Historic Biological Reports
Scan Control Sheet

County Project Number(s): CUP - 2949

Report Type (check one):
- ☐ Initial Study
- ☒ Species Inventory/Survey
- ☐ Focused Study
- ☐ EIR
- ☐ Draft EIR
- ☐ EIS
- ☐ ND
- ☐ MND
- ☐ Other

Report Date (Month/Day/Year): 08/14/1997

Check if the following apply to the report:

- ☐ Wetland and/or aquatic habitat
- ☐ Within designated Coastal Zone
- ☐ Potential movement corridor for fish and/or wildlife

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August 14, 1997

United Water Conservation District
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Attention: Mr. Doug West

BIOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT FOR THE LAKE PIRU MASTER PLAN PROJECT VENTURA COUNTY, CA

Rincon Consultants, Inc. has conducted a biological survey of the areas proposed for expansion of recreational facilities at Lake Piru near the existing campground. Three expansion sites are addressed by this report; the small group RV area near the existing marina, the improved day use area just north of Texaco Knoll, and the expansion of the swim beach with a new adjacent swim lagoon. While other renovations are also proposed under the updated Master Plan, those renovations are part of unbuilt facilities previously approved and considered in the 1980 Environmental Impact Report for the Master Plan. The purpose of this report is to discuss the general biological habitats at the project sites and determine the potential effects of new or expanded recreational facilities on sensitive biological resources, both due to construction and during operation. This report is intended to meet the needs of the United Water Conservation District for their environmental documentation of the Master Plan changes, and the County of Ventura's environmental documentation needs as a responsible agency for those changes. This report is expected to be used for reference in the Initial Study being prepared for the Master Plan and the subsequent environmental document.

STUDY AREA

The project sites are located within the Lake Piru Recreation Area Core Area and within one mile of the existing main camping facilities and marina (Figure 1). The small group RV area is immediately north of the gatehouse and next to the marina and marina parking lot. The improved day use area is on the southeast-facing shore across from Texaco Knoll, while the swim lagoon is adjacent to the dirt parking lot and existing swim beach about 1,600 feet further north.

METHODOLOGY

A field reconnaissance of the sites was performed on July 2, 1997. Dominant vegetation at the sites was noted and the location of dominant plant associations mapped. Wildlife were observed during the reconnaissance and an active search was conducted for sensitive wildlife species, in particular, the coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma coronatum*), western spadefoot toad (*Scaphiopus hammondii*), arroyo toad (*Bufo microscaphus californianus*), and

two-striped garter snake (*Thamnophis hammondi*). Four soil test pits were hand dug to determine the wetland soil characteristics, if any, of the swim lagoon site. Observations were also made on the location of water marks, drift lines, banks, shelving, changes in soil characteristics, and other indications of the ordinary high water mark to aid in determining the classification of the site as a wetland under the Army Corps of Engineers procedures.

BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES AT THE SITES

Small Group RV Site

Vegetation. The dominant plant associations in this location are ruderal grasslands and olive groves mixed with native scrub (Figure 2). This area is currently used informally for picnicking in the open areas, and also is partially irrigated, which allows the growth of several landscaping species within the area. The dominant species in the ruderal grassland are brome grasses (*Bromus* sp.) and slender wild oat (*Avena sativa*), and occasional yellow star thistle (*Centaurea melitensis*), bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*), horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*), saw-toothed goldenbush (*Hazardia squarrosa*), and black mustard (*Brassica nigra*). The dried stems of blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium bellum*) were seen in the more open southern end of this site. The native scrub plants associated with the olive trees (*Olea europaea*) include several large toyons (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*), elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*), buckbrush (*Ceanothus cuneatus*), and poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*). One coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) is located near the entry road and gatehouse.

No rare or endangered plant species were noted in this location, and given the disturbance associated with current and past use, no sensitive plants are anticipated.

Wildlife. Few wildlife species were seen in this location, owing in part to the small area, but most of the common species prevalent at Lake Piru are expected to be present. Several western fence lizards were observed near the parking lot. No other reptiles were seen, though gopher snakes and side-blotched lizards would be expected. Birds noted included California quail, brown towhee, and lesser goldfinch. Cottontail rabbits were seen in the area, along with numerous mice holes and runs, gopher holes, and mule deer scat.

Habitat for horned lizards at this location is considered lacking because of the few harvester ant colonies seen, the disturbance associated with existing casual use of the site, and the vegetation density (lack of open sandy areas). The site does not provide suitable habitat for breeding by the spadefoot toad, arroyo toad, or the two-striped garter snake.

Wetland Status. This area is located above the lake high water mark and contains no drainages. A small drainage that contains a few mulefat (*Baccharis salicifolia*) bushes is located at the southern end of the site, but this area is not apparently within the proposed disturbance zone.

Improved Day Use Area

Vegetation. Ruderal grassland and coastal sage scrub are the primary habitats present in this location (Figure 3). Annual grasses (bromes, slender oats, and annual fescues [*Vulpia*

sp.]) along with abundant concentrations of filaree (*Erodium* sp.) and mustard are the primary components of the grassland. Phacelia (*Phacelia distans* and *P. ramosissima*), saw-toothed goldenbush, and alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) also occurred commonly in this grassland. A significant patch of tumbleweed (*Amaranthus albus*) was located adjacent to the barren turnout at the road. The coastal sage scrub dominants include sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*) and purple sage (*Salvia leucophylla*), with some buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*) and chaparral mallow (*Malacothamnus fasciculatus*).

Four large valley oaks (*Quercus lobata*) are an important aspect of this site since they offer different micro-climatic conditions under their branches. However, the understory flora found in this location was not substantially different from the adjoining ruderal grassland and coastal sage scrub.

Wildlife. The valley oak trees offer an important roost location for raptorial birds that hunt over the adjacent grasslands and scrub areas. Turkey vultures and red-tailed hawks roost frequently in these trees, but no nesting was observed. Other birds seen in this location included mourning dove, phainopepla, and scrub jay. A western whiptail lizard was seen in the sage scrub adjacent to the oak trees. Sign was present that indicated that cottontail rabbit, mule deer, pocket gopher, ground squirrel, coyote, and deer mice all frequent the habitats in this location.

Wetland Status. The proposed day use area is generally above the high water mark of the lake and no wetland hydrology exists at this location except at the lake's edge.

Swim Lagoon

Vegetation. Approximately one-third of this location is currently a graded dirt parking lot, in which four blue gum trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*) are located (Figure 4). On the northern side of the parking lot is a small cove of the lake that contains water only during full reservoir periods in the winter. A line of mulefat bushes delineates the high water mark for the lake, with annual ruderal grassland generally occurring upslope of the mulefat. At the time of the field visit (July 2), the area between the mulefat and the lake's edge was dominated by mustard (*Brassica* sp.), with foxtail brome (*Bromus rubens*), filaree or storksbill (*Erodium* sp.) and yellow star thistle also common. Nearer the water's edge, salt heliotrope (*Heliotropium curassavicum*) is more common, while cocklebur (*Xanthium strumarium*) is present at the water's edge and in shallow water.

The vegetation along a small drainage on the northern side of this area is predominantly chaparral. Across the north side of the cove is a mixture of coastal sage scrub and chaparral elements. Dominant species in the chaparral include yerba santa (*Eriodictyon crassifolium*), coyote brush, and sugar bush (*Rhus ovata*), with purple sage, and sagebrush being the dominant species in the coastal sage scrub. A large, arborescent elderberry was located along the drainage, while tree tobacco (*Nicotiana glauca*) and giant wild rye (*Leymus condensatus*) were located in disturbed areas of the coastal sage scrub. Coastal sage scrub vegetation is also found south of the dirt parking lot.

The ruderal grassland at the site is distinguishable into three basic associations: (1) a mustard dominated group as previously discussed; (2) an oat and annual brome grass

association; and (3) a bunchgrass group. All of these groups share most of the species present, with the differentiation based on a visual observation of the primary dominants. Species present in the ruderal grassland include mustard, slender oat, soft chess, foxtail brome, filaree, doveweed (*Eremocarpus setigerus*), yellow star thistle, wild oat (*A. fatua*), and California needlegrass (*Nassella [Stipa] californica*). The latter species is a native bunchgrass that is outside its normal range and was apparently used during revegetation efforts. It is the dominant species along a previously graded slope just north of the parking lot, and it is also well established near the drainage course, occupying a total area of about 0.5 acres. The ruderal grassland has been grazed regularly and shows substantial disturbance from this activity.

Wildlife. The eucalyptus trees at this site provide roosting and nesting habitat for a variety of birds, with American kestrel, ash-throated flycatcher, and hooded oriole recently nesting in the eucalyptus. Anna's hummingbird also nested in these trees, while mourning dove, house finch, common crow, and European starling also frequent them. Additional birds seen in the grassland and scrub areas or flying overhead included red-tailed hawk, red-shouldered hawk, turkey vulture, common bushtit, Bewick's wren, wrentit, spotted towhee, brown towhee, common flicker, and scrub jay.

Cattle sign was found throughout the site, particularly in the mustard areas and under the large elderberry tree. Brush rabbit, wood rat, microtine mice, and ground squirrel sign was also common in the area.

Pacific treefrogs were found at the water's edge and in the adjoining grassland. Other amphibians expected in the area include California slender salamander, western toad, and bullfrog. Western fence lizard was the only reptile seen, but several species of snakes common to scrub areas would be expected to occur at least occasionally at the site.

Wetland Status. Four wetland data point samples were taken within the proposed swim lagoon area; the first under the mulefat scrub near the center of the cove, the second about 85 feet closer to the water's edge, the third at 15 feet from the water's edge, and the fourth within the alluvial channel of the small drainage course at 115 feet downstream of the mulefat. At the first site, the mulefat scrub was an indicator of facultative wetland vegetation and drift lines indicated the maximum high water for the reservoir. The soil was dry and somewhat clayey, with sand and small pieces of decomposed bedrock. While damp below 6 inches, the soil did not hold together and there was no indication that hydric soil conditions were present.

The second sample was in an area dominated by mustard with virtually no hydrophytic plants present, even though drift lines were located topographically upslope of the sample site. The soil was loose alluvium, dry, and slightly darker from 11 inches to the bottom of the sample hole at 18 inches. No evidence of gleying, mottling, or organic streaking was observable within the soil. It was noted that a ground squirrel burrow was located 50 feet closer to the lake edge and less than 40 feet from the water's edge within the mustard dominated grassland.

The third site had a 50% ground coverage of salt heliotrope, a facultative wetland species, with mustard being a co-dominant with a similar ground coverage. An oxidation layer and sulfate smell occurred at 4 inches, and groundwater flowed into the hole at 12 inches below

the ground surface. This area within 15 feet of the water's edge would be clearly classifiable as a wetland.

The fourth site was within a sandy alluvial channel that was mostly barren of plants. No water was encountered in the sample hole, with the fine sand only slightly damp at 24 inches below the ground surface.

Because of the influence of the reservoir, the area downslope and including the mulefat scrub can be classified as man-made wetlands based on hydrology. However, the wetland values of this area are minimal, as indicated by the preponderance of mustard and the general lack of hydric soil formation even though wetland hydrology has existed at the site since Santa Felicia Dam was completed in 1955.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The Ventura County *Initial Study Assessment Guidelines* (November, 1992) have identified Appendix G of the *State CEQA Guidelines* as the source of threshold criteria for determining significant impacts of projects. These criteria indicate that a project would have a significant impact if it:

- Conflicts with the adopted environmental plans and goals of the community where it is located;
- Substantially affects a rare or endangered species of animal or plant or the habitat of the species;
- Interferes substantially with the movement of any resident or migratory fish or wildlife species;
- Substantially diminishes habitat for fish, wildlife or plants; or
- Involves the use, production or disposal of materials which pose a hazard to animal or plant populations in the area affected.

Development of the small group RV camp would be within a former olive orchard and in an area that has been used for several years as an informal picnicking area. Development of this area would remove only common native shrub species and ruderal vegetation, with no sensitive species likely to be present nor expected to be harmed by the proposed action. No significant wildlife pathways would be affected by this proposed development. The amount of habitat removed does not represent a "substantial" loss of habitat for plants or animals given the regionally available amount of similar, less disturbed habitat in the adjacent Lake Piru watershed. The project does not involve the use, production or disposal of toxic or hazardous materials that may result in impacts on native flora and fauna.

The development of a parking lot, picnic tables, and landscaping at the improved day use area will remove primarily the ruderal grassland, though some coastal sage scrub habitat will also be affected. The oak trees are not planned for removal, though some branch trimming may be necessary for safety reasons. Similar to the RV group camp, this proposed use would not result in a significant impact to sensitive plants or animals, nor would it remove substantial amounts of habitat. It may somewhat decrease the use of the valley oaks by raptorial birds, though the proposed day use is not likely to cause a significant effect because raptorial birds coexist with similar facilities in other locations. As

an example, a turkey vulture nocturnal roost persists within the campground at the State Park in Morro Bay.

Encroachment within the crown coverage of the valley oaks could ultimately lead to their long term decline due to soil compaction, direct injury to surface roots, and trunk damage caused by people. While the number of valley oaks and amount of valley oak habitat have substantially decreased, these are not considered a rare plant and the potential long term loss of these trees and their habitat is not significant based on the regional supply. Nonetheless, mitigation measures are suggested for the Master Plan to reduce effects on native oak trees.

Paving of the parking lot at the swim lagoon site and development of picnic facilities on the barren dirt parking lot would not adversely affect any biological resources, and would reduce sediment runoff into the lake. Development of extended day use activities would include the construction of a trail and other modifications of the coastal sage scrub habitat between the parking lot and the improved day use area to the south. Loss of this habitat is not expected to cause a significant effect due to the regional supply of available habitat and the relatively small area affected.

Development within the cove area north of the parking lot would include construction of a swim lagoon and adjoining picnic areas. The majority of vegetation that would be removed is the ruderal grassland, including the revegetated bunchgrass. Ruderal grassland is not a sensitive community type and loss of this grassland is not considered significant. The swim lagoon site meets the criteria for definition as a wetland under the Army Corps of Engineers procedures even though the area generally lacks hydric soils and appropriate vegetation. This area is under the jurisdiction of the Corps under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. The amount of wetland vegetation that would be removed (less than one-third of an acre of mulefat scrub) is not biologically significant, and the entire swim lagoon project may qualify for a Nationwide Permit under current regulations. In addition, the wetland vegetation removed would be replaced in part by new wetland vegetation that would be expected to develop around the margins of the swim lagoon. It is noted that a Streambed Alteration Agreement from the California Department of Fish and Game may also be required for this portion of the Master Plan development.

No rare, threatened, or endangered plant species are recorded as being present in the vicinity of Lake Piru by the California Department of Fish and Game Natural Diversity Data Base. In addition, those listed plants that occur within Ventura County would not be expected to occur within the habitats present within the Master Plan area. The endangered California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) is known to occur in the vicinity of Lake Piru (the Sespe Condor Sanctuary is located about 3 miles west of Lake Piru), but these birds would not be expected to use the habitats present at the expansion sites because of the existing level of human disturbance. The federally listed endangered southwestern arroyo toad (*Bufo microscaphus californicus*) is known to occur along Piru Creek upstream of Lake Piru, with its preferred habitat being perennial streams with slow flowing water or pools and sandy shoals. This toad has not been recorded at the project sites and these sites do not contain preferred habitat. Buildout of the proposed Master Plan would not be expected to have a significant direct impact on this species because of the lack of preferred habitat at the expansion sites. An indirect impact could occur in that additional people would be drawn to the area, who may then choose to hike up Piru Creek and potentially disturb

arroyo toad habitat. It is anticipated that most recreationalists drawn to the lake by the proposed facilities would stay in the immediate vicinity of those facilities, but some indirect effect could nonetheless occur.

Sensitive communities listed by the California Natural Diversity Data Base as occurring in the region include southern coast live oak riparian forest, southern cottonwood willow riparian forest, sycamore alder riparian woodland, southern willow scrub, southern walnut woodland, walnut forest, and valley oak woodland. Only the latter community, valley oak woodland, is present at the expansion sites. The four valley oaks and associated plants meet the definition of valley oak woodland, but given the small size and present disturbance associated with day use picnicking in this area, the potential biological value of site is minimal. Given these factors, expansion of the day use in this area would not constitute a significant impact on this sensitive plant community.

Another facility of potential concern to biological resources is the development of a wastewater treatment facility somewhere near the existing Oak Grove campground in Reasoner Canyon. Several locations are under consideration, with the currently preferred site in a small drainage south of the campground and west of the entry road (Draft Lake Piru Recreation Area Master Plan, June 1997, pg. 29). This area contains vegetation similar to the small group RV camp, mainly olive trees, chaparral scrubs, and ruderal grassland, but several oak trees are also located in this vicinity. Development of this facility should follow the recommended mitigation measure with regard to oak trees.

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURES

The following Biological Resource Protection design guidelines should be added to the Master Plan.

- No picnic tables, concrete pads, or buildings shall be located within the dripline of oak trees. Any revegetation plans shall include the use of only native species within the driplines of oaks and irrigation designs are to avoid summer irrigation of live oaks.

- United Water Conservation District in conjunction with the Los Padres National Forest Service should investigate the need to limit the number of recreational users who access Piru Creek from the Blue Point Campground. This may include the implementation of a paid daily permit program with a limited number of daily passes available and seasonal limitations that minimize potential disturbance during arroyo toad breeding periods.

If you have any questions regarding this report, please do not hesitate to call.

Sincerely,

RINCON CONSULTANTS, INC.

Duane Vander Pluym, D. Env.
Principal

Cc.: Nick Deitch, Mainstreet Architects & Planners
Attach.: References, Figures

REFERENCES

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