

Purpose of and Need for the Proposed Action

Purpose of Proposed Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to enhance natural habitat and increase public access on the Jensen River Ranch project site. The objectives of the proposed action are consistent with the goals and objectives of the San Joaquin River Parkway Master Plan (Parkway Plan) and the recommendations from the Jensen River Ranch Advisory Committee (list in chapter 5, consultation and coordination), San Joaquin River Parkway Trust (River Parkway Trust), and San Joaquin River Conservancy (Conservancy). The goals have been separated into broad subject areas to ensure that all issues are addressed. The primary project goals, which reflect revisions made during the September 1, 1999, Advisory Committee meeting, are summarized below.

- Provide increased wildlife habitat, high plant community diversity, and areas with minimal human disturbance. Create a wildlife corridor through the site that connects adjacent properties.
- Locate plant communities where they will be supported by existing soils and hydrology, naturally regenerate, and require minimal long-term maintenance.
- Control nonnative invasive plant species, and collect seed and cutting material for restoration plantings from the reach of the San Joaquin River between Friant Dam and Mendota Pool.
- Maintain the current settling capability of the “DK” drainage area channel, and expand the floodplain to the extent feasible without jeopardizing adjacent land uses, increasing flood damage potential, or increasing flood potential.
- Incorporate cost saving and innovative restoration techniques, and, where possible, allow natural processes to establish the desired vegetation.
- Accommodate multiuse trails through the site while minimizing disturbances to adjacent land uses, and incorporate educational features into the overall plan.
- Locate trails where they can be visually patrolled from the bluff, provide shade for visitors, and focus public use to key areas of the site.
- Provide visual connections from Woodward Park while maintaining privacy for adjacent land uses.

The Jensen River Ranch project is one of many projects designed to restore riparian habitats and increase public access along the San Joaquin River. Other completed projects include: Lewis S. Eaton Trail, Wildwood Native Park, Camp Pashayan, and Willow Unit of the San Joaquin River Ecological Preserve. The Jensen River Ranch project site is highly visible from existing overlooks in Woodward Park and along the Lewis S. Eaton Trail at the top of the bluff. Therefore, the Jensen River Ranch project should be a showcase restoration effort for the community.

- The elevation of the project site limits the restoration of riparian plant communities. Because most of the site is above the 100-year floodplain, planting as a sole method of restoration is not possible. Portions of the site will be excavated, so that a mosaic of riparian and upland plant communities can be established to provide greater habitat diversity.

Need for the Proposed Action

Rapid development is occurring adjacent to the San Joaquin River corridor. Population growth within the Fresno region is expected to continue at rates ahead of statewide growth rates. Current recreational demand at the adjacent Woodward Park indicates the need for expansion of these facilities, including expanded access to the river. Currently, public access to the San Joaquin River is very limited throughout the Parkway. As populations increase, recreational demands are also expected to increase.

Past damage to habitat and past and current actions affecting habitat at the project site include:

- construction of the Friant Dam, permanently altering the river hydrology;
- aggregate mining north and northeast of Fresno;
- decline of riparian scrub species and succession of site from cottonwood riparian forest to valley oak riparian forest due to lack of periodic flood scouring;
- urban development, reducing habitat; and
- cattle grazing.

Riparian habitat has been modified or reduced due to these actions. Along the San Joaquin River, approximately 6% of the original habitat remains (Counties of Madera and Fresno, City of Fresno 1986 Reconnaissance Study). Restoration and enhancement of habitat at Jensen River Ranch would increase habitat value and help recreate a continuous wildlife corridor along the river.

Recognizing the value and significance of the remaining riparian corridor, local community and state agencies identified the need to develop a comprehensive Parkway Plan with the goal of directing natural resource preservation, public access, and recreation along the river. This plan identified land acquisition

priorities based on the fundamental goals for the parkway and was adopted by the Conservancy in 1997.

The Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land requested Central Valley Project Improvement Act funds to acquire the Jensen River Ranch. U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR), along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, approved this grant request. The grant is consistent with the objectives of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act and the desires of the Friant Water Users Authority and is designed to achieve restoration goals identified in the Parkway Plan. Acquisition of the Jensen River Ranch by the Conservancy, thereby eliminating the potential for future development, and grant funding provided by the Conservancy to the River Parkway Trust for restoration of the site are two actions that support the vision of a parkway corridor. The River Parkway Trust is managing the restoration of the property for the Conservancy.

Scope of This Report

This initial study/environmental assessment (IS/EA) has been prepared to assess the effects of the Jensen River Ranch Habitat Enhancement and Public Access Plan (proposed action) as required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (14 Cal. Admin. Code 15,000 et seq.) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This IS/EA is based on guidelines contained in the state CEQA Guidelines, and on the USBR NEPA Guidelines. The proposed action would restore riparian habitat and increase habitat diversity, as well as provide public access to the San Joaquin River within a 167-acre parcel owned by the Conservancy.

The Conservancy, as the state lead agency for the proposed action under CEQA, must evaluate the environmental effects of the proposed action when considering whether to approve the proposed action. Because federal funds allocated by USBR to the Conservancy would be used for project implementation, the USBR must also approve the proposed action. The USBR is, therefore, the federal lead agency for the proposed action under NEPA. This joint document is intended to fulfill requirements for an initial study/mitigated negative declaration (IS/MND) per CEQA Guidelines and the requirements for an environmental assessment (EA) under the USBR Draft NEPA Handbook (1996). Pursuant to section 3.12.2 of the USBR NEPA Handbook, a non-federal document may be adopted after review by USBR.

This IS/EA will serve as a public document for

- identifying the purpose and need for actions,
- analyzing the possible environmental effects of the proposed action,
- presenting feasible measures to reduce or avoid potential environmental damage, and

- identifying and analyzing a range of reasonable alternatives to the proposed action, including no action, if there are unresolved environmental issues.

Relevant Documents

The proposed action is within the jurisdiction of both the County of Fresno and the City of Fresno. However, the city is considered the lead government agency. Documents reviewed for consistency and relevant to this IS/EA include:

- Revised Draft Conceptual Plan for Habitat Enhancement and Public Access on the Jensen River Ranch (Conceptual Plan)
- San Joaquin River Parkway Master Plan (Parkway Plan)
- City of Fresno General Plan
- Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Tom MacMichael Sr. Trail

The Conceptual Plan is incorporated into this IS/EA by reference and includes detailed descriptions of proposed project elements.