

3.11 Biological Resources

This section summarizes key information regarding the biological setting of the WT Corridor. For more detailed information, please refer to the Winchester to Temecula Corridor Biological Resources Technical Report (LSA, 2002).

3.11.1 Existing Physical Characteristics and Land Uses

The Winchester to Temecula Corridor (WT Corridor) crosses several valley areas, specifically Menifee, Warm Springs, Domenigoni, Paloma, Murrieta, French, Skunk Hollow Plain, Santa Gertrudis, Tualota, Long, Pauba, Wolf, and Temecula. The southernmost alternative of the corridor traverses the base of the Santa Ana Mountains west of Temecula.

Due to the minimal to moderate slopes and alluvial soils of the region, the majority of the flat land in the valleys is under active grain or hay production. The largest area of field croplands is located in the northern half of the WT Corridor in the Perris, Menifee, Domenigoni, Paloma, and French Valleys. The majority of urbanized areas is in the Menifee, Murrieta, and Temecula Valleys (see Habitat Fragmentation Figures 1 through 4 in Appendix E of this EIS/EIR). Urbanization is concentrated in the lowlands, and further conversion of the agricultural lands to residential and commercial areas is progressing rapidly in the region. The majority of the urbanized areas in the WT Corridor is within the Menifee, Murrieta, and Temecula Valleys. Maps of the habitat types, land uses, and potential waters of the U.S. maps are provided on Figures 1-8 in Appendix E of this EIS/EIR.

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

There are a variety of factors that determine 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 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 the maps in Appendix E), which also include alkali grasslands and alkali 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 in areas where the water table fluctuates near the ground surface. Plant species include various species of saltbush (*Atriplex* sp.), salt grass (*Distichlis spicata*), salt heliotrope (*Heliotropium curassavicum*), alkali mallow (*Malva leprosa*), and spikerush (*Eleocharis* sp.).