

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.

1. The New General Plan for Riverside County

The new General Plan and anticipated future growth over the long term are the subjects of the General Plan Program EIR (County of Riverside Transportation and Land Management Agency, 2002). The General Plan is meant to express the community's goals with respect to the man-made and natural environments, and to set forth the policies and implementation measures needed to achieve those goals for the welfare of those who live, work, and do business in Riverside County.

2. Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan

A Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP) is being created for the western portion of Riverside County. An ongoing Coachella Valley Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan effort is also under way as part of the comprehensive planning for Riverside County. The western Riverside County MSHCP will address the potential impacts of urban growth, natural habitat loss, and plant and animal species endangerment. It will provide habitat conservation, species protection and management, and program costs. It will provide certainty to the County, cities, landowners, and developers so that planned growth can proceed in an orderly manner while protecting listed and declining species and habitats. A separate EIR and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) are being prepared by the County of Riverside Transportation and Land Management Agency and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service for the western Riverside County MSHCP.

3. Community Environmental and Transportation Acceptability Program

The Community Environmental and Transportation Acceptability Process (CETAP) has identified two new intracounty transportation corridors (one north-south and one east-west) to meet the future transportation needs of western Riverside County. The CETAP transportation program contemplates a multimodal transportation facility within each corridor study area. The MSHCP is expected to address the cumulative and growth facilitating effects of the CETAP corridors on endangered species, and to facilitate requisite environmental clearances for such corridors.

The route location decisions for the CETAP corridors will both support and guide land use planning in western Riverside County. Due to the fast pace of development in Riverside County, opportunities are being lost to preserve land for regional transportation facilities. The timely preservation of right-of-way will help ensure that needed transportation infrastructure will be in place in the future to support the economy of Riverside County and provide access to jobs, schools, shopping, and other daily activities. The decision of where to locate the transportation corridors also informs government agencies, landowners, and residents so that timely land use policy decisions can be made and appropriate development standards can be implemented.

1.4 Growth Projections

The HCLE Corridor is located in an area with a population base of nearly 300,000 (source: Western Riverside Council of Governments and SCAG). Most of the corridor is located within unincorporated Riverside County. The remainder falls within the