

1.0 Introduction and Purpose and Need for the Action

1.1 Introduction

The Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC), in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), and the County of Riverside (County), proposes to preserve right-of-way¹ for two transportation corridors² within western Riverside County (Figure 1.1). The corridors are the Hemet to Corona/Lake Elsinore Corridor (east to west) and the Winchester to Temecula Corridor (north to south), also known as the intracounty corridors.

The proposed transportation corridors are part of the Community and Environmental Transportation Acceptability Process (CETAP) undertaken by the County of Riverside and the RCTC. The CETAP is also investigating two potential corridors from Riverside County to Orange and San Bernardino counties. The CETAP planning effort is multi-modal in nature, considering both highway and transit options.

CETAP is one component of the Riverside County Integrated Project (RCIP), which also includes a new Riverside County General Plan and a Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP) for western Riverside County. The purpose of the RCIP is to integrate the processes of planning land uses, transportation improvements and habitat preservation for endangered species. A primary objective of the RCIP is to accommodate projected population growth within Riverside County by focusing development within areas that will be readily accessible, will provide a good quality of life for future residents, and will minimize environmental impacts, including impacts to sensitive habitats, endangered species, and aquatic resources. One of the goals of the RCIP process is to preserve the rights-of-way needed for the transportation corridors while minimizing potential impacts on the human and natural environment.

Both intracounty corridors propose connections to the Interstate system. As a result, FHWA is required to analyze potential environmental impacts pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The RCTC and the County are required to prepare an environmental analysis pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). As a result, a joint Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR) has been prepared for each of the intracounty corridors. This EIS/EIR is for the Hemet to Corona/Lake Elsinore Corridor (HCLE Corridor), serving the east-west travel demand in the area connecting the Hemet/San Jacinto area with areas along I-15 between Corona and Lake Elsinore (Figure 1.1).

¹ “Right-of-way” is the required area for the future transportation facility. The exact ROW width will be determined at the Tier 2 level of planning and engineering and evaluated in the Tier 2 EIS/EIR.

² A “corridor” is a general geographic area linking origins and destinations between which people travel and goods are transported. The Hemet to Corona/Lake Elsinore Corridor is an example of a corridor.

Figure 1.1 - Study Area and Vicinity

1.2 Tier 1 EIS/EIR

Multiple corridor route location alternatives are evaluated in this EIS/EIR to determine the potential environmental effects of selecting right-of-way for a future transportation corridor in these possible locations. The selection of the preferred alternative in the HCLE Corridor will be based on the application of evaluation criteria provided in Appendix D of this EIS/EIR. These criteria have been developed in cooperation between transportation and resource agencies through the National Environmental Policy Act/federal Clean Water Act Section 404 (NEPA/404) integration process.

The decision making process will take into account public comments and coordination with government agencies. This Tier 1 EIS/EIR provides environmental documentation for the selection of the route location within the HCLE Corridor. After selection of the route location, RCTC, the County, and affected cities will be able to preserve right-of-way for the future transportation corridor in the study area. The Tier 2 environmental analysis will examine the environmental impacts of a range of alignment,¹ mode, and facility type² alternatives for the selected route. The Tier 2 engineering and environmental studies will analyze these alternatives at a greater level of detail and will identify specific mitigation measures. The Tier 2 level project may be subject to multiple NEPA and CEQA documents if the selected alternative is implemented in phases.

1.3 RCIP Planning Context

In 2020, Riverside County will be home to approximately 2.8 million people, who will occupy approximately 918,000 dwelling units (Riverside County Draft General Plan). This represents a doubling of the present population and housing stock of Riverside County. Riverside County encompasses 7,295 square miles, stretching across 200 miles from the eastern portion of the Los Angeles metropolitan area to the Colorado River. Riverside County is the fourth largest county in California and is bound by Orange County on the west, San Bernardino County to the north, the State of Arizona to the east, and San Diego and Imperial Counties to the south. Riverside County is also one of the most diverse counties in the State of California, and includes well-established urban, suburban, and rural communities; an extensive array of agricultural lands, lands devoted to mineral extraction, and recreational areas; rugged mountains, flat valley areas, and open desert; and expansive natural open space areas.

The challenge of balancing the housing, transportation, and economic needs of existing and future populations with limited natural resources and the sensitivity of the natural environment required Riverside County to develop the Riverside County Integrated Project (RCIP), which consists of three coordinated plans to determine future planning, transportation, and conservation needs for Riverside County. The three components of the plan include the following:

¹ “Alignment” refers to the physical line followed by an alternative. The engineering of the preferred alignment will occur in the Tier 2 level planning and environmental review, and will be used to determine the right-of-way width.

² “Facility type” refers to the definition of the future facility as a freeway, major arterial, transitway, etc.