontological resources based on preliminary analysis.
- **Recreation** – The temporary recreational trail closures within the Ventura River floodplain that are typically required during and after significant storms would be exacerbated by Project-related sediment transport and increased water surface elevations. Dam removal would open portions of Matilija Creek to long-term recreational use which is considered a beneficial impact, although the nature of new recreational opportunities has not been designed.



- **Scenic Resources** – Construction activities (e.g., equipment, materials, staging areas, demolition) would create temporary impacts to the scenic character of the Project area. Increased sediment deposition would also affect scenic views. Over the long-term the natural pre-dam condition would be restored which is considered beneficial.
- **Transportation** – Project construction activities would temporarily contribute to traffic congestion along State Route 33 and Highway 150, which could impact roadway safety and general performance of the circulation system. The short-term effect of the Project on vehicle miles traveled (VMT) will be addressed. (VMT was not an issue addressed in the 2004 EIS/EIR.)
- **Wildfire** – The Project would introduce people and equipment into a high fire hazard area during construction. Impacts relating to wildfire hazard will be assessed. (Wildfire was not an issue addressed in the 2004 EIS/EIR.)
- **Forest Resources** – The Matilija Dam adjacent to Los Padres National Forest land and other downstream property that would be impacted by the Project may meet the criteria as forest land. This issue will be evaluated in the SEIR. (Forest Resources was not an issue addressed in the 2004 EIS/EIR.)

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 that will be presented and evaluated in the SEIR. Modified dam removal alternatives that will be considered in detail include: Containment Berm with High Flow Bypass; Uncontrolled Orifices/ Optional Gates; and Temporary Upstream Storage of Fine Sediment. Other alternatives considered will also be discussed.

Project Scoping Process and Scoping Period

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.

