

Salinas River

Long-Term Management Plan

SUMMER 2018

Project Summary

The Salinas River is the longest river system in the central coast of California. The use of river flows for aquifer recharge and irrigation in the Salinas Valley makes it one of the most productive agricultural regions in California. However, activities such as riparian vegetation removal, ad-hoc bank stabilization for flood control, including non-native invasive plants, and pollution are having an effect on the river.

The Monterey County Water Resources Agency (MCWRA) is the primary local agency managing and, protecting water along the Salinas River while minimizing flood risk. Until now, MCWRA has addressed many challenging water management issues one by one, often as funding becomes available. This project, the Salinas River Long-Term Management Plan (LTMP), will start the process of a more comprehensive solution to water management along the Salinas River.

MCWRA received a grant from the California Coastal Conservancy to begin development of a Salinas River LTMP. MCWRA will develop the management strategy to meet the goals and objectives for the entire system, while maintaining necessary flexibility. The strategy will clearly define benefits, build upon public/private partnerships, and be compatible with existing land and water rights and uses.

The draft goals of the LTMP include:

Identify long-term solutions for management of the Salinas River that include flood reduction, water resource management, and habitat management for threatened and endangered species

Investigate the Salinas River Lagoon for the potential of reducing flooding on productive agriculture land in the vicinity

Identify potential mitigation and solutions to steelhead migration issues in the Salinas River Corridor utilizing existing management efforts and future projects and future projects

Develop an outline for a long-term management strategy within Monterey County that meets a variety of multi-benefit management goals

Key Species, Environmental Considerations, and Regulatory Compliance

The Salinas River and its lagoon are designated as critical habitat for a number of species. Both the federal government and the state government designate species for protection, based on the health or population of the species. Steelhead trout is listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). The lagoon is also habitat for tidewater goby, listed as endangered under ESA, and the beach area is designated critical habitat and breeding grounds for western snowy plover, also listed as threatened under ESA. Other listed species with the potential to occur in the Salinas River corridor and around the lagoon include the California red-legged frog, least Bell's vireo, and bank swallow.



Transitioning from Long Term Management Plan to Habitat Conservation Plan

Operation of MCWRA facilities and management of the Salinas River lagoon may cause “take” of many of these species, as defined by the ESA. From 2007 to 2017, MCWRA had authorization to take federally listed species from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for much of its operations. NMFS expects to complete a revised biological opinion in 2018, but it will only last for up to 3 years. This short-term biological opinion will provide MCWRA with take authorization while it prepares a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). The HCP, under Section 10 of the ESA, will address long-term water operations and maintenance. The HCP will provide a more comprehensive and durable take authorization than biological opinions under Section 7 of the ESA. The HCP will be based, in part, on the LTMP and the existing biological opinions.

“Take” is defined by the ESA as harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect any threatened or endangered species.

The benefit of the HCP is to provide MCWRA with regulatory certainty for decades with a comprehensive and sustainable plan for the Salinas River.

To approve the HCP, MCWRA will need to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) by preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIR). To issue the ESA Section 10(a)(1)(B) permits, both NMFS and USFWS must comply with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) by preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

Schedule

MCWRA will develop the LTMP, HCP, and EIR/EIS in phases. MCWRA will complete the LTMP in 2019, with a public draft by the end of 2018. The HCP and EIR/EIS will follow with an anticipated start in 2019 if MCWRA can secure funding to support the effort. The HCP will take approximately 3 years to complete.

Agency & Public Engagement

Public and agency involvement is critical to the development of a successful LTMP. MCRWA is developing a robust stakeholder engagement process to solicit input and gather insights into issues to strengthen the LTMP. In addition, MCWRA is coordinating with other related planning efforts, including the Salinas Valley groundwater sustainability plan, scheduled for completion in 2020-2022.

Contact Information

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