

# MONTEREY COUNTY

## WATER RESOURCES AGENCY

PO BOX 930  
SALINAS, CA 93902  
(831)755-4860  
FAX (831) 424-7935

CURTIS V. WEEKS  
GENERAL MANAGER



STREET ADDRESS  
893 BLANCO CIRCLE  
SALINAS, CA 93901-4455

### Notice of Preparation (NOP) of an Environmental Impact Report for the Salinas River Channel Maintenance Program

Date: April 20, 2011

To: State Clearinghouse, Responsible Trustees, and Interested Agencies; and other Interested Parties and Individuals

The Monterey County Water Resources Agency (MCWRA) as Lead Agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) will prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for continuation of the Salinas River Channel Maintenance Program (Program) through 2030. MCWRA seeks the views of your agency as to the scope and content of the environmental information that is germane to your agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the proposed Program. Your agency may need to use the subject EIR when considering any necessary permit or other approval for the Program. Interested parties and individuals are invited also to comment on alternatives to, concerns with, and environmental issues or potential effects of the Program. Please share this notice with anyone you feel may be interested in the Program. Project files are being maintained by the MCWRA at the address provided at the bottom of the page. A description of the proposed Program, its location, and potential environmental impacts are contained in the attached materials.

#### Public Scoping Meetings

Two public scoping meetings will be held to receive agency and public comment on the scope of analysis and EIR content for the proposed Program.

**Date and Time:** May 2, 2011, from 5pm – 7pm

**Location:** Monterey County Water Resources Agency Board Room, 893 Blanco Circle, Salinas, CA 93901

**Date and Time:** May 16, 2011, from 5pm – 7pm

**Location:** Soledad High School Mission Room, 425 Gabilan Drive, Soledad, CA 93960

Due to the time limits mandated by State law, your written response must be sent at the earliest possible date, but no later than 30 days after receipt of this notice. Please send your response to:

Brent Buche, Assistant General Manager  
Monterey County Water Resources Agency  
893 Blanco Circle, Salinas, CA, 93901  
fax 831-424-7935  
email [930-SalinasRiverCMP@co.monterey.ca.us](mailto:930-SalinasRiverCMP@co.monterey.ca.us)

Curtis V. Weeks, General Manager  
Monterey County Water Resources Agency

Date

# **SALINAS RIVER CHANNEL MAINTENANCE PROGRAM PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

## **Summary**

The Monterey County Water Resources Agency (MCWRA) is preparing an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) to evaluate effects of renewing the Salinas River Channel Maintenance Program (CMP or Program) through 2030. The Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) Regional General Permit (RGP), pursuant to section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA), was authorized only until October 31, 2008. MCWRA has developed the Program which allows property owners adjacent to the Salinas River, acting under oversight from MCWRA, the opportunity to control sandbars and vegetative growth to address channel capacity issues in the Salinas River necessary to reduce the risk of flooding, protect valuable farm resources, enhance food safety, and reduce economic losses. Through the CMP, MCWRA employs existing working relationships with federal, state, and local agencies to address the need for successful channel maintenance in a manner that is compatible with environmental concerns and resources, including the needs of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species.

## **Project Location**

The Program Area is located in Monterey County and is shown on the attached Figure 1. The Program Area is defined as the Salinas River mainstem from the Highway 1 Bridge at river mile (RM) 2, upstream to RM 94, including the tributaries of Gonzales Slough (at RM 31.6), Bryant Canyon Channel (at RM 47.1), and San Lorenzo Creek (at RM 69.0), for a total of approximately 94 river miles. Channel maintenance activities would be focused in areas with limited channel capacity to reduce the risk of flooding, which could damage or destroy agricultural lands, crops, productive farmland, and both public and private infrastructure.

## **Background**

Lands adjacent to the Salinas River have historically experienced both localized and catastrophic flooding. Thus, for nearly a century, channel maintenance to maintain modest flow capacity has been an important aspect of life along the Salinas River.

Channel maintenance activities became even more important following construction of the Nacimiento and San Antonio Reservoirs in the 1950s and 1960s for flood control, water conservation, and recreation purposes. Although some levees already existed in the lower Salinas River Watershed, the ACOE and landowners constructed additional flood-control levees in the area around this time period. These changes played an important role in controlling channel location and the extent of adjacent riparian corridors within the Salinas River. Releases from upstream reservoirs have also extended the period during which the river channel contains surface water flows. While providing critical recharge to the Salinas Valley aquifer, these flows also provide for silt transport and sandbar formation in some reaches of the river. These wet conditions encourage in-channel vegetation growth and, in turn, further increase sediment deposition and mid-channel sandbars. Both in-channel vegetation and sandbars reduce the overall water conveyance capacity of the Salinas River, making adjacent lands more prone to flooding during higher flow storm events.

The risk of flooding became real most recently in March 1995, when severe floods devastated Monterey County. The floods destroyed approximately one-fourth of Salinas Valley's projected crop value and damaged more than 30,000 acres of Salinas Valley farmland. The value of flood-related agricultural loss, not including permanent loss of farmland, was estimated to be \$240 million (1995 dollars). The flood also resulted in the permanent loss of over 1,100 acres of Prime Farmland<sup>1</sup> to erosion. Virtually all flood control levees along the Salinas River were destroyed or severely damaged, making adjacent lands

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<sup>1</sup> Prime Farmland is defined as land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, fiber, forage, oilseed, and other agricultural crops within minimum inputs of fuel, fertilizer, pesticides, and labor, and without intolerable soil erosion.

vulnerable to further flood damage from even moderate river flows. Following the floods of 1995, federal, state, and local agencies worked with affected landowners and businesses to develop a voluntary program to carry out channel maintenance work in the Salinas River to mitigate future flood damage and resource losses. The Salinas River Channel Coalition (SRCC), a group of landowners, growers, and other interested parties, was formed in 1995 and carried out restoration work on the Salinas River pursuant to the conditions in the 1995 permits issued by the ACOE, the State Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the Monterey County Planning and Building Inspection Department.

MCWRA secured a five-year ACOE 404 RGP (No. 22309S) in 1997 covering sandbar grading and relocation, vegetation removal, and bank re-vegetation activities to improve and maintain flood flow capacity in both the Salinas River and the Arroyo Seco River. MCWRA was unable to renew a 404 permit for the 2002 season and, thus, no work was performed in the river channel during 2002. A one-year Critical Channel Vegetation Clearing Program (CCVCP) was in place in 2002, but only five parties participated covering nine sites. Because work conducted under the CCVCP occurred on the channel banks above the ordinary high water mark, it did not require an ACOE 404 permit. The CCVCP was permitted under a California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) Section 1602 Agreement.

On August 18, 2003, MCWRA secured another ACOE 404 RGP (No. 26270S), authorizing MCWRA to oversee voluntary, annual channel maintenance by landowners along a 92-mile section of the Salinas River. Channel maintenance activities performed under the 2003 RGP included removal of vegetation, removal of sandbars, removal of obstructions that redirected flows into the banks and threatened levee integrity, and installation of bank protection. The 2003 RGP expired on October 31, 2008. Thus, no channel maintenance work has been carried out since October 31, 2008, and channel capacity is decreasing.

Through the years, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) have actively overseen and approved the channel maintenance activities and associated effects on species listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), including the least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*), the California red-legged frog (*Rana aurora draytonii*), and South-Central California Coast steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*). These agencies have identified conditions for MCWRA to follow for species protection. As set forth in the relevant concurrence letters and biological opinions (BO), the USFWS and NOAA Fisheries have consistently found that the channel maintenance activities were not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of listed species, or destroy or adversely modify designated critical habitat.

### **Proposed Project**

As it has done since 1995, MCWRA proposes to coordinate voluntary channel maintenance activities with landowners and appropriate federal, state, and local agencies. Through coordination, MCWRA will streamline the CMP permitting process and oversee channel maintenance activities performed by owners of property along the 92-mile Salinas River mainstem and by MCWRA staff along portions of the following three tributaries to the Salinas River: Gonzales Slough, Bryant Canyon Channel, and San Lorenzo Creek.

In general, channel maintenance work will be conducted on the channel bottom away from the wetted and/or low-flow channel and in areas paralleling the river channel that transition from the relatively flat bottom to a steeper cross-slope up towards the tops of the riverbanks. Channel maintenance activities will be considered and approved on an annual basis for areas that can be accessed based on hydrologic conditions. Because hydrologic conditions will likely vary throughout implementation of the Program, the extent of channel work and the areas where work can be performed is also likely to vary.

Key channel maintenance activities that could occur as part of the proposed Program are summarized below.

1. Non-native vegetation treatment could be performed to control invasive, non-native plant species (e.g. *Arundo donax*) using integrated weed management techniques. The two main

methods to be implemented as part of the CMP are herbicide application and mechanical removal. The herbicide approved by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) for use in aquatic environments being considered for this Program is AquaMaster®. The active ingredient in AquaMaster® is glyphosate, a non-selective aquatic herbicide that controls emergent vegetation in and around bodies of fresh and salt water. In areas where infestations of non-natives are extensive, mechanical means, such as a backhoe, front loader, bulldozer, or mowing, may be used to eradicate the plants. All non-native vegetation would be removed from the channel through burning, chipping, or physical transport out of the area.

2. Native vegetation treatment involving mechanized removal of native vegetation on the channel bottom and sandbars within the areas below the top of the riverbanks but away from the wetted channel could be performed. To the extent possible, roots of native species will be left intact within the sediment surface. Methods of mechanized removal include mowing, discing, or using an excavator, bulldozer, backhoe or other equipment.
3. Sediment management could be performed to remove excess accumulated sediment from the river channel. Removal of accumulated sediment or silt deposits will be performed by mechanized equipment and limited to those areas below the riverbank that are dry. Sediment removed from the river will be hauled off-site.
4. Bank stabilization work could be performed to repair and stabilize riverbanks when a weakened, unstable, or failing bank causes or threatens damage to an adjacent property, increases the flood hazard, impairs roads/transportation/access, generates erosion, or impacts riparian habitat or natural resource values.

### **Project Alternatives and Impacts**

The EIR will present the analysis of the environmental impacts of the proposed project, compare environmental effects of the proposed project to other alternatives including the No Project Alternative, and identify mitigation measures for potentially significant impacts. A range of project alternatives is being evaluated by MCWRA to meet the purpose and need of the proposed project. Each of the potential project alternatives being considered affords a level of flood protection to lands adjacent to the Salinas River within the Program Area, although the level of protection afforded by each alternative varies considerably. The potential alternatives being considered are generally listed in order of their overall water conveyance capacity with the No Project Alternative providing the lowest level of protection and the Levee Improvements/Construction Alternative providing the highest level of protection. Potential alternatives to be evaluated in the EIR include, but may not be limited to:

- **No Project.** The No Project Alternative would be defined as what would be reasonably expected to occur in the foreseeable future if none of the other project alternatives were approved and implemented based on current plans and consistent with available infrastructure, such as no channel maintenance activities, continued growth of native and non-native vegetation, and the reduction in channel flow capacity. It would be the circumstance under which the project does not proceed.
- **Non-Native Vegetation Eradication Program.** This Alternative would involve a program aimed at reducing existing non-native vegetation to improve flood capacity and preventing further encroachment of non-native vegetation (e.g. Arundo) into the waterways (Salinas River mainstem and tributaries) using a variety of removal methods such as mechanical removal, herbicide application, and mulching. After eradication treatments, the areas would be re-vegetated with native vegetation, monitored and then maintained in the future to keep replacement native vegetation young and flexible.

- **Renewal of the Previous Channel Maintenance Program.** This Alternative would be similar to the previous ACOE 404 RGP which authorized MCWRA to oversee voluntary, annual channel maintenance activities by landowners along the lower 92 miles of the Salinas River mainstem.
- **Proposed Channel Maintenance Program.** As described above under the “Proposed Project” heading.
- **Maintain Critical-at-Risk Flood Locations.** This Alternative would target the “weakest links in the chain”, and develop flood protection solutions for at-risk locations (i.e., points along the river where the channel is significantly under capacity or other criteria). The exact solution to identify and address flood capacity for at-risk locations would need to be determined on a case-by-case basis.
- **Mandatory Channel Maintenance Program.** This Alternative would require all landowners along the lower 92 miles of the Salinas River mainstem to participate in the Channel Maintenance Program.
- **Levee Improvements/Construction.** This Alternative would raise and improve the present levees and construct new levees to provide significant flood protection while minimizing the amount of land needed for construction along the Salinas River mainstem. Locating the new levees in existing roadways and/or at the outside edge of the riparian habitat if no roads are present would be proposed as part of this alternative.

Potential environmental impacts (direct, indirect, and cumulative) to be analyzed in the EIR include the following: human safety, agricultural economics and land use, public services/hazard response, hydrology/water quality, air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, and biological resources including listed aquatic and terrestrial species. Any technical studies conducted as part of development of the EIR will be incorporated as appendices to the EIR with important results summarized in the appropriate section of the EIR.

Environmental issues raised during public scoping will be incorporated into a public scoping report and made available to the public and preparers of the EIR.

**For More Information**

Additional information is located at: [www.mcwra.co.monterey.ca.us](http://www.mcwra.co.monterey.ca.us)

Figure 1. Program Area

- ▲ Dams
- River Mile Markers
- USGS Gages
- ~ Stream/River
- Potential Maintenance Sites
- Salinas River Watershed
- County Boundary

0 2.5 5 10  
Scale in Miles

The scale and configuration of all information shown hereon are approximate and are not intended as a guide for design or survey work.

