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Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Water

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The Los Angeles River and Its San Fernando Valley Watershed: Progress and Opportunities

The Los Angeles River and its Watershed

The Los Angeles River (river) is approximately 51 miles long. The river is formed by the confluence of the Arroyo Calabasas and Bell Creek in Canoga Park. The river then flows generally east through the San Fernando Valley (valley) and turns to the south around Griffith Park en route to its estuary in Long Beach via downtown Los Angeles. About 32 miles of the River are in the City of Los Angeles (city). Following serious flooding, efforts to control flooding on the river through "channelization" intensified in the 1930s and were led by the US Army Corps of Engineers (Army Corps). The river is now largely a concrete-lined flood control channel, without vegetation for long reaches. Further, in many sections the river is effectively isolated from the surrounding communities as public access is limited and urban development extends to the channel's edge. Dense urbanization in many locations would not have been possible without channelization. A few locations remain, however, where the stream bed is natural (in the Sepulveda Basin, in Griffith Park (the Glendale Narrows) and near the estuary in Long Beach).

In the valley, there are several important river tributaries and a significant fraction of the river's 834 square mile watershed. The upper part of the river's watershed, approximately 360 square miles, is covered by forest or other open space. The lower part is highly developed and urban.

The river currently has "impaired" water quality and TMDL[1]s for several pollutants, including trash, nutrients and metals, have been issued. The county and cities along the river are addressing polluted urban runoff through the use of low impact development ordinances, green streets, stormwater management and other programs.

Revitalization

Restoration of sustainable urban centers, including greening and bringing nature back to urban and "post-industrial" landscapes, creates value. Sustainability incorporates more environmentally-conscious design and improved urban water management practices. It is widely acknowledged that the vicinity of the river is comparatively "under-parked" compared to other areas, and a sustainable Los Angeles

[1] Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) is a calculation of the maximum amount of a pollutant that a waterbody can receive and still safely meet water quality standards

intrinsically depends upon river revitalization. Relevant to the river, the county, city and other river municipalities have made a public commitment to sustainability. Innovative and wide-ranging master planning documents have been developed by both the county (in 1996) and the city (in 2007) to spur and guide river revitalization.

Revitalization takes many forms and includes, among others, enhancing flood water storage, water quality, natural habitat and restoring a functional ecosystem. Multi-benefit solutions, where, for example, a single element such as a swale improves flood control, water quality and ecosystem function, are favored. Additionally, public access can be improved and people connected to the river through the development of a continuous greenway – a green "spine" to Los Angeles – by adding bike trails, recreational areas, and open space. Critical components to revitalization efforts include incorporating community input into the process to create "buy-in", fostering a river identity, and celebrating the cultural heritage of the river. Revitalization will improve the quality of life, and provide a sustainable clean and green Los Angeles, with improved and enhanced water quality, and a clean and healthy river. Ultimately over several decades, the river will be returned to a less-polluted, functioning riparian environment in as many reaches as possible, while still controlling flooding and providing recreational opportunities.

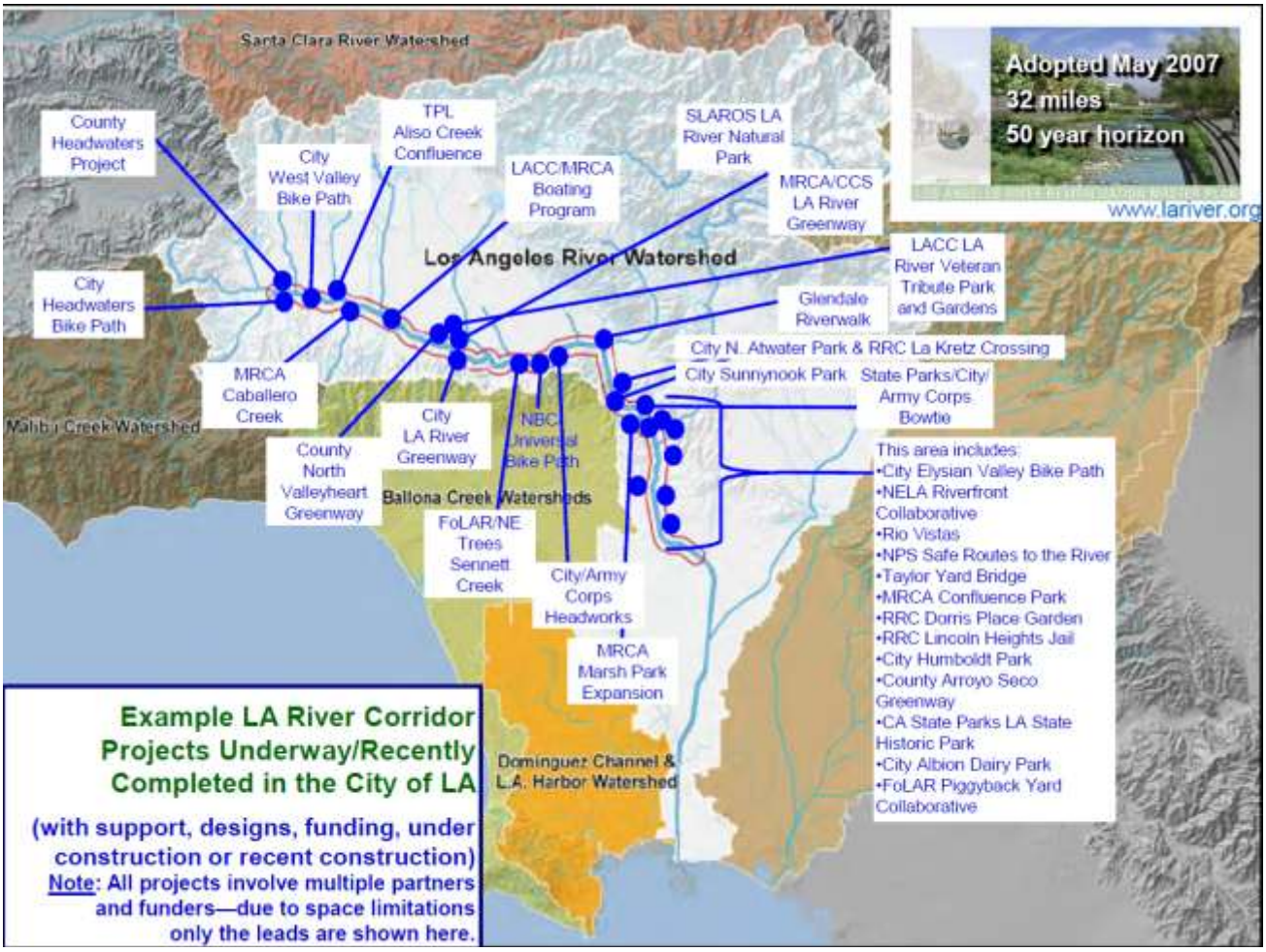
Since the revitalization plans were created the Army Corps, the city, the county, the City of Long Beach, and other public and private entities have studied and created parks, bike paths, bridges, street improvements and other projects, including the development of guidelines for signage and other design elements. The 2010 city and 2012 county bike plans include bikeways along the entire river – the "Greenway 2020" effort – and over 7 miles of bikeway are already open in the city. The State Conservancies and State Parks have helped to create new parks – the Los Angeles State Historic Park at Cornfields, as well as the Rio de Los Angeles State Park at Taylor Yard, among others. The Mountains Recreation Conservation Authority (MRCA) has added "pocket" parks and other amenities including the multi-benefit Tujunga Wash Greenway and Stream Restoration Project along the river. The dedication and efforts of numerous local river advocacy organizations and individuals have played an indispensable role in revitalization efforts. For example, dozens of community-based stakeholder groups participated in the development of the county and city revitalization plans. A map from a recent presentation shows many recent revitalization projects undertaken by various river partners[2]. Revitalization and its benefits are popular.

Jurisdiction and Federal Role in the River

In addition to the city and county, fourteen cities, multiple local and state agencies and departments, as well as the Army Corps and other federal agencies all have jurisdiction over the river or its immediate surroundings and contents. River management is a collaborative effort. Generally, the Army Corps or county manage and maintain the river, and the Army Corps oversees flood protection, regulations and standards. Moving away from the river, the land becomes subject to existing zoning and planning including, for example, the city's river improvement overlay district. The city's revitalization plan developed a three-tiered governance structure with a nonprofit fund raising arm (the Los Angeles River Foundation), an entrepreneurial private non-profit (the Los Angeles River Revitalization Corporation) and a formal collaboration between the Army Corps, county and city to vet projects (the Los Angeles River Cooperation Committee).

[2] Excerpt from "The Economic and Social Impact of Revitalizing the Los Angeles River" by Michael Affeldt (City of Los Angeles) and Daniel Tellalian (Emerging Markets, Los Angeles River Revitalization Corporation Board) hosted by the Federal Reserve Bank of California on November 12, 2013

The federal government has lately taken additional action to promote river revitalization beyond the Army Corps' long-standing involvement. In 2010, the US Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) declared the entire length of the river a navigable waterway. Also in 2010, President Obama launched the America's Great Outdoors Initiative followed in 2011 by the establishment of the Urban Waters Federal Partnership. Through the Initiative, the National Park Service is collaborating on the "development of partnerships, policy and plans for enhanced river access, including water-based recreation[3]" in the Glendale Narrows as well as working with MRCA on the Safe Routes to the River pilot project. The Urban Waters Federal Partnership also works collaboratively with community-based partners and state and local agencies to enhance access to and use of the river including flood storage and water quality, enable safe public access, and restore a functional riparian ecosystem.



Watershed Health

The Los Angeles Watershed Monitoring program was formed in 2007 by local, state and federal stakeholders to institute a program that would provide data necessary to more fully understanding the watershed. The first five years of monitoring have been completed and preliminary answers (italicized in the list below) are now available. According to the Council for Watershed Health, the monitoring addressed the following 5 questions:

[3] "California News" published by the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program, Pacific West Region

1. What is the condition of streams in the watershed?
    - *In the upper ("natural") watershed, the stream-based biologic health was higher. In the lower watershed where it is more urban and channelized, the biologic health was lower and less diverse.*
2. Are conditions at areas of unique interest getting better or worse?
    - *Unique areas include river confluences, wetland areas, and the river's estuary.*
    - *The upper watershed is again healthier. Habitat was better in the upper watershed too.*
3. Are receiving waters near discharges meeting water quality objectives?
    - *Yes – effluent from the publicly-owned treatment works improved river water quality.*
4. Is it safe to swim?
    - *Human use of swim sites in the upper watershed correlated with higher contamination.*
5. Are locally caught fish safe to eat?
    - *Consumption should be limited although in the River, mercury conc'ns were lower.*

The Army Corps' Integrated Feasibility Report ("ARBOR study")

After several years of development, the Army Corps' recently released its Los Angeles River Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Report in September 2013[4]. This study focused on the restoration potential along the 11 mile soft-bottomed stretch of the river from roughly Griffith Park to downtown (the Glendale Narrows) called the ARBOR[5] reach. Given the possibilities, the study aimed to determine the best alternative to restore a more natural hydrologic and hydraulic flow regime to the river and to improve natural processes, such as promoting infiltration, and reducing water velocity while maintaining the same level of flood risk management. Specific goals include restoring valley foothill riparian and freshwater marsh habitat, increasing habitat connectivity and providing recreation. Where possible, concrete will be removed, the profile of the river channel changed and vegetated terracing added along the banks. Restoration projects are proposed from the Verdugo Wash confluence downstream to the Piggyback yard and numerous project combinations assessed to develop the final list of alternatives that meet the study's criteria.

The tentative Army Corps' selection is Alternative 13 which would restore 588 acres, add 5,902 habitat "units" and cost $453 million (the city's share would be $313 million). Mayor Garcetti, the Los Angeles City Council, the County Board of Supervisors, Senators Boxer and Feinstein, elected members of the US House of Representatives and the California Legislature, the US EPA, the US Department of Interior, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, local officials, numerous additional river advocates and other stakeholders all preferred Alternative 20 – the option that would provide the maximum restoration of the river (671 acres), add 6,782 habitat units (including a significant increase in freshwater marsh relative to Alternative 13), and cost $1.08 billion (the city's share would be about $500 million). Alternative 20 includes the Alternative 13 projects plus restoration at the Verdugo Wash, and additional restoration at Cornfields (Los Angeles State Historic Park) and other reaches. Only Alternative 20 includes the Verdugo Wash restoration which would add connectivity between Griffith Park and the Verdugo Hills providing an important wildlife corridor in the highly urbanized area.

The comment period on the ARBOR study recently closed. In 2014 the Army Corps is scheduled to make a final recommendation to Congress of its selected alternative.

[4] Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) helped arrange for a private donation to fund the study's completion

[5] "Area with Restoration Benefits and Opportunities for Revitalization"

Recreation on the River

Within the city, river public access has increased from 3.5 miles in 1997 to 12.5 miles in 2013.

During summer 2011 and 2012, the Paddle the LA River pilot program permitted guided canoe and kayak tours in 1.5 miles of the Sepulveda Basin. The Los Angeles Conservation Corps ran this program in collaboration with MRCA, the Army Corps and other stakeholders. Approximately 2,500 kayakers were reported to have participated in 2012. Due to an Army Corps' permitting delay, this program was cancelled for 2013. However, during summer 2013, the Los Angeles River Pilot Recreation Zone (managed by MRCA in cooperation with the Army Corps, the county and the city) permitted the public to walk, fish or kayak on a 2.5 mile long river reach in Elysian Park.

Sepulveda Basin

The Sepulveda Basin is a flood risk management basin of over 2000 acres located on the upper portion of the Los Angeles River in the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles County. In December 2012, as part of a new vegetation management program, the Army Corps removed vegetation using bulldozers, mowers and mulching machines from approximately 43 acres of the "South Reserve" in the Sepulveda Basin.[6] Native vegetation was removed, non-native vegetation was inconsistently removed and habitat was destroyed. Although there was an existing stakeholder forum (The Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Areas Steering Committee) for Army Corps activity in the Sepulveda Basin, there was no specific notice provided in advance of the vegetation removal. The Army Corps' actions were widely criticized and there was considerable media attention. Numerous meetings between the Army Corps and community stakeholders, including conservation groups, followed. The Los Angeles Water Quality Control Board considers the Army Corps' actions to be an unauthorized project in violation of the Clean Water Act and California law and has taken steps to pursue legal action against the Army Corps.

Funding

River revitalization projects have been supported by federal, state and local public funds, private funds and thousands of volunteers. It is not unusual for a successful project to receive funding from multiple sources. Recent natural resources-related state bond measure include Propositions 40 (2002), 50 (2002) and 84 (2006). In 2009, the Legislature passed the most recent water bond measure (SB X7 2, Cogdill). Following repeated legislative votes to postpone this measure, the water bond is now on the November 2014 ballot for public approval. There are two competing bills active in the current legislative session that seek to replace the current water bond with a revised, less expensive measure. While the current bond and the two proposed bonds include programs that river revitalization projects would be eligible for, only the current bond designates specific funding levels for the Los Angeles and the San Gabriel River watersheds.

Local funding includes the city's Proposition O (2004) which designated $500 million to improve water quality by constructing stormwater treatment systems. The county passed two Proposition A measures in 1992 and 1996 to provide funding for parks and open space. All of these measures have supported river revitalization projects. Additionally, the county recently proposed the "Clean Water, Clean Beaches Initiative", which would provide funding for multi-benefit clean water projects including stormwater and related water quality improvements. This initiative is still pending before the Board of Supervisors.

[6] "State wants Army Corps to restore damaged L. A. River habitat" by Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times, October 31, 2013.

River revitalization projects have also been supported by transportation funding available to promote multi-modal transportation and provide environmental mitigation.

Recent State Legislation

SB 42 (Wolk, 2013) – meant to replace the existing 2014 water bond with the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality, and Flood Protection Act of 2014. LA River-related projects would likely be eligible for funding from this bond, but no specific funding levels are provided (*before the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee*).

AB 735 (Gomez, 2013) – would promote greenway (e.g. pedestrian bikeway) development throughout the state with numerous findings regarding the LA River and its tributaries (*before the Assembly Appropriations Committee*).

AB 1331 (Rendon, 2013) – meant to replace the existing 2014 water bond with the Climate Change Response for Clean and Safe Drinking Water Act of 2014. LA River-related projects would be eligible for funding from this bond (e.g. the LA and San Gabriel River watersheds are specifically identified as eligible for ecosystem and watershed protection and restoration projects), but no specific funding levels are provided (*before the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee*).

AJR 5 (Gomez and Hall, Nazarian, Padilla, Pavley & Rendon, 2013) – would support the choice of Alternative 20 for the ARBOR study (*before the Assembly Rules Committee*)

SB 1201 (de León, c. 94, Statutes of 2012) – specifically provides the the LA Flood Control Act that the use of navigable waterways for recreational and education opportunities, when safe, is specifically authorized.

SCR 101 (Pavley, c. 97, 2012) – Resolution commending the efforts of local, regional, state and federal governments and government agencies and nonprofit and civic groups in the creation of parks and the restoration of natural habitats along the Los Angeles River and its San Fernando Valley tributaries and promoting connectivity among the river and surrounding parks, trails, bikeways and open space for maximum benefits.

SB X7 – 2 (Cogdill, c.95, Statutes of 2009) – the basis, now slightly modified, for the 2014 water bond on the ballot. This measure includes specific funds for the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy and Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy ($75 million each) in support of river and San Gabriel river watershed projects. River revitalization projects would likely be eligible for funds from other bond programs.