

California Environmental Quality Act Environmental Checklist Form
Biological Resources
County of Ventura, Planning Division



SEP 0 2000

PROJECT REFERENCE NO.: PM-5265 (DMEC PN 00-0011-1)	PROJECT PLANNER: Debbie Morrisset
DATE: 14 April 2000; field site visit conducted on 6 April 2000	PROJECT BIOLOGIST: David Magney & Cher Wellonen, David Magney Environmental Consulting

PROJECT LOCATION: The project site is located at the intersection of State Route 126 and Old Telegraph Road; NE¼, NE¼, S34, T4N, R20W; NW¼, NW¼, S35, T4N, R20W; and NE¼ & SW¼, SW¼, S26, T4N, R20W; Fillmore Quadrangle (7.5 minute series), Ventura County, California; 34°23'35" latitude, 118°57'13" longitude.

PROJECT ADDRESS: No address number.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT: To perform a full parcel review to legalize a 62.99-acre lot (Assessor's Parcel No. 041-0-300-080 & 100).

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING: The project site is located approximately one mile west of Fillmore (Sespe No. 2) and ¼ mile northeast of the Sespe and Oak villages. It is approximately ½ mile long with the broadest portion of the site at the southern end tapering to the narrowest portion at the northern end. The project site is sandwiched between the southeast side of Old Telegraph Road and the northwest side [right bank] of Sespe Creek. The site occurs a short distance north of the confluence of Sespe Creek and the Santa Clara River. See attached photographs for selected scenes of the parcel.

The proposed lot consists of predominantly flat topography, throughout approximately 75% of the 63-acre site, which is primarily occupied by citrus orchards with little or no native vegetation. However, the southeastern boarder of the project site runs parallel to Sespe Creek and includes a portion of the creek's steep northwest bank and its inactive streambed and floodplain. A large eucalyptus grove makes the transition from citrus orchard to Southern Mixed Riparian Woodland, which then blends into Scalebroom Scrub adjacent to the southeastern side of the site.

Southern Mixed Riparian Woodland. This mixed riparian plant community is a sensitive and diminishing habitat type, which contributes significant biological resources to the site and region. The riparian vegetation, within the bed and bank of Sespe Creek, consists of a scattered mixed tree canopy (dominated by cottonwood and willow species) over an open shrub stratum (Mulefat Scrub) and a sparse ground layer. The tree canopy consists of winter-deciduous wetland and floodplain species, including Southern California Black Walnut (*Juglans californica* var. *californica* [special-status species]), Black Cottonwood (*Populus balsamifera* ssp. *tricarpa*), Fremont Cottonwood (*P. fremontii*), Coast Live Oak (*Quercus agrifolia* [near the eucalyptus grove]), Narrow-leaved Willow (*Salix exigua*), Arroyo Willow (*S. lasiolepis*), and Blue Elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*).

The dominant shrub occupying the dry streambed is Mulefat (*Baccharis salicifolia*), while other scattered and intergrading shrubs include: California Sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), Brewer Saltbush (*Atriplex lentiformis* ssp. *breweri*), California Buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum* var. *polifolium*), Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia* [1 observed]), Giant Wildrye (*Leymus condensatus*), Deerweed (*Lotus scoparius*), Laurelleaf Sumac (*Malosma laurina* [1 observed]), White Sage (*Salvia apiana*), and Purple Sage (*S. leucophylla*).

The native herbaceous groundlayer species growing below the mixed riparian canopy onsite include: Mugwort (*Artemisia douglasiana*), California Sun-cup (*Camissonia bistorta*), Common Horseweed (*Conyza canadensis*), White Everlasting (*Gnaphalium canescens* ssp. *microcephalum*), Telegraph Weed (*Heterotheca grandiflora*), Cudweed-aster (*Lessingia filaginifolia*), Fleshy Lupine (*Lupinus succulentus*), Manroot (*Marah fabaceus*), Hedge Nettle (*Stachys bullata*), and Hairy Vetch (*Vicia villosa* ssp. *varia*).

Scalebroom Scrub. The east side of the project site only touches the western extent of the Scalebroom Scrub; however, this scrub type is worth noting since it is a rare habitat type. Scalebroom Scrub is dominated by *Lepidospartum squamatum* (Scalebroom), which forms an intermittent to open shrub canopy, growing over a sparse groundlayer of predominantly native herbaceous species. Several scattered, but important, associate shrubs contribute to the Scalebroom canopy, including: California Sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), Big Sagebrush (*A. tridentata* ssp. *tridentata*), California Brickellbush (*Brickellia californica*), Buck Brush (*Ceanothus cuneatus* var. *cuneatus* [1 observed]), California Croton (*Croton californicum*), Thicketleaf Yerba Santa (*Eriodictyon crassifolium* var. *nigrescens*), California Buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum* var. *polifolium*), Deerweed (*Lotus scoparius*), Coast Prickly Pear (*Opuntia littoralis*); White, Purple, and Black Sages (*Salvia apiana*, *S. leucophylla*, and *S. mellifera*); Shrubby Butterweed (*Senecio flaccidus* var. *douglasii*), and Our Lord's Candle (*Yucca whipplei*).

The native herbaceous species scattered beneath the Scalebroom Scrub canopy include: California Sun-cup (*Camissonia bistorta*), Common Forget-me-not (*Cryptantha intermedia*), Calabazilla (*Cucurbita foetidissima*), White Everlasting (*Gnaphalium canescens* ssp. *microcephalum*), Fleshy Lupine (*Lupinus succulentus*), Wild Rhubarb (*Rumex hymenosepalus*), and Hairy Vetch (*Vicia villosa* ssp. *varia*).

Invasive/Exotic Species. The large eucalyptus grove, which separates the citrus orchard and the riparian vegetation onsite, is expectedly disturbed, as it is dominated by exotic tree species (mostly planted), including Blackwood Acacia (*Acacia melanoxylon*), Tasmanian Blue Gum Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*), and Peruvian Pepper Tree (*Schinus molle*).

The majority of the grove understory consists of primarily nonnative invasive species, forming a ruderal plant community with the following associates: Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*), Black Mustard (*Brassica nigra*), Lambsquarters (*Chenopodium album*), Redstem Filaree (*Erodium cicutarium*), Sweet Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), Summer Mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*), Cheeseweed (*Malva parviflora*), White Horehound (*Marrubium vulgare*), Yellow Sweetclover (*Melilotus indica*), Tree Tobacco (*Nicotiana glauca*), Smilo Grass (*Piptatherum miliaceum*), Wild Radish (*Raphanus sativus*), Castor Bean (*Ricinus communis*), Milk Thistle (*Silybum marianum*), Common Sow-thistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*), and Dwarf Nettle (*Urtica urens*).

Several of these highly invasive exotic plants, making up the ruderal community onsite, are of significant concern, as they are invading the neighboring native and sensitive habitats. These introduced species increase competition, inhibit native propagules, and decrease the ecological function of wildlife habitat. The invasive exotics that are of significant concern to the riparian habitat and Scalebroom Scrub onsite include: Bladder Flower (*Araujia sericofera* [noxious perennial vine that specifically invades citrus orchards]), Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*), Poison Hemlock (*Conium*

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maculatum), Sweet Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), Tree Tobacco (*Nicotiana glauca*), Prickly Ox-tongue (*Picris echioides*), and Castor Bean (*Ricinus communis*).

Wildlife. Open riparian and floodplain habitats such as at the project parcel provide important habitat for a wide variety of wildlife, especially when adjacent to wetland areas such as the Sespe Creek. The prevalent species richness and diversity onsite indicates the high level of wetland habitat function, and the general site condition is defined by the abundance of wildlife observed during the site visit.

The project site is active with several wildlife species that frequent and inhabit the riparian habitat onsite, including: Coyote (scat), Audubon Cottontail, California Jackrabbit, California Mole, Botta's Pocket Gopher, Merriam's Kangaroo Rat, Deer Mouse, Bobcat, Mountain Lion, Black Bear, Raccoon, Virginia Opossum, San Diego Coast Horned Lizard, Western Skink, Western Fence Lizard, Side-blotched Lizard, Southern Alligator Lizard, Gopher Snake, Western Rattlesnake, Garter Snake, Kingsnake, Red-tailed Hawk, Scrub Jay, White Crowned Sparrow, Common Raven, California Quail, American Robin, Brown Towhee, and several other unidentified songbirds. Many more wildlife species are expected to use the parcel either regularly or occasionally. Raptors such as Cooper's Hawk, Great Horned Owl, and White-tailed Kite are expected to forage onsite, in addition to the Red-tailed Hawk observed. Several species of bats are also expected to forage onsite.

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IV. BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES:		PROJECT IMPACT DEGREE OF EFFECT ¹				CUMULATIVE IMPACT DEGREE OF EFFECT			
		N	LS	PS-M	PS	N	LS	PS-M	PS
<i>What level of impact will the proposal have on:</i>									
A. Endangered, Threatened, or Rare Species				X				X	
B. Wetland Habitat				X				X	
C. Coastal Habitat		X				X			
D. Migration Corridors				X				X	
E. Locally Important Species/Communities				X				X	
<i>Will the proposal:</i>									
a) Have a substantial adverse effect, either directly or through habitat modifications, on any species identified as a candidate, sensitive, or special-status species in local or regional plans, policies, or regulations, or by the California Department of Fish and Game or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?				X				X	
b) Have a substantial adverse effect on any riparian habitat or other sensitive natural community identified in local or regional plans, policies, regulations or by the California Department of Fish and Game or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?				X				X	
c) Have a substantial adverse effect on federally protected wetland as defined by Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (including, but not limited to, marsh, vernal pool, coastal, etc.) through direct removal, filling, hydrological interruption, or other means?				X				X	
d) Interfere substantially with the movement of any native resident or migratory fish or wildlife species or with established native resident or migratory wildlife corridors, or impede the use of native wildlife nursery sites?				X				X	
e) Conflict with any local policies or ordinances protecting biological resources, such as a tree preservation policy or ordinance?				X				X	
f) Conflict with the provisions of an adopted Habitat Conservation Plan, Natural Community Conservation Plan, or other approved local, regional, or state habitat conservation plan?		X				X			

¹ N = No Impact; LS = Less Than Significant; PS-M = Potentially Significant Impact Unless Mitigation Incorporated; PS = Potentially Significant Impact.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS OR EXPLANATION:

Special-status Plants. Two special-status species, Southern California Black Walnut (*Juglans californica* var. *californica*)² and Great Basin Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*)³, were observed in the riparian/floodplain vegetation during the field survey. The Southern California Black Walnut is included in the California Native Plant Society's (CNPS') List 4: Plants of Limited Distribution. The occurrence of Great Basin Sagebrush at the project site, while not rare by any definition in California or Ventura County, represents the likely southwesternmost extension or limits of its range. Great Basin Sagebrush is generally found in high desert habitats such as in the Cuyama Badlands and Lockwood Valley, Dry Lakes Ridge, and upper Sespe Creek areas of Ventura County, the eastern Sierra Nevada, and Great Basin of Nevada and Utah. Its occurrence in the Santa Clara River Valley represents a relictual occurrence from the Xerothermic period of 5,000 to 7,000 years ago when climatic conditions were much hotter and drier than at present. A historic (1934) occurrence is recorded in the Santa Clara River floodplain near Saticoy; however, this population has most likely been extirpated.

No other special-status species were observed at the project site; however, a search of the RareFind 2 Natural Diversity Database⁴ indicated that additional special-status plant species are known to occur in the vicinity of the project site. Based on existing ecological requirements present onsite and suitable habitat for potential establishment, the two other special-status plant species with the potential to occur in the vicinity of the project site are Plummer Mariposa Lily (*Calochortus plummerae*) and Abrams Oxytheca (*Oxytheca parishii* var. *abramsii*).

Special-status Wildlife. Although no special-status wildlife species were observed during the survey, the NDDB search for the area indicates that several additional special-status wildlife species are expected to occur in the vicinity of the project site. Based on existing suitable habitat, the special-status wildlife with the potential to inhabit or frequent the project area include: Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia* [burrow sites]), Arroyo Toad (*Bufo microscaphus californicus*), Santa Ana Sucker (*Catostomus santaanae*), Southwestern Pond Turtle (*Clemmys marmorata pallida*), Coastal Western Whiptail (*Cnemidophorus tigris multiscutatus*), California Mastiff Bat (*Eumops perotis californicus*), California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*), San Diego Desert Woodrat (*Neotoma lepida intermedia*), Southern Steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss irideus*), San Diego Horned Lizard (*Phrynosoma coronatum blainvillei*), Coastal California Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*), Two-striped Garter Snake (*Thamnophis hammondi*), and Least Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*).

Sensitive Habitat Types. The project site contains a portion of the expansive Scalebroom Scrub floodplain, dominated by *Lepidospartum squamatum*. Several scrub communities are considered sensitive; however, Scalebroom Scrub (Magney 1992s), in particular, is considered to be a rare plant

² Natural Diversity Database – RareFind2. 1999. California Department of Fish and Game, Natural Diversity Database, Sacramento, California.

³ Magney, D.L. in ed. Ventura County Plant Species of Local Concern. California Native Plant Society, Sacramento, California.

⁴ Natural Diversity Database – RareFind2. 1999. California Department of Fish and Game, Natural Diversity Database, Sacramento, California.

⁵ Magney, D.L. 1992. Descriptions of Three New Southern California Vegetation Types: Southern Cactus Scrub, Southern Coastal Needlegrass Grassland, and Scalebroom Scrub. *Crossosoma* 18(1):1-9, June.

community by the California Native Plant Society⁶ and the California Department of Fish and Game⁷. Scalebroom Scrub is unusually uncommon, and the habitat formed by the dominant phreatophyte is unique. Flood control, agriculture, and urban development activities have greatly reduced the amount of Scalebroom Scrub throughout California, with only remnants left, such as at the project site.

Most wetland habitats are considered sensitive, as impacts resulting from human activities continue to encroach upon them. The NDDDB search lists several sensitive riparian habitat types that are present onsite (at least as moderately representative patches), or have the potential to become established onsite, and they include: Southern Cottonwood-Willow Riparian Forest (based on two species of cottonwoods scattered onsite), Southern Mixed Riparian Forest (as a woodland, it creates the predominant riparian habitat onsite), Southern Riparian Scrub (the shrub stratum of the riparian corridor), Southern Willow Scrub (based on the presence of two willow species as important canopy contributors throughout the site), and California Walnut Woodland (based on the presence of scattered walnut trees).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In general, a simple legalization of this parcel should not result in significant impacts on biotic resources. However, existing land uses onsite, and in adjacent areas, such as very recent road grading and vegetation clearing, have resulted in direct and indirect impacts to the sensitive habitats onsite. For example, an access road was created along the eastern border of the site (running north and south at the northern half of the site), which has cleared some Scalebroom Scrub vegetation. The newly graded road turns west and cuts directly through a portion of the dense Southern Mixed Riparian Woodland present onsite, segmenting the riparian corridor. This action was likely taken without appropriate permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, and California Department of Fish and Game, which each regulate activities within waters of the U.S. or state.

Additional impacts to the sensitive habitats onsite will result from any vegetation clearing due to agricultural expansion, future development of the parcel, and increased competition created by invasive exotic plant species if they are not eradicated. If the lot is developed in the future, fire hazard brush clearance requirements around proposed structures would increase the amount of natural vegetation removed and would contribute to the cumulative loss in the region. Regardless of the above mentioned, the existing plant communities are considered sensitive (rare), and impacts should be minimized to the maximum extent possible. All future grading and land use alterations, not currently requested, which may cause additional impacts to the biotic resources onsite, should be investigated and evaluated upon proposal.

Since this survey was conducted in early spring, during which most annuals are in bloom, the majority of the observed plant species were identifiable. However, several species were only producing new

⁶ Sawyer, J.O., and T. Keeler-Wolf. 1995. *A Manual of California Vegetation*. California Native Plant Society, Sacramento, California.

⁷ Natural Diversity Data Base. 1987. *Natural Communities: List of Natural Communities Indicating Highest Inventory Priorities*. California Department of Fish and Game. Sacramento, California.

foliage at the time of the field survey, and only a fraction of the species observed were actually producing flowers. Therefore, additional seasonal field surveys for botanical resources should be conducted to determine whether special-status plant species are present onsite prior to changes in land use or grading. At least two additional field surveys are recommended: one in May for late-spring blooming species, and one in early July for fruiting periods and summer-blooming plants. The botanical surveys should be floristic in nature, should concentrate on potential special-status species, and should include vascular and nonvascular plants.

Although the property is only sparsely inhabited by the sensitive Scalebroom Scrub and Southern Mixed Riparian Woodland habitats, most of the site includes eucalyptus groves and citrus orchards. These extensive areas onsite are invaded by many nonnative plant species; and the invasive exotic species are expanding into adjacent native vegetation. The species of most concern, inhabiting the riparian habitat onsite, is Bladder Flower (*Araujia sericofera*), which is a noxious and weedy vine that is typically found invading abandoned citrus orchards, and Giant Reed (*Arundo donax*), which is a highly invasive giant grass that colonizes and dominates riparian habitats. While the Bladder Flower is considered an agricultural pest in orchards, where it is typically found, invasion into adjacent Scalebroom Scrub and riparian habitats is of concern.

Bladder Flower, Giant Reed, and the other invasive exotic species of concern, which were observed onsite and that are listed above in Environmental Setting, need to be controlled over time, using appropriate methods of eradication and removal that do not harm biotic resources or native and planted vegetation. These measures are important to reduce unnatural competition levels for the remaining and successional native plant communities that are required for maintaining wildlife habitat functions.

Mitigation measures to reduce potential impacts to biological resources, direct and cumulative, to less than significant levels include:

- ♣ Establishing a conservation easement, or similar vehicle, over that portion of the parcel containing special-status species or sensitive habitats;
- ♣ Establishing a 100-foot buffer between wetland/riparian habitats from any development, including access roads or agricultural expansion; and
- ♣ Controlling invasive exotic plants (both in the natural and orchard areas of the parcel) using appropriate methods as recommended by the California Department of Fish and Game.

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D. MANDATORY FINDINGS OF SIGNIFICANCE:		Yes/Maybe	No
Based on the information contained with Section B6:			
1. Does the project have the potential to degrade the quality of the environment, substantially reduce the habitat of a fish or wildlife species, cause a fish or wildlife population to drop below self sustaining levels, threaten to eliminate a plant or animal community, reduce the number or restrict the range of a rare or endangered plant or animal, or eliminate important examples of major periods of California's history or prehistory?		X	
2. Does the project have the potential to achieve short-term, to the disadvantage of long-term, environmental goals? (A short-term impact on the environment is one that occurs in a relatively brief, definitive period of time while long-term impacts will endure well into the future.)			X
3. Does the project have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? "Cumulatively considerable" means that the incremental effects of a project are considerable when viewed in connection with the effects of past projects, the effect of other current projects, and the effect of probable future projects. (Several projects may have relatively small individual impacts on two or more resources, but that total of those impacts on the environment is significant.)		X	
4. Does the project have environmental effects that will cause substantial adverse effects on human beings, either directly or indirectly?			X

E. DETERMINATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENT:	
On the basis of this initial evaluation:	
<input type="checkbox"/>	I find the proposed project COULD NOT have a significant effect on the environment, and a NEGATIVE DECLARATION should be prepared.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I find that although the proposed project could have a significant effect on the environment, there would not be a significant effect in this case because the mitigation measure(s) described in section C of the Initial Study will be applied to the project, A MITIGATED NEGATIVE DECLARATION should be prepared.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I find the proposed project, individually and/or cumulatively, MAY have a significant effect on the environmental, and an ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT is required.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I find that the proposed project MAY have a "potentially significant impact" or "potentially significant unless mitigated" impact on the environmental, but at least one effect 1) has been adequately analyzed in an earlier document pursuant to applicable legal standards, and 2) has been addressed by mitigation measures based on the earlier analysis as described on attached sheets. An ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT is required, but it must analyze only the effects that remain to be addressed.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I find that although the proposed project could have a significant effect on the environment, because all potentially significant effects (a) have been analyzed adequately in an earlier EIR or NEGATIVE DECLARATION pursuant to applicable standards, and (b) have been avoided or mitigated pursuant to that earlier EIR or NEGATIVE DECLARATION, including revisions or mitigation measures that are imposed upon the proposed project, nothing further is required.

David L. Magnev, Biological Resources Initial Study Preparers

17 April 2000

Date