

1.2 Purpose and Need for the Proposed Project

As discussed previously, the inland valleys and hillsides of Riverside and San Bernardino Counties have until recently remained largely rural, agricultural, and relatively undeveloped. Riverside County's population totaled approximately 1.5 million in 2000. SCAG predicts that the majority of the growth in Southern California over the next 40 years will occur in San Bernardino and Riverside Counties. Riverside County's population is expected to double by 2020. SCAG forecasts show the County's population at approximately 3.5 million by 2030 and approximately 4.5 million by 2040 (SCAG, 2000).

Accommodating an increase in population of this magnitude in the County would involve the urbanization of thousands of acres of undeveloped land. Over the past 15 years, there has been increasing development pressure on northwest and southwest Riverside County. Natural habitats once common and extensive in Southern California are in rapid decline. The burden of mitigating for the historic pattern of urbanization in Southern California now falls largely on Riverside County and the property owners holding much of the last remaining intact habitats in the region. As development pressure has increased, so have conflicts between landowning interests and the State and federal regulatory agencies charged with habitat protection associated with endangered, threatened, or candidate species. The conflicts over species conservation threaten the ability of local jurisdictions to plan for and provide the infrastructure necessary to provide for a high quality of life and for economic development in Riverside County, and threaten to fracture critical habitats. A continuation of the current piecemeal process of endangered species protection would likely preclude the possibility of creating a sustainable Conservation Area that would protect endangered and threatened species and the habitats upon which they rely.

Prior to development, most of western Riverside County was covered by chaparral and coastal sage scrub, with coniferous and oak woodlands at higher elevations. Elevations within western Riverside County range from about 755 feet in the northwestern corner of the County to about 10,800 feet at San Jacinto Peak. Variation in topography, soil, and climate across this elevational range creates habitats for a wide variety of animals and plants, including many that are rare or endemic to Southern California.

Seven biogeographic regions were identified within the proposed MSHCP Plan Area. These seven bioregions are Santa Ana Mountains, Agua Tibia Mountains, Riverside Lowlands, San Jacinto Foothills, San Jacinto Mountains, Desert Transition, and San Bernardino Mountains.

Thirty-six species indigenous to western Riverside County have special status under the FESA and/or the CESA. These include species that are listed as "endangered" or "threatened" under the FESA or that have been "proposed" or are "strong candidates" for such listing.

The traditional project-by-project process for resolving conflicts between species preservation and development involves a costly expenditure of time and money.

Moreover, this piecemeal process results in uncoordinated preservation of scattered habitat areas set aside as mitigation for individual project impacts. These generally small, unconnected habitat areas do not necessarily guarantee the continued viability of species populations or ecosystem functions, which generally depend on large interconnected habitat areas designed and managed in a coordinated manner. The proposed MSHCP replaces the current piecemeal approach to project approval and mitigation with a coordinated, comprehensive approach based on the basic conventions of biological reserve design. This approach ensures that project mitigation is directed to those areas most critical to maintenance of ecosystem function and species viability. A goal of the proposed MSHCP is to target the highest quality habitats for preservation, while allowing development of less important habitat areas.

Each permittee within the proposed MSHCP Plan Area would be a signatory to the IA, which is a contractual obligation among the individual permittees, the CDFG, and the USFWS. Upon issuance of the Section 10(a) permit, the permittees would be granted “take authorization” for otherwise lawful actions, such as development, that may result in incidental take or harm individuals of a species or its habitat outside of reserve areas, in exchange for supporting assembly of a coordinated reserve system. Individual permittees would be required to ensure future development is consistent with the proposed MSHCP.

The Conservation Area strategy for the proposed MSHCP strikes a balanced approach that allocates responsibility for assembly and long-term management of the reserve to the State government, the federal government, the County of Riverside, the 14 cities in western Riverside County, other signatories to the IA, and the private and public entities engaged in construction activities that potentially affect the species covered under the proposed MSHCP. The plan acknowledges the obligation of local projects, both public and private, to mitigate for their impacts to species. The implementation strategy relies heavily on incentives to encourage private property owners to conserve their lands. Where incentives are not sufficient, conservation would require the purchase of properties from willing sellers. Management and monitoring activities are intrinsic parts of the Proposed Project and not of the alternatives.

1.2.1 Project Goals

The overall goal of the proposed MSHCP is based on the RCIP Vision Statement and supporting policy directives. The proposed MSHCP would enhance and maintain biological diversity and ecosystem processes while allowing future economic growth. Preserving a quality of life characterized by well-managed and well-planned growth integrated with an associated open-space system is a component of the RCIP vision. The proposed MSHCP would create an MSHCP Conservation Area in excess of 500,000 acres and focuses on conservation of 146 species. The proposed MSHCP Conservation Area includes approximately 347,000 acres on existing public/quasi-public lands and approximately 153,000 acres of additional Reserve Land. The overarching goals of the proposed MSHCP are:

- In the MSHCP Plan Area, conserve Covered Species and their habitats.