20. Santa Clara River SEA

Location

General

The Santa Clara River Significant Ecological Area (SEA) extends along the entire County reach of the Santa Clara River, primarily within unincorporated areas of the County. The SEA encompasses a wide variety of topographic features and habitat types, as well as major tributaries—all of which contribute to this diversity. It is a major biotic corridor for the County (and Ventura County). The orientation and extent of the SEA depends upon the surface and subsurface hydrology of the Santa Clara River, from its headwaters, tributaries, and watershed basin, to the point at which it exits the County's jurisdiction. Nearly all of the SEA is designated by California Audubon as a Globally Important Bird Area (IBA). The Santa Clara River IBA extends beyond the SEA in both upstream and downstream directions (across Soledad Pass to the Barrel Springs area in the Antelope Valley and through Ventura County to the mouth of the River at the Pacific Ocean).

The SEA is located at least partially in each of the following United States Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5' California Quadrangles: Pacifico Mountain, Acton, Agua Dulce, Sunland, San Fernando, Mint Canyon, Oat Mountain, Newhall, and Val Verde.

General Boundary and Resources Description

The SEA covers a wide variety of topographic features and habitat types, including parts of the watershed tributaries. The biological and ecological functionality of the SEA is integrally linked to the Santa Clara River basin for its entire length. The bio-geographic limits of the SEA would extend downstream through Ventura-Los Angeles County line to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean, and encompass significant tributary drainages of Ventura County (Piru Creek, Sespe Creek, Santa Paula Creek, Wheeler Creek, etc.).

The eastern portion of the SEA follows natural contours at the headwaters of the watershed to incorporate much of upper watershed of Soledad Canyon (which becomes the Santa Clara River), the Kentucky Springs and the Aliso Canyon basins, and the downstream unnamed tributaries of the Santa Clara River to Arrastre Creek. This includes the watershed southern headwater areas within the Angeles National Forest. The headwaters of both Kentucky Springs and Aliso Canyon are in the Angeles National Forest, in semi-arid chaparral and desert scrub habitat; however, the drainages themselves support vegetation of desert and interior riparian habitat, which ranges from Great Basin sagebrush in Kentucky Springs Wash to dense, mature, willow-cottonwood-sycamore woodlands along permanent streams in Aliso Canyon. The surrounding uplands in the basins support pinyon-juniper woodlands, chamise, mountain mahogany, and manzanita-dominated chaparral, buckwheat scrub, and ruderal lands. The alluvial plain formed along the southern margin of the Santa Clara River basin below these canyons supports intact, high diversity xeric alluvial fan sage scrub. Alluvial terraces within both drainages have been extensively cultivated for orchard crops and dryland agriculture, and in more recent years, rural and urban-type residential developments have encroached on the watersheds. The Kentucky Springs basin has a large population of Parish's Great Basin sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* ssp. *parishii*), which is considered rare and sensitive in the County. A population of the federally-threatened red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii* FT, SC) is known to inhabit and breed in the Aliso Canyon watershed. Blum Ranch and another area on Aliso Canyon Road are ETAs, with farming development, but important to continuity of the SEA. The Santa Clara River IBA extends in a branch upstream to include Blum Ranch.

The boundary follows the Santa Clara River channel downstream through the Acton basin, paralleling Soledad Canyon Road on the north side, following the toe of the slope of the San Gabriel Mountains to the south. Boundaries continue along the channel margins to the southwest from Acton to Arrastre Creek, where the southern boundary follows watershed contours to take in four upper tributary channels (Arrastre, Moody, and Bootleggers). Downstream from Acton, there are developed areas along the Santa Clara River that are ETAs. From a little upstream of the Arrastre Creek confluence to a little downstream in the vicinity of the railroad stop of Lang (about 13 miles of river), the floodplain of the Santa Clara River is designated critical habitat for the federally-endangered arroyo toad (*Anaxyrus californicus*). Some of the confluence area of Mill Canyon is also critical habitat for the arroyo toad. Part of the area of critical habitat for the toad was also proposed as critical habitat for the state and federally-endangered unarmored threespine stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus williamsoni*), which is a small three-inch fish that essentially only occurs in the County. It once was widespread throughout the Los Angeles Basin and beyond, but is now restricted to the upper Santa Clara River. The proposal for critical habitat was never approved, and this is now referred to as “essential habitat” for the fish. The type area for the fish is the Arrastre Creek, where it was first collected and described with a museum specimen.

The habitat along the Santa Clara River supports the largest community of riparian-obligate birds between Santa Ynez River in Santa Barbara County and the Prado Basin in Riverside County. In the Soledad Canyon stretch are breeding summer tanager (*Piranga rubra*) and other desert species, along with some instances of least Bell’s vireos (*Vireo bellii pusillus*), coastal cactus wrens (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus sandiegensis*), and southwestern willow flycatchers (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) from the coastal influence areas. The area is notable for having a combination of species that are characteristic of the desert and characteristic of coastal-influence.

Just west of the confluence with Arrastre Creek the northern boundary loops up to the slopes of Parker Mountain and the eastern watershed of Hughes Canyon around the basal contours of significant rock outcroppings above the river basin, and on the south side, around the Mill Canyon tributary basin. The rocky buttes on the north side of the river, while only a minor part of the watershed of the river, provide important nesting, roosting, and sheltering habitat values for bats, birds of prey, and other sensitive species foraging along the river corridor. The boundaries stay at the river margins west to the watersheds of two northern tributaries, Nellus and Bobcat canyons. These drainages were identified by the South Coast Wildlands Project as important to connectivity across the Santa Clara River between the western and eastern highland areas of the San Gabriel Mountains.

At the Agua Dulce Canyon drainage, the northern boundary loops around the watershed, including the Vasquez Rocks County Natural Area. Agua Dulce Canyon has a permanent stream and supports high quality riparian habitat from the confluence with the river to the intersection with State Route-14. The Santa Clara River IBA extends upstream to include about one mile of the Agua Dulce Canyon.

The Agua Dulce underpass of State Route-14 is an important crossing of the highway barrier for wildlife. From that point, north riparian areas exist where the creeks (Agua Dulce and Escondido) pass through Vasquez Rocks County Natural Area. The Agua Dulce Canyon extension was included in the SEA for its value as a wildlife corridor to provide connectivity across the Santa Clara River between the western and eastern highland areas of the San Gabriel Mountains. The extension includes the watershed of Bee Canyon, which is a downstream tributary of the Santa Clara River. Bee Canyon has an important population of the federally-endangered slender-horned spineflower (*Dodecahema leptoceras*) in its broad, floodplain area. In the Bee Canyon slopes of coastal sage chaparral, the federally-threatened coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) is sometimes resident. The Bee Canyon area has some underpasses of the State Route-14 that could be used by smaller wildlife if maintained unclogged. The extension includes upper watersheds of Spring and Tick canyons to enhance the connective area. Beyond upper areas of Tick Canyon, the

SEA boundaries cross Mint Canyon into the Angeles National Forest and the watershed of Rowher Canyon. The SEA continues to the upper reaches of Rowher Canyon onto the main ridgeline of the Sierra Pelona. At the Mint Canyon crossing, just southwest of the community of Sleepy Valley, a lobe of the SEA extends along Mint Canyon to capture riparian woodlands of coast live oak, with a number of heritage trees (diameters greater than 36 inches). Residences are scattered and the natural communities of chaparral are intact on the canyon slopes.

The southern boundary of the SEA opposite the confluence with Agua Dulce Canyon includes the flood plain. The SEA dips southward into the lower portion of Bear Canyon (tributary of Santa Clara River) and includes undeveloped alluvial terrace slopes of the river downstream of Bear Canyon. The flood plain is a narrowed part of the SEA in the vicinity of Lang, which is a railroad stop on the transcontinental railroad line that runs the length of the Soledad Canyon. Downstream from Lang, the SEA expands to the southern slopes between Lang and Oak Spring Canyon, adjacent to the river channel. Downstream of Oak Canyon, the SEA narrows to the flood plain, passes Sand Canyon, and reaches the west ridge of Sand Canyon. A broad finger of the SEA goes south along the ridgeline of the Sand Canyon watershed, where the finger expands when it reaches the watershed of Placerita Canyon.

The alluvial fans of Oak Springs Canyon and Sand Canyon are important recharge grounds for the river aquifer. Surface flows from both canyons enter the Santa Clara River basin through natural, unconfined channels. Recognizing the importance of the Sand Canyon drainage, the SEA boundaries are drawn to encompass the entire upper Sand Canyon watershed, which is largely natural with scattered residences, as well as the Sand Canyon tributary, Bear Canyon. Most of the upper Sand Canyon and its Bear Canyon tributary are within the Angeles National Forest, and Sand Canyon originates on the peak of Magic Mountain. These canyons form a natural movement zone for wildlife traversing among the western end of the San Gabriel Mountains, the eastern end of the Santa Susana Mountains, and the Santa Clara River basin. Together, they encompass a spectrum of significant and unique habitat, vegetation and wildlife resources. The major habitat linkage zones and watersheds between the river basin and the Angeles National Forest, and the protected areas of the County (Placerita Canyon Natural Area), have also been included within the SEA boundary. Near the peak of Magic Mountain, the boundary contours to the southwest, and then proceeds west along the Santa Clara Divide to its intersection with the junction of Interstate-5 and State Route-14. Natural areas of the Sand Canyon watershed, along with the major topography of ridgelines, earthquake escarpments, grasslands, and canyon habitat features and watersheds of Bear, Placerita, Whitney, and Elsmere canyons are the important features of the wildlife linkage. Existing rural residential developments are excluded from the SEA, but the remaining natural highland areas of the western banks of the Sand Canyon watershed are included. These are integral parts of the river basin recharge system and functional ecosystem.

Parts of this area have coastal sage scrub and are critical habitat for the threatened coastal California gnatcatcher. The watershed of Placerita Canyon southeast of the State Route-14 is generally critical habitat for the federally-threatened coastal California gnatcatcher. An area of development surrounding the Placerita Creek near State Route-14 is excluded from the critical habitat. The critical habitat area for the gnatcatcher extends along the east side of State Route-14 beyond Placerita Creek and envelops watersheds into the Angeles National Forest along Whitney Canyon, Elsmere Canyon, and southward over the main ridge of the San Gabriel Mountains, into Grapevine Canyon in its upper natural watershed. Upper areas of these canyons with oaks and big-cone Douglas fir are habitat for the California spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis*)

The eastern half of the Los Piñetos undercrossing of State Route-14 on old oil development roads is included, and focuses on a major wildlife conduit connecting the Santa Susana Mountains to the San Gabriel Mountains, and to the Santa Clara River. The adjacent part of the Santa Susana Mountains and Simi Hills SEA includes the west half of the Los Piñetos undercrossing of State Route-14, connecting through the natural oak woodlands and drainages adjacent to the San Fernando Pass.

This area, once called “San Francisco” or “Newhall Wedge,” is north and west of the junction of Interstate-5 and State Route-14 with The Old Road running through it. The Newhall Wedge area is nearly all critical habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher. This critical habitat of the Newhall Wedge is adjacent to the gnatcatcher critical habitat across State Route-14 in the SEA, but is in the Santa Susana Mountains and Simi Hills SEA.

The SEA boundary borders State Route-14 from the north ridge of Grapevine Canyon and heads northeast from the Los Piñetos undercrossing, on the natural side of existing development east of State Route-14. The area around development along Running Horse Road off Placerita Canyon has been excluded from the SEA. The movie-shoot ranch at the junction of State Route-14 and Placerita Canyon has much area with development or staging excluded, but there is a connected finger of the SEA in Placerita Canyon that leads to the Placerita Canyon watercourse underpass. Much of the watercourse underpass is used by wildlife to transition between the natural areas of Placerita Canyon and the oil field area on the west side of State Route-14. The SEA narrows to the western hills of Sand Canyon beyond the movie-shoot ranch, to avoid developed areas, and continues back to the river margin at Humphreys railway stop, about a 0.4 mile west of its previous point of departure from the river channel. The boundary was drawn to avoid existing major development, but connect the uplands to the river basin. The narrow aperture for the linkage at the Santa Clara River reflects the remnant nature of the last unobstructed terrestrial passageway between the upland areas and the river.

From Sand Canyon westward through the residential neighborhoods of Santa Clarita, the SEA boundary continues on the margins of the flood plain to the confluence with San Francisquito Canyon. The segment of the Santa Clara River passing through the City of Santa Clarita is a dry channel, except during seasonal runoff flows. Some irregular extensions go north into tributaries that have remnant riparian habitat and probable outflows from irrigation runoff that flows into neighborhood storm drains. Regardless of the intermittent nature of water, the river bed elevated areas among braided channels support relatively intact stands of alluvial sage scrub, riparian woodland, and southern riparian scrub. The dry zones are essential to the continued genetic isolation and integrity of the unarmored three-spine stickleback population in the upper reaches of the Santa Clara River.

The boundary extends northward upstream into the reaches of San Francisquito Creek (formerly a separate SEA, but now included with the SEA), following the approved development setback limits, north into the Angeles National Forest (Santa Clara/Mojave Rivers District). The SEA continues nearly the length of the San Francisquito Creek to beyond the junction with South Portal Creek in the vicinity of the community of Green Valley. The Santa Clara River IBA extends in a branch upstream in close proximity to the crossing of Copper Hill Drive.

As the channel enters the Angeles National Forest, flows become less seasonal, and riparian resources expand and diversify. San Francisquito Creek supports dense and mature southern riparian scrub and riparian woodland formations, along with small areas of freshwater marsh, which provide essential wintering areas and resident habitat for waterfowl, wading birds, marshland birds, and a variety of other vertebrate species. The headwaters of San Francisquito Creek are on a low ridge that bounds the San Andreas Fault Zone, and this is an important connective element of the SEA, in that it completes the path from the Pacific Ocean through the mountains to the Mojave Desert. The sub-watershed and flood plain of the San Francisquito Creek perennial flow in the Angeles National Forest jurisdiction is designated critical habitat for the federally-threatened red-legged frog, which extends from about the Angeles National Forest southern boundary to about one mile south of the junction with Bee Canyon. Much of the San Francisquito Creek is considered essential habitat (one of three areas) for the endangered unarmored threespine stickleback, although the fish has not been found in the San Francisquito Canyon in recent years.

The boundaries west of the confluence with San Francisquito Creek follow the river margins under

the Interstate-5 to the Castaic Creek confluence, at which point the northern setback line has been drawn around the lower portion of Castaic Creek, which embraces the riparian habitat areas around and above the confluence. Castaic Creek is the tributary with the largest watershed for the Santa Clara River in the County. The SEA boundaries go upstream about four miles along the watercourse of Castaic Creek to the crossing of Lake Hughes Road, which is just downstream of Castaic Lagoon. The Santa Clara River IBA extends in a branch upstream into Castaic Creek for approximately one mile.

Relatively extensive areas of willow-cottonwood forest and southern riparian scrub occur west of San Francisquito Creek and within the junction zone of Castaic Creek and the Santa Clara River. These river forests support numerous sensitive species and provide multi-layered riparian habitat for a wide diversity of wildlife species, particularly birds of prey and riparian-obligate song birds, such as the federally-endangered least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*) and the southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*).

Federally-designated critical habitat for the endangered arroyo toad extends from the east side of Interstate-5, from the junction of the Santa Clara River with San Francisquito Creek, under the Interstate-5, about 5.8 miles to the confluence, with an unnamed drainage just upstream of the confluence of the river with San Martinez Chiquito. The critical habitat area for the toad also includes the flood plain of Castaic Creek as far upstream as the Interstate-5 undercrossing (about 2.5 miles), and for about one mile upstream into the natural area of Hasley Canyon, a tributary of Castaic. Coincident with the critical habitat for the toad is critical habitat for the endangered least Bell's vireo (FE, SE). Critical habitat for the vireo extends along the floodplain from the Rye Canyon undercrossing of the river (west side of Interstate-5), over the Ventura-Los Angeles County line, to about a mile short of the confluence of the Santa Clara River with Piru Creek in Ventura County (about 9 miles). The river area from near Interstate-5 towards the Ventura-Los Angeles County line is "essential habitat" for the threespine stickleback. A disjunct SEA area is on a ridge south of the river bend at Castaic Junction (interchange of Interstate-5 and State Route-126). This area supports a population of the federal candidate and state-endangered San Fernando Valley Spineflower (*Chorizanthe parryi* var. *fernandina*, FC, SE), which is a diminuitive, once-common flower of slopes within the San Fernando Valley and adjacent passes and mountain ranges. The plant became so rare that it was believed to be extinct until it was rediscovered during required surveys for development.

Beyond the confluence with Castaic Creek, the boundaries of the SEA follow the margins of the Santa Clara River channel to the Ventura-Los Angeles County line. The Santa Clara River IBA has a lobelike expansion opposite the confluence with San Martin Chiquito, extending south to cover diverse topography from river cliffs to confluence flood plains in the area around Potrero Canyon.

The Santa Clara River channel and its alluvial terraces and tributary creeks together form the single most important and natural wildlife movement zone through the County. Mobile species can enter the river basin anywhere along its length (outside of developed areas) and proceed in either direction without having to pass through narrow culverts or blind channels, with continuous vegetative cover and only short stretches of dry substrates. The overall drainage course provides a continuum of aquatic and terrestrial movement opportunities, shelter, forage, and resident habitat from the mouth of the river at Ventura County and the Pacific Ocean, to the Antelope Valley. The drainage course connects to both districts of the Angeles National Forest, and links together three large public resource preserves (Vasquez Rocks and Placerita County Natural Areas and the Angeles National Forest).

Vegetation

Plant communities within the SEA include bigcone Douglas fir-canyon oak forest, coast live oak woodland, coast live oak riparian forest, chaparral, coastal sage scrub, coastal sage scrub-chaparral

mixed scrub, non-native and native grasslands, alluvial fan sage scrub, southern cottonwood-willow riparian woodland and forest, southern sycamore-alder woodland, southern willow scrub, vernal pool, pinyon-juniper woodland, juniper woodland, freshwater marsh, and disturbed. Transitional zones (ecotones) between these communities often contain unusual species compositions. Plant species observed or recorded in previous documentation within the SEA are indicated in the *Comprehensive Floral & Faunal Compendium* of the *Los Angeles County SEA Update Study 2000 Background Report*. Sensitive plant species occurring or potentially occurring within the SEA are discussed in the Sensitive Biological Resources section.

Bigcone Douglas Fir-Canyon Oak Forest: Typically occurs in higher elevation draws on north-facing slopes, and may have incense cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*), big-leaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*), California bay (*Umbellularia californica*), and other shade-loving species intermixed, depending upon slope orientation, substrates, and fire history. Understory vegetation is usually dominated by chaparral species, such as scrub oak (*Quercus berberidifolia*), poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*), wild grape (*Vitis californica*), and manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* spp.). This community occurs on watershed slopes in the eastern portion of the SEA, and in a few of the narrower, more mesic canyons along the southern side of Soledad Canyon.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Pseudotsuga macrocarpa* (bigcone Douglas-fir forest) Forest Alliance
- *Quercus chrysolepis* (canyon live oak forest) Forest Alliance

Coast Live Oak Woodland: Consists of moderate-density overstory formations of coast live oak trees (*Quercus agrifolia* var. *agrifolia*), usually on erosional plains or landslides along the margins of canyon bottoms and on lower slopes in chaparral and coastal sage scrub understory habitats. Western blue elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* var. *caerulea*), chaparral currant (*Ribes malvaceum*), skunk bush (*Rhus aromatica*), and California peony (*Paeonia californica*) are frequent in the understory. Extensive stands of this formation occur in Sand, Placerita, Bear, Whitney, Elsmere, and Soledad canyons, and in unnamed tributary canyons to these drainages.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oak woodland) Woodland Alliance

Coast Live Oak Riparian Forest: A variation of coast live oak woodland wherein the canopy is more closely grown, and the trees occur in narrower formations along watercourses. Willow (*Salix* spp.), California bay, mulefat (*Baccharis salicifolia*), and other riparian species often occur in the understory.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oak woodland) Woodland Alliance

Juniper Woodland: An open formation dominated by California juniper (*Juniperus californica*), often with an understory of foothill yucca (*Yucca whipplei*), California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), and other scrub species. This community is found on lower slopes within the eastern portion of the SEA and is mixed with a few Joshua trees and chaparral species in several places.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Juniperus californica* (California juniper woodland) Woodland Alliance

Pinyon-Juniper Woodland: In the SEA, pinyon-juniper woodland typically consists of a mixture of

singleleaf pinyon pine (*Pinus monophylla*) and California juniper, with mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus betuloides*), California buckwheat, skunk bush, foothill yucca, penstemons (*Penstemon* spp.), and native grasses (*Stipa*, *Poa*, *Elymus*, etc.). This formation occurs on middle elevation north-facing slopes in the Kentucky Springs watershed, and sporadically along the same orientations south of Acton.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Pinus monophylla* (singleleaf pinyon woodlands) Woodland Alliance
- *Juniperus californica* (California juniper woodland) Woodland Alliance

Southern Cottonwood-Willow Riparian Woodland and Forest: A broad-leafed winter-deciduous habitat dominated by Fremont cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), various species of willow, and occasional alder (*Alnus rhombifolia*) and western sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*). Southern cottonwood-willow riparian woodland (or forest) occurs in numerous reaches of the SEA, forming mature overstory habitat on the Santa Clara River, its main tributaries, oxbow ponds, and alluvial plains. Some of the most extensive formations occur just west of Acton, in upper Aliso Canyon, in lower San Francisquito Canyon, and from Santa Clarita to the Ventura-Los Angeles County line. Large tracts of cottonwood-willow habitat occur in Ventura County as well.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Populus fremontii* (Fremont cottonwood forest) Forest Alliance
- *Salix laevigata* (red willow thickets) Woodland Alliance
- *Salix gooddingii* (black willow thickets) Woodland Alliance

Southern Sycamore-Alder Woodland: A formation that most often occurs on broad plains with heavy alluvial substrates, as well as along narrow creeks and streams with high-energy, permanent flows within the SEA. Alders typically occur along the watercourse, while sycamores usually grow a bit further from the active flowing channel. This community is rare within the SEA, as it occurs in only the upper reaches of the watershed and in portions of Bear, Sand, and Placerita canyons and to a lesser extent in Aliso Canyon.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Platanus racemosa* (California sycamore woodlands) Woodland Alliance
- *Alnus rhombifolia* (white alder groves) Forest Alliance

Southern Willow Scrub: is a riparian community consisting of dense, broad-leafed, winter-deciduous riparian thickets that occur within and adjacent to seasonal or permanent watercourses. The “scrub” generally is sub-mature, which is a state that often is maintained by frequent heavy over-flooding. The trees attain woodland or forest stature if undisturbed for several decades. Dominant species of this community within the SEA are mulefat, sandbar willow (*Salix exigua*), and arroyo willow (*Salix lasiolepis*). Within the SEA, this community occurs throughout the tributary and primary drainages, wherever the habitat structure is maintained or repeatedly altered by frequent high water flows.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Salix exigua* (sandbar willow thickets) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salix lasiolepis* (arroyo willow thickets) Shrubland Alliance

Freshwater Marsh: Develops in areas of still or slow-moving permanent freshwater. This community is dominated by the perennial, emergent cattail (*Typha* spp.) or bulrush (*Schoenoplectus* spp.), which can reach heights of seven feet and grow dense enough to form a closed canopy. This

vegetation occurs in scattered ponds and slow-flowing portions of the river and tributaries within the SEA.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Phragmites australis* (common reed marshes) Herbaceous Alliance and Semi-Natural Stands
- *Schoenoplectus californicus* (California bulrush marsh) Herbaceous Alliance
- *Typha* (*angustifolia, domingensis, latifolia*) (cattail marshes) Herbaceous Alliance
- *Lemna* (*minor*) *and relatives* (duckweed blooms) Provisional Herbaceous Alliance

Vernal Pool Systems: Extremely rare in the County. There are only two verified vernal pools currently recognized within the Santa Clara River watershed area: Cruzan Mesa and Plum Canyon. The SEA has been designated for these vernal pools. There are probably unrecognized ephemeral pools all along the river course where soil types are appropriate. For example, there is at least one small documented seasonal pond with typical vernal pool characteristics within the Golden Valley Ranch portion of the upper Placerita-Sand Canyon watershed. This small pool is surrounded by coastal sage scrub, with a band of native needlegrass and melic grass on its fringes. The Golden Valley pool supports Riverside fairy shrimp and western spadefoot toad. It is considered a vernal pool by virtue of its habitat values and species that are unique to this type of seasonal formation.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Deinandra fasciculata* (clustered tarweed fields) Herbaceous Alliance
- *Eleocharis macrostachya* (pale spike rush marshes) Herbaceous Alliance
- *Lasthenia californica-Plantago erecta-Vulpia microstachys* (California goldfields-dwarf plantain - six-weeks fescue flower fields) Herbaceous Alliance
- *Juncus arcticus* (var. *balticus, mexicanus*) ([*Juncus balticus* ssp. *ater, Juncus mexicanus*] Baltic and Mexican rush marshes) Herbaceous Alliance

Chaparral: Consists of sclerophyllous (hard-leaved, evergreen), medium height to tall shrubs that form a dense cover on steep slopes, usually below 5,000 feet in Southern California. Dominant species found within this community include scrub oaks (*Quercus*, several species), chamise, manzanita, wild lilac (*Ceanothus* spp.), toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), and western mountain-mahogany on north-facing exposures; buckwheat, foothill yucca, chamise, hoary-leaf lilac (*Ceanothus cuneatus*), black sage (*Salvia mellifera*), and goldenbush (*Ericameria linearifolia*) on south-facing slopes. This plant community occupies most of the basin slopes along the Santa Clara River and on interior ridges and slopes within the watersheds and drainages west of Acton. Chaparral also occurs on some of the higher elevations of the eastern watershed portions of the SEA, where the shrubs frequently are interspersed as understory formations within oak and conifer woodlands.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Adenostoma fasciculatum* (chamise chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Adenostoma fasciculatum-Salvia apiana* (chamise- white sage chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Arctostaphylos glandulosa* (Eastwood's manzanita chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Arctostaphylos glauca* (bigberry manzanita chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Ceanothus cuneatus* (hoary leaf ceanothus chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Ceanothus greggii* [*vestitus*] (cup leaf ceanothus chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Ceanothus leucodermis* (chaparral whitethorn) Shrubland Alliance
- *Prunus ilicifolia* (holly leaf cherry chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

Coastal Sage Scrub and Coastal Sage Scrub-Chaparral Mixed Scrub: Formations that typically occur on south or west-facing slopes within the western portion of the SEA. Some sites may be artifacts of fire frequency or occurrence, while other areas appear to be stable scrub communities. Dominant species are typically California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), purple sage (*Salvia leucophylla*), black sage, white sage (*S. apiana*), goldenbush, buckwheat, foothill yucca, California brittle bush (*Encelia californica*), golden yarrow (*Eriophyllum confertiflorum*), chamise, hoary-leaf lilac, and a variety of annuals and bulbs. Excellent examples of coastal sage scrub occur in upper Placerita Canyon watershed and on the ridgeline to the north, along the Santa Clara River just east of Sand Canyon, and in San Francisquito Canyon.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Artemisia californica* (California sagebrush scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Artemisia californica-Salvia mellifera* (California sagebrush-black sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Artemisia californica-Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California sagebrush-California buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Encelia californica* (California brittle bush scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Dendromecon rigida* (bush poppy scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia apiana* (white sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia leucophylla* (purple sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia mellifera* (black sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Eriogonum fasciculatum-Salvia apiana* (California buckwheat-white sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Ericameria linearifolia* (narrowleaf goldenbush scrub) Provisional Shrubland Alliance
- *Lotus scoparius* ([*Acmispon glaber*] deer weed scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Malacothamnus fasciculatus* (bush mallow scrub) Shrubland Alliance

Alluvial Fan Sage Scrub: Sometimes also known as floodplain sage scrub, generally consists of a mixture of shrubs, which colonize and persist within infrequently scoured and flooded terrain, such as floodplains, alluvial plains, or along seasonal streams. The dominant shrub in most washes is scalebroom (*Lepidospartum squamatum*), but thick leaf yerba santa (*Eriodictyon crassifolium*), Great Basin sagebrush, rabbitbrush (*Ericameria nauseosa*), skunk bush, holly leaf cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*), and foothill yucca also usually occur in the habitat type, and may be dominant, depending upon substrates and subsurface hydrology. This vegetation type is common throughout the alluvial plains and washes in the SEA, and form particularly high diversity stands along the southern margin of the river at Acton, on uplands east of the Sand Canyon confluence, along the dry reaches of the river in Santa Clarita, and in lower San Francisquito Canyon. Extensive stands of Parish's Great Basin sagebrush-dominated alluvial scrub occur around Acton and in the Kentucky Springs portion of the SEA. Lower reaches of tributary drainages to the Santa Clara River often support unusual vegetation types (not addressed in the MCV) with dominance by holly leaf cherry. In addition, the Santa Clara River floodplain provides an avenue of westward range extension for a small number of species more typically associated with the Mojave Desert flora and otherwise not expected within the cismontane region of Southern California. These include sandpaper plant (*Petalonyx thurberi*) and arrow weed (*Pluchea sericea*).

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Artemisia californica-Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California sagebrush-California buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Artemisia tridentata* (big sagebrush) Shrubland Alliance
- *Eriodictyon crassifolium* (thick leaf yerba santa scrub) Provisional Alliance

- *Eriogonum fasciculatum-Salvia apiana* (California buckwheat-white sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Lepidospartum squamatum* (scale broom scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Malosma laurina* (laurel sumac scrub) Shrubland Alliance

Native and Non-Native Grassland Communities: Consist of low, herbaceous vegetation dominated by grasses, with native formations generally mixed with native bulbs and other herbaceous species, and often intermixed with naturalized annual taxa. There are representatives of native grasslands scattered within the SEA, most notably patches of different needlegrass (*Stipa*) species and melic (*Melica*) grasses on clay soils in Placerita Canyon, on slope wetlands and around oak woodlands on the ridge north of Placerita Canyon, and on less-disturbed xeric slopes in the eastern portion of the SEA. Seeps in chaparral often support homogeneous stands of giant wildrye (*Leymus condensatus*). Other native grasses occur sporadically within most natural habitats along the Santa Clara basin.

Non-native grassland consists of invasive annual grasses that are primarily of Mediterranean origin. Dominant species within this community include wild oats (*Avena* spp.), bromes (*Bromus* spp.), and other grasses, along with wild mustards (*Brassica*, *Hirschfeldia*, and *Sisymbrium* spp.) and other disturbance-facilitated "weedy" taxa. Non-native grasslands and other ruderal formations are the dominant understory on most disturbed substrates, particularly grazed areas.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Leymus condensatus* (giant wild rye grassland) Herbaceous Alliance
- *Nassella* [*Stipa*] *cernua* (nodding needle grass grassland) Provisional Herbaceous Alliance
- *Nassella* [*Stipa*] *lepida* (foothill needle grass grassland) Provisional Herbaceous Alliance
- *Nassella* [*Stipa*] *pulchra* (purple needle grass grassland) Herbaceous Alliance
- *Avena* (*barbata, fatua*) (wild oats grasslands) Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands
- *Brassica* (*nigra*) *and Other Mustards* (upland mustards) Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands
- *Bromus* (*diandrus,hordeaceus*)-*Brachypodium distachyon* (annual brome grasslands) Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands
- *Bromus rubens-Schismus* (*arabicus, barbatus*) ([*Bromus madritensis* ssp. *rubens*] red brome or Mediterranean grass grasslands) Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands
- *Centaurea* (*solstitialis, melitensis*) (yellow star-thistle fields) Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands
- *Lolium perenne* [*Festuca perennis*] (perennial rye grass fields) Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands

Disturbed or Barren Areas: These areas either completely lack vegetation or are dominated by ruderal species. Ruderal vegetation typically found within the SEA includes non-native and native grasses and "weedy" herbaceous species, including doveweed, mustards, wire lettuce, sow thistle, telegraph weed, Russian thistle, dock, yellow star thistle, Australian saltbush, and cocklebur. Disturbed areas occur throughout the SEA on fallow agricultural sites, disked fields, abandoned pastures, residential development, paved road margins, fire breaks, dirt access roads, trails, and other similarly disturbed areas.

Corresponding MCV communities:

None at this time.

In a 2006 report submitted to PCR by South Coast Wildlands, in cooperation with the Upper Santa Clara Biodiversity Work Group, entitled *Wildlands of the Santa Clara River Watershed: Restoring and Maintaining the Integrity and Health of the River and its Watershed*, indicate several plant communities not previously identified as being present in the area. Desert scrub and Joshua tree woodland were described as being present in the eastern part of the watershed. Mainland holly

leaved cherry woodland was also identified as a sensitive plant community that is common in the area and is included above as a subset of chaparral, *Prunus ilicifolia* (holly leaf cherry chaparral) Shrubland Alliance.

Wildlife

Wildlife within the SEA is extremely diverse and abundant, commensurate with extensive acreages of natural open space and the great diversity of habitat types within the Santa Clara River channels and on the surrounding uplands. While a few wildlife species may be entirely dependent upon or obligate within a single vegetative community, the mosaic of vegetation communities within the SEA and adjoining uplands constitutes a continuum of functional ecosystems. These ecosystems support a wide variety of wildlife species, within the SEA boundaries and as a part of the regional ecosystem.

Analysis of invertebrates on any given site generally is limited by a lack of specific data, but the size of the SEA and diversity of habitats present are considered sufficient to support healthy populations of a very large number of invertebrate species, probably in excess of 2,500 species. The riparian formations, wetlands, and aquatic habitats within the SEA support diverse faunas of arthropods, including native fairy shrimp, craneflies, blackflies and other aquatic dipterans, stoneflies, caddisflies, and dobsonflies, water boatmen, giant water bugs, ground beetles, diving beetles, and tiger beetles. Terrestrial insects occur around riparian corridors and in scrub habitats, and are particularly abundant in oak-dominated habitats. Insect orders are very well-represented taxonomically, and with some habitat specialization within the SEA include orthoptera, neuroptera, coleoptera, diptera, hymenoptera and lepidoptera.

Amphibians are abundant and relatively diverse within moister woodland areas, along montane canyon bottoms, in riparian areas, and within surface water features of the SEA. The overall riparian systems of the Santa Clara River basin support abundant populations of California and Baja California chorus frogs (*Pseudacris cadaverina*, *P. hypochondriaca*), California toad (*Anaxyrus boreas halophilus*), western spadefoot toad (*Spea hammondii*), American bullfrog (*Lithobates catesbeianus*), and African clawed frog (*Xenopus laevis*)—of which the latter two species are non-native. San Francisquito Canyon also supports populations of California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*) and arroyo toad (*Anaxyrus californicus*). Arboreal salamander (*Aneides lugubris*), garden slender salamander (*Batrachoseps major*), and painted ensatina (*Ensatina eschscholtzii picta*) are also present within mesic habitats in the SEA.

Open scrub, chaparral and alluvial fan habitats support diverse reptile populations, and the overall herpetofauna of the SEA includes numerous lizard species, along with southwestern pond turtle (*Emys marmorata*) in Agua Dulce and Bear canyons, as well as some parts of the main river channel. Yucca night lizard (*Xantusia vigilis*), western side-blotched lizard (*Uta stansburiana elegans*), Great Basin fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis longipes*), Skilton's skink (*Plestiodon skiltonianus skiltonianus*), San Diego alligator lizard (*Elgaria multicarinata webbii*), coastal whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tigris stejnegeri*), coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma blainvillii*), California legless lizard (*Anniella pulchra*), and San Diego banded gecko (*Coleonlyx variegatus abbotti*) would be expected within the SEA.

The SEA also supports a robust snake fauna, including desert threadsnake (*Rena humilis cahuilae*), red racer (*Coluber flagellum piceus*), California striped racer (*Coluber lateralis lateralis*), coast patch-nosed snake (*Salvadora hexalepis virgultea*), northern three-lined boa (*Lichanura orcutti*), San Diego gopher snake (*Pituophis catenifer annectens*), California glossy snake (*Arizona elegans occidentalis*), California kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula californiae*), California mountain kingsnake (*Lampropeltis zonata*), long-nosed snake (*Rhinocheilus lecontei*), San Diego nightsnake (*Hypsiglena ochrorhyncha klauberi*), Baja California lyresnake (*Trimorphodon biscutatus lyrophanes*), western black-headed snake (*Tantilla planiceps*), two-striped garter snake (*Thamnophis hammondii*), San Bernardino ring-necked snake (*Diadophis punctatus modestus*), and southern Pacific rattlesnake

(*Crotalus oreganus helleri*).

Bird diversity within the SEA is related to habitat opportunities for year-round residents, seasonal residents, migrating raptors, and song birds. Coastal sage scrub and chaparral host a suite of birds that are typical of such sites at lower elevations over most of the coastal slopes of Southern California. The most productive sites for resident coastal sage scrub and chaparral birds are around riparian and freshwater systems, which also attract large numbers of migrants during the spring and fall. Coastal sage and chaparral birds resident or breeding within the SEA include California quail (*Callipepla californica*), greater roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*), black-chinned hummingbird (*Archilochus alexandri*), Anna's hummingbird (*Calypte anna*), Costa's hummingbird (*C. costae*), coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*), northern mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*), California thrasher (*Toxostoma redivivum*), phainopepla (*Phainopepla nitens*), spotted towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*), Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps canescens*), California towhee (*Melozone crissalis*), black-chinned sparrow (*Spizella atrogularis*), lark sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*), Bell's sage sparrow (*Amphispiza belli belli*), and lazuli bunting (*Passerina amoena*). Oak woodlands and riparian areas support many more species. Notable species include band-tailed pigeon (*Patagioenas fasciata*), western wood-pewee (*Contopus sordidulus*), summer tanager (*Piranga rubra*), black-headed grosbeak (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*), Bullock's oriole (*Icterus bullockii*), several swallow species, western yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*), southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*), and least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus. Species associated with ruderal sites and grasslands include California horned lark* (*Eremophila alpestris actia*), savannah sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), and grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*). Birds of prey (*including common migrants*) observed within the SEA include white-tailed kite (*Elanus leucurus*), northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), red-shouldered hawk (*Buteo lineatus*), Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), merlin (*Falco columbarius*), and prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*). Resident owl species within the SEA boundaries include barn owl (*Tyto alba*), great horned owl (*Bubo virginianus*), long eared owl (*Asio otus*), and California spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis occidentalis*).

Native mammal diversity within the SEA is considerable. These include bats (at least seven species), rodents (at least four species of deer mice, two species of woodrat, Beechey ground squirrel, western gray squirrel, and more), two types of rabbits and one hare, mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), common gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), cougar (*Puma concolor*), striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), western spotted skunk (*Spilogale gracilis*), long-tailed weasel (*Mustela frenata*), American badger (*Taxidea taxus*), northern raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), and broad-footed mole (*Scapanus latimanus*). Black bear (*Ursus americanus*) also occur within the SEA boundaries, at least occasionally, but the San Gabriel Mountains population was introduced for game use, and this species is not native within the SEA.

Wildlife species previously recorded, as well as those expected to occur, within the SEA are indicated in the *Comprehensive Floral & Faunal Compendium* of the *Los Angeles County SEA Update Study 2000 Background Report*. Sensitive wildlife species occurring or potentially occurring within the SEA are discussed in the Sensitive Biological Resources section.

Wildlife Movement

Historically (and prehistorically) the riparian corridor along the Santa Clara River has served as the primary east-west linkage between the Pacific coastline, coast ranges, interior ranges, high desert and southern Sierra (via the Tehachapi Range). Animals moving through the Santa Clara drainage had unobstructed passage along the river and within the riparian systems between the coastal lowlands of Ventura County and the Mojave Desert. The tributary routes extend south into the Santa Susana Mountains, south and north into the San Gabriel Mountains, northward via Castaic, Bouquet

and San Francisquito tributaries (over the coastal ranges and San Gabriel Mountains of the Transverse Ranges and into the San Joaquin Valley), west into the central coast ranges, or east through the Tehachapi Mountains, and into the southern Sierra Nevada. The present configuration of the tributary drainages has impinged upon connectivity from the Santa Clarita Valley to the north, but the Santa Clara River remains relatively intact and open. The SEA embraces the river corridor and the linkage zones that are considered essential to ensuring connectivity and resource values within the historic movement zones for all of the wildlife species present within the County portion of the Santa Clara River, including mountain lion, coyote, bobcat, and several medium-sized mammals, as well as birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fishes.

Sensitive Biological Resources

Sensitive biological resources are habitats or individual species that have special recognition by federal, state, or local conservation agencies and organizations as endangered, threatened, and/or rare. This is due to the species' declining or limited population sizes, which usually results from habitat loss. Watch lists of such resources are maintained by the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and special groups, such as the California Native Plant Society (CNPS). The following sections indicate the habitats as well as plant and animal species present, or potentially present within the SEA, which have been accorded special recognition. When species are federally-listed as endangered or threatened, they often have federally-designated, geographically-specific "critical habitat areas." Critical habitat areas, after extensive study by experts, are judged to be essential to conservation and maintenance of the species. Species with critical habitat in the SEA include the red-legged frog, arroyo toad, least Bell's vireo, and coastal California gnatcatcher. A species with essential habitat (critical habitat was proposed but not designated for species listed before 1978) is the unarmored threespine stickleback (fish).

Sensitive Plan Communities and Habitats

The SEA supports several habitat types considered sensitive by resource agencies. These are inventoried by California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) in the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDB) [2011]. The CNDDB includes state and federally-listed endangered, threatened, and rare vascular plants, as well as several sensitive vertebrate species. These communities include bigcone Douglas-fir forest, Fremont cottonwood forest, black willow thickets, California sycamore woodlands, clustered tarweed fields, chamise-white sage chaparral, holly leaf cherry chaparral, California brittle bush scrub, white sage scrub, California buckwheat-white sage scrub, narrowleaf goldenbush scrub, thick leaf yerba santa scrub, scale broom scrub, giant wild rye grassland, nodding needle grass grassland, foothill needle grass grassland, and purple needle grass grassland. These communities, or closely related designations, are considered high priority communities by the CDFG, which indicates that they are experiencing a decline throughout their range. The array and composition of these communities has been discussed in the Vegetation section.

Sensitive Plant Species

The following special-status plant taxa have been reported or have the potential to occur within the SEA, based on known habitat requirements and geographic range information:

- Nevin's barberry (*Berberis nevinii*) FE, SE, RPR 1B.1
- Round-leaved filaree (*California macrophylla*) RPR 1B.1
- Peirson's morning-glory (*Calystegia peirsonii*) RPR 4.2
- Southern tarplant (*Centromadia parryi* ssp. *australis*) RPR 1B.1
- San Fernando Valley spineflower (*Chorizanthe parryi* var. *fernandina*) FC, SE, RPR 1B.1
- Slender-horned spineflower (*Dodecahema leptoceras*) FE, SE, RPR 1B.1

- Palmer's grapplinghook (*Harpagonella palmeri*) RPR 4.2
- Newhall sunflower (*Helianthus inexpectatus*) RPR 1B.1
- Los Angeles sunflower (*Helianthus nuttallii* ssp. *parishii*) RPR 1A
- Coulter's goldfields (*Lasthenia glabrata* ssp. *coulteri*) RPR 1B.1
- Davidson's bushmallow (*Malacothamnus davidsonii*) RPR 1B.2
- Moran's navarretia (*Navarretia fossalis*) FT, RPR 1B.1
- White rabbit-tobacco (*Pseudognaphalium leucocephalum*) RPR 2.2
- Chaparral ragwort (*Senecio aphanactis*) RPR 2.2
- Mason's neststraw (*Stylocline masonii*) RPR 1B.1
- Greata's aster (*Symphyotrichum greatae*) RPR 1B.3
- Slender mariposa lily (*Calochortus clavatus* var. *gracilis*) RPR 1B.2
- Plummer's mariposa lily (*Calochortus plummerae*) RPR 1B.2
- California Orcutt grass (*Orcuttia californica*) RPR FE, SE, 1B.1

Sensitive Animal Species

The following special-status animal species are reported or are likely to be present within the SEA based on habitat requirements and known range attributes:

- Riverside fairy shrimp (*Streptocephalus woottoni*) FE
- Santa Ana sucker (*Catostomus santaanae*) FT, FSS, SSC
- Unarmored threespine stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus williamsoni*) FE, FSS, SE, CDFG Fully Protected
- Arroyo chub (*Gila orcuttii*) FSS, SSC
- Arroyo toad (*Anaxyrus californicus*) FE, SSC
- California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*) FT, SSC
- Western spadefoot (*Spea hammondii*) BLMS, SSC
- Silvery legless lizard (*Anniella pulchra pulchra*) FSS, SSC
- Coastal whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tigris stejnegeri*) CDFG Special Animals List
- Rosy boa (*Charina trivirgata*) BLMS, FSS
- Western pond turtle (*Emys marmorata*) BLMS, FSS, SSC
- Coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma blainvillii*) BLMS, FSS, SSC
- Coast patch-nosed snake (*Salvadora hexalepis virgultea*) SSC
- Two-striped garter snake (*Thamnophis hammondii*) BLMS, FSS, SSC
- Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) CDFG Watch List
- Tricolored blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*) BCC, BLMS, SSC, USBC, AWL, ABC
- Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps canescens*) CDFG Watch List
- Grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) CDFG Special Animals List
- Bell's sage sparrow (*Amphispiza belli belli*) BCC, CDFG Watch List
- Golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) BCC, BLMS, CDFG Watch List, CDFG Fully Protected, CDF
- Burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*) BCC, BLMS, SSC
- Ferruginous hawk (*Buteo regalis*) BCC, BLMS, CDFG Watch List, AWL, LAA
- Western yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*) FC, BCC, FSS, SE
- Yellow warbler (*Dendroica petechia brewsteri*) SSC
- White-tailed kite (*Elanus leucurus*) CDFG Fully Protected
- Southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) FE, FSS, SE, USBC, AWL, ABC
- California horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris actia*) CDFG Watch List, LAA
- Prairie falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) BCC, CDFG Watch List, LAA

- American peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) BCC, FSS, SE, CDF, CDFG Fully Protected, AWL, ABC
- California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) FE, SE, CDF, CDFG Fully Protected, USBC, AWL, ABC
- Yellow-breasted chat (*Icteria virens*) SSC
- Loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) BCC, SSC, LAA
- Coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) FT, SSC, USBC, AWL, ABC
- Bank swallow (*Riparia riparia*) ST
- Least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*) FE, BCC, SE, USBC, AWL, ABC
- Pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*) FSS, BLMS, SSC, WBWG High
- Pallid San Diego pocket mouse (*Chaetodipus fallax pallidus*) SSC
- Spotted bat (*Euderma maculatum*) BLMS, SSC, WBWG High
- Western mastiff bat (*Eumops perotis californicus*) BLMS, SSC, WBWG High
- Silver-haired bat (*Lasionycteris noctivagans*) WBWG Medium
- Hoary bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*) WBWG Medium
- Western yellow bat (*Lasiurus xanthinus*) WBWG High
- San Diego black-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus bennettii*) SSC
- California leaf-nosed bat (*Macrotus californicus*) FSS, SSC, WBWG High
- Fringed myotis (*Myotis thysanodes*) BLMS, WBWG High
- Long-legged myotis (*Myotis volans*) BLMS, SSC, WBWG Medium
- Yuma myotis (*Myotis yumaensis*) BLMS, WBWG Low-Medium
- San Diego desert woodrat (*Neotoma lepida intermedia*) SSC
- Big free-tailed bat (*Nyctinomops macrotis*) SSC, WBWG Medium-High
- Southern grasshopper mouse (*Onychomys torridus ramona*) SSC
- American badger (*Taxidea taxus*) SSC

Ecological Transition Areas (ETAs)

ETAs within this SEA are often scattered residential and camping development along the Santa Clara River, but also include development, such as ranches, a sewage treatment plant, and an aggregate mine. Disturbed stream or riverbed or potential for disturbance is the chief reason for ETAs in this SEA.

Regional Biological Value

The SEA meets several SEA designation criteria and supports many regional biological values. Each criterion and how it is met described below.

CRITERIA ANALYSIS OF THE SANTA CLARA RIVER SEA

Criterion		Status	Justification
A)	The habitat of core populations of endangered or threatened plant or animal species.	Met	The only existing natural population of the federally-endangered unarmored three-spine stickleback is within the Santa Clara River and its tributaries, and all of its essential habitat is in this SEA. The federally-threatened Santa Ana sucker occurs in the river, as does the state species of concern, the arroyo chub. The population of

Criterion		Status	Justification
			state and federally-endangered slender-horned spineflower in Bee Canyon is one of fewer than seven known occurrences for this species, one of only two known occurrences in the County, and one of its largest populations. San Francisquito Creek has a breeding area for the endangered red-legged frog. The San Fernando Valley spineflower (at Newhall Ranch in Interstate-5 vicinity) is found in only a few nearby places. Some of the critical habitat for the threatened California coastal gnatcatcher is included in this SEA. Western spadefoot, which is a species of concern, is extremely rare and local in the County away from this SEA. One of the largest, if not largest populations of least Bell's vireo in the County occurs along the river in the vicinity of the crossing of Interstate-5 near Newhall Ranch. Many RPR-listed rare plants occur within the SEA. Critical habitat occurs in the SEA for the listed arroyo toad, the red-legged frog, the coastal California gnatcatcher, and the least Bell's vireo.
B)	On a regional basis, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution.	Met	The low-elevation bigcone Douglas fir-canyon oak forests above Placerita Canyon, the vernal pool in the Placerita Canyon-Sand Canyon divide, the native grassland on the Golden Valley Ranch (upper Placerita Canyon), and the alluvial fans with sage scrub in lower San Francisquito Canyon, Kentucky Springs and Acton are unique and regionally restricted biotic communities. Additionally, the riparian forests and woodlands along the Santa Clara River are among the most extensive, diverse and intact vegetative stands of this type in Southern California. Rare aquatic species, such as the unarmored three-spined stickleback, Santa Ana sucker, red-legged frog, least Bell's vireo, summer tanager, spineflower, and many others represented within the SEA are found nowhere else in the region.
C)	Within the County, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution.	Met	The cottonwood-willow forests and woodlands, alluvial fan sage scrub, and coast live oak riparian forest are best represented in the County within the SEA. The lower elevation examples of bigcone Douglas fir-canyon oak forest communities where they mix with low-elevation biota are restricted to the edges of mountain habitat communities, which are regionally rare and also designated in this SEA.

Criterion		Status	Justification
D)	Habitat that at some point in the life cycle of a species or group of species, serves as concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or migrating grounds and is limited in availability either regionally or in the County.	Met	The Santa Clara River is simultaneously an oasis running through a dry landscape and an extension of coastal conditions into the dry interior. For this reason, it supports unique populations of aquatic and amphibious species, as well as arid lands species extending towards the coast and coastal species' extension inland. It is a principle migratory route for the County plants and animals and a center of diversity for the County. The Santa Clara River and its tributaries provide breeding opportunities for numerous species otherwise not known to breed within the County, including California red-legged frog, summer tanager, southwestern willow flycatcher, and the unarmored three-spined stickleback . The extensive riparian areas shelter dozens of migrant songbird species during winter, including high concentrations of white-crowned and golden-crowned sparrows, fox sparrow, yellow-rumped warbler, dark-eyed junco, and sharp-shinned hawk. The SEA embraces the river corridor and the linkage zones that are considered essential to ensuring connectivity and resource values for many of the wildlife species that are present within the County portion of the Santa Clara River.
E)	Biotic resources that are of scientific interest because they are either an extreme in physical/geographical limitations, or represent unusual variation in a population or community.	Met	The Santa Clara River represents a unique example of a drainage that stretches from the desert to the coast through the mountains. Its resources are, by definition, present at their geographic extremes. Plants such as western juniper, snake cholla, basin sagebrush, and birds, such as summer tanager are at the southwestern edges of their ranges along the river. Coastal taxa extend to the headwaters in the Acton area. High elevation species, such as bigcone Douglas fir, spotted owl, and Steller's jay occur at fairly low elevations at the edges of Santa Clara River valley, on north facing slopes that remain cool all summer.
F)	Areas that would provide for the preservation of relatively undisturbed examples of the original natural biotic communities in the County.	Met	The SEA encompasses some of the highest quality, least disturbed and biotically intact acreage of bigcone Douglas-fir-canyon oak forest, riparian forest and woodland, coastal sage scrub, and alluvial fan sage scrub that remains in the County, and one of the three known vernal pools along the river. Vernal pools are rare everywhere in California.

In conclusion, the area is an SEA because it contains: A) the habitat of core populations of endangered and threatened plant and animal species; B-C) biotic communities, vegetative

associations, and habitat of plant and animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution in the County and regionally; D) concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or migrating grounds, which are limited in availability in the County; E) numerous examples of species at their habitat extremes as the coastal and desert influences meet; and F) areas that provide for the preservation of relatively undisturbed examples of original natural biotic communities in the County.

20. Santa Clara River SEA Sources

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