

3.11 Biological Resources

This section summarizes key information regarding the biological setting of the HCLE Corridor. For more detailed information, please refer to the Hemet to Corona/Lake Elsinore Corridor Biological Resources Technical Report (LSA, 2002).

3.11.1 Existing Physical Characteristics and Land Uses

The HCLE alternatives traverse the highlands of El Sobrante de San Jacinto, then descend into San Jacinto Valley and Domenigoni Valley. The HCLE corridor alternatives cross several other valley areas; specifically, Eagle, Temescal, Mead, Warm Springs, Perris, San Jacinto, Domenigoni, and Menifee. Other narrow canyons include Walker, Cajalco, Arroyo del Toro, Mockingbird, Cottonwood, and Railroad Canyon. Within the corridor area, the foothills are as high as 760 m (2,500 ft) in elevation. Foothills include areas surrounding Arlington Mountain, Gavilan Peak, Steele Peak, Lakeview Mountains, and Bernasconi Hills.

Due to the minimal to moderate slopes and abundance of alluvial soils in the region, the majority of the flat land in the valleys is under active grain or hay production. The largest area of field cropland is located in the eastern half of the HCLE corridor, in the San Jacinto, Perris, Menifee, and Domenigoni Valleys. The majority of urbanized areas is in cities of Riverside, Corona, Lake Elsinore, San Jacinto, Woodcrest, Perris, Hemet, and in the communities of El Cerrito, Val Verde, Mead Valley, and Canyon Lake. Citrus groves are in El Cerrito, Eagle Valley, and Woodcrest. The citrus groves adjacent to La Sierra Avenue were cleared for development in September and October 2001 (refer to Habitat Fragmentation Figures 1 through 4 in Appendix E that show developed and undeveloped lands within the corridor study area). Maps of the habitat types, land uses, and potential waters of the U.S. in the HCLE corridor alternative areas are provided on Figures 1-20 in Appendix E of this EIS/EIR.

3.11.2 Potential Waters of the U.S. and Associated Habitats

A variety of factors determines whether areas are, or are not, wetlands protected under Section 404 of the federal Clean Water Act. An assessment of the factors requires detailed field surveys as well as the application of regulatory considerations (i.e., interstate commerce nexus). The application or interpretation of the parameters may change over time as new information becomes available or as regulatory interpretations are tested in court or in other arenas. Since a detailed assessment of such parameters is beyond the scope of the Tier 1 review, the EIS addresses all *potential* waters of the U.S. (including all *potential* wetlands). It is likely that a more thorough analysis in accordance with standard jurisdictional delineation methods will reveal that certain waterways do not meet the applicable definitions of waters of the U.S.

3.11.2.1 Alkali Playas

Alkali playas (RCIP vegetation code 460 as shown on maps in Appendix E), which also include alkaline grasslands and alkaline scrub habitat, are found in low-lying sites, such as valley floors and river floodplains, that contain saline and/or alkali soils. The sites are either poorly drained, irregularly flooded, or are in areas where the water table