3.0 Affected Environment

Introduction

Riverside County (County) spans most of Southern California, extending from the Colorado River in the east to Los Angeles County in the west, in the midst of one of the fastest growing regions in the western United States. The County is roughly rectangular in shape, stretching more than 289.62 km (180 mi) wide along its east-west axis, and about 64.36 km (40 mi) wide along its north-south axis, making it the fourth largest county in California. The eastern portion of the County is primarily desert and stark, dry mountain ranges; the western half consists of a large, northwest-southeast trending valley some 25 miles wide between the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa Mountains on the east and the Santa Ana Mountains on the west. Other than the wide, broad Colorado River, flowing south from Lake Mead in Nevada to the Gulf of California along its eastern border, rivers in the County are generally small and seasonally intermittent in flow.

Western Riverside County encompasses the area west of the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa Mountains, and comprises only about 30 percent of the total area of the county, while supporting the vast majority of the population. The climate in the western County is generally dry with mild winters and hot, dry summers, with seasonal winter storms and summer thundershowers. The area historically supported small groups of Native American tribes; missions founded by Spanish missionaries spread in the 18th and 19th centuries, bringing cultivation of grain and the raising of cattle. Following the Mexican revolt against Spanish rule, vast tracts of land were deeded to California citizens; these lands became the *ranchos* that defined the character of the southern California economy and culture for many decades.

The area became a California county in 1893 with the merger of lands from the existing San Bernardino and San Diego counties; the new County was named for the City of Riverside, which had grown up as a mission town and agricultural service center along the Santa Ana River, the largest river in the western County area. The primary economic component of the County continued to be agriculture, with cultivation of grain, cattle grazing, and citrus production the focus of this industry. Population centers grew up around the scattered agricultural service centers. In the mid-20th Century, growth in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, and the availability of large areas of relatively inexpensive land in western Riverside County, resulted in increased population growth in the western County. Growth centers were primarily areas of established cities such as Riverside and Corona. In the last decades of the 20th Century, growth in Orange County, San Diego County, and Los Angeles County has fueled continued growth in western Riverside County, expanding to include the Temecula/Murrieta area, the Corona/Riverside area, and Moreno Valley. The mild climate has also attracted retirees, recreation seekers, and vineyard growers to these and other areas, including Lake Elsinore, Sun City/Perris, Hemet/San Jacinto, and Beaumont/Banning.

The western County area is linked internally by a transportation triangle including I-15, I-215, and SR-91/SR-60. Major arterial highways serving the area include the Cajalco Road/Ramona Expressway, SR-74, SR-79, and SR-71. Major topographic divisions of the western County are defined by the drainage basins of the Santa Ana/San Jacinto River systems in the northwest, and the Temecula Creek/Santa

Margarita River system in the southwest. Large areas have been given over for water storage to serve the Southern California region, including Lake Mathews, Lake Perris, Lake Skinner, Canyon Lake, and the newly completed Diamond Valley Lake.

The Winchester to Temecula (WT) Corridor addressed in this EIS/EIR includes the southwestern County bordered by the communities of Winchester and Menifee on the north, extending south through the cities of Murrieta and Temecula. The area is bordered on the west by I-15, and bisected in a north-south direction by I-215. The I-15, I-215, and SR-79 converge into the I-15 south to the Temecula/San Diego County line. Current areas of growth include Menifee, Murrieta, and Temecula, centered on the I-15/I-215/SR-79 corridor. Future growth is expected to include increased density in developed areas, and expansion of development to the east toward the Santa Rosa Mountains.

Chapter 3.0 describes the existing affected environment, or existing environmental setting, for the areas within and adjacent to the WT Corridor alternatives. The affected environment is the base environmental condition upon which potential environmental effects of all of the alternatives presented in the EIS/EIR are evaluated. The affected environment is described and illustrated for the topics of land use, farmland, socioeconomics and community impacts, environmental justice, public services and utilities, recreation, air quality, noise, geology, surface water hydrology, floodplain encroachment, and water quality, biological resources, cultural resources, hazardous wastes, visual resources, and transportation and circulation. Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1.0 illustrates the project study area and vicinity, and Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2.0 illustrates the WT Corridor alternative routes being evaluated in this EIS/EIR.