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NOTICE OF PREPARATION DOCUMENTATION AND PUBLIC SCOPING MEETING FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

Date: March 6, 2025

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the County of San Diego (County), Department of Planning & Development Services Sustainability Planning Division, will be the Lead Agency and will prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the project below. The County is seeking public and agency input on the scope and content of the environmental information to be contained in the EIR. An Initial Study (IS) document, which contains a description of the probable environmental effects of the project, can be reviewed at the following website link:

https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/pds/ceqa_public_review.html

NORTH COUNTY MSCP PLAN

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT:

The County of San Diego's Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP), is a long-term, regional habitat conservation program focusing on balancing two unique aspects of San Diego County: high biological diversity and urban growth. Under this program, large blocks of interconnected habitat would be conserved through acquisition of land by private and public entities. The County's MSCP is comprised of three separate planning areas covering unincorporated regions of San Diego County in the South County, North County, and East County. The MSCP plans associated with each of the planning areas are the County Subarea Plan (South County Subarea Plan) (adopted), North County Plan (Plan, draft), and East County Plan (future).

The North County Plan (North County Plan, Plan, or Project) would provide take coverage for 40 species, specifically 31 animals and 9 plant species (Covered Species). These Covered Species are currently listed as threatened or endangered by California and/or the federal government, may become listed during the 30-year permit term, or serve as a species whose presence indicates elements of habitat structure and ecological function or habitat connectivity. Of the total 40 Covered Species included in this Plan, 24 are state or federally listed or proposed to be listed as endangered or threatened. This Plan includes measures to conserve all the Covered Species, whether listed or not.

The North County Plan would extend the benefits of the existing MSCP (the South County Subarea Plan) to contribute to the conservation of sensitive species and habitats while providing a streamlined permitting process for landowners, agricultural operators, businesses, and residents in the unincorporated regions of northwest San Diego County.

NOTICE OF PREPARATION DOCUMENTATION AND PUBLIC SCOPING MEETING FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

The Plan also aims to conserve and protect habitats for the Covered Species by creating and managing a North County Preserve (Preserve). This Preserve would ensure the conservation and management of the 40 Covered Species by conserving the natural communities covered by the Plan across a range of elevations to allow species and habitats to shift spatially in response to climate change. Monitoring and adaptive management would ensure habitat conservation and aid in species recovery. Implementation of the Plan would create a connected Preserve, allowing species to move freely and maintain ecological processes. This would also benefit other sensitive species and may prevent the need to list additional species as threatened or endangered.

While the Plan would facilitate a streamlined permitting process for development within areas already planned for development under the County's General Plan, it would not result in any additional urban development or changes in the intensity of development within the Plan area. Rather, the Plan would designate specific parcels for conservation that could also potentially be subject to incidental habitat restoration, vegetation management, minor surface grading, irrigation, or other related physical activities associated with enhancement and maintenance of habitat or the provision of compatible recreational opportunities on Preserve land. The Plan is independent and not reliant on other regional conservation plans in San Diego or Riverside counties. It is separate from other subarea plans under the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) and Multiple Habitat Conservation Program (MHCP).

This Initial Study (IS) evaluates the potential impacts of adopting and implementing the North County Plan. The purpose of this IS is to inform agency decision makers and the public regarding the potential environmental effects of adopting and implementing the North County Plan, whether such effects are significant and potential measures to mitigate significant effects that could reduce significant adverse environmental impacts.

Goals of the North County Plan include the following:

- Provide a regulatory process that allows for efficient permitting of residential and commercial development, community infrastructure projects, agricultural expansion, as well as providing greater certainty for economic and urban development through the identification of appropriate locations for new development.
- Facilitate a balanced approach of conserving high biological value habitats while streamlining development in less biologically sensitive areas.
- Create a preserve that will protect and maintain ecosystem functions and values, maintain the range of natural biological communities, the 40 Covered Species, and native biodiversity within the Plan Area, and maintain opportunities for movement and genetic exchange of native organisms.
- Conserve and maintain habitat to ensure protection of covered and other sensitive species that precludes the need for future listings of species as threatened or endangered.
- Conduct habitat management and restoration within the Preserve to maintain and enhance Covered Species habitat.
- Monitor the Covered Species populations within the Preserve to inform management and ensure the persistence of the Covered Species.

NOTICE OF PREPARATION DOCUMENTATION AND PUBLIC SCOPING MEETING FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

- Maintain the scenic beauty, natural biological diversity, cultural resources, and compatible recreational opportunities within the Plan Area to enhance the quality of life of the public while protecting the Covered Species.

Projects and activities covered under the incidental take permits include three general categories:

- Private development projects that conform to the Plan and the North County Biological Mitigation Ordinance (BMO)
- County projects and activities that conform to the Plan and the North County BMO
- Implementation of management and monitoring of the North County Preserve consistent with the requirements of the Plan, Framework Resource Management Plan (FRMP), and subsequent site-specific RMPs

LOCATION OF THE PROJECT:

The North County Plan Area (Plan Area) represents the geographic boundary that defines the extent of the analysis for the development of the North County Plan and encompasses the northwestern unincorporated areas of San Diego County, totaling 699,411 acres. Segments of the Plan Area are separated by land in incorporated cities, and not subject to this Plan. The northern border of the Plan Area follows the County's boundary with Orange and Riverside counties. The western border of the Plan Area follows the boundary of unincorporated areas and the cities of Fallbrook, Oceanside, Vista, Carlsbad, Encinitas, Escondido, and San Diego. There are also County-owned or County-managed lands within the incorporated cities within the Multiple Habitat Conservation Program (MHCP) Plan Area in the western portions of the Plan Area. The southern border of the Plan Area mostly follows the boundary of the South County MSCP and the San Diego River watershed boundary. The eastern boundary is along the mountain-desert divide and follows parcel and ownership boundaries in that area.

PROBABLE ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS:

The probable environmental effects associated with the Project are detailed in the attached Initial Study (IS). All questions answered "Potentially Significant Impact" will be analyzed further in the EIR. All questions answered "Less Than Significant Impact or No Impact" will be summarized but will not be analyzed further in the EIR. Potential issues and impacts to the existing environment to be analyzed in the EIR include the following environmental topics:

- Agriculture and Forestry Resources
- Air Quality
- Biological Resources
- Cultural Resources
- Paleontological Resources
- Greenhouse Gas Emissions
- Land Use/Planning
- Mineral Resources
- Noise
- Public Services (Parks)
- Recreation
- Transportation
- Tribal Cultural Resources

The EIR, consistent with CEQA, will include sufficient information to facilitate meaningful public review and informed public decision-making regarding the significant effects on the environment that may be caused by the project. The EIR will include information regarding the environmental baseline, including the past, current, and reasonably foreseeable expected future environmental impacts of implementing the project in the project area. Where needed, the EIR will identify potentially feasible mitigation measures to avoid and/or substantially lessen any significant adverse effects identified in the EIR's impact analysis. The EIR will also address the cumulative environmental consequences of the proposed project in combination with other closely related past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects in the area. This will serve to satisfy CEQA requirements regarding potential regional cumulative effects. In compliance with CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.6, the EIR will describe and evaluate the effects of a reasonable range of alternatives to the proposed project and will compare the impacts of the alternatives to the impacts of the proposed project. The EIR will also identify any alternatives that were considered but rejected by the lead agency as infeasible and briefly explain their reasoning. The EIR will provide an analysis of the No Project Alternative and will also identify the Environmentally Superior Alternative. The alternatives to be analyzed in the EIR will be developed during the environmental review process and will consider input received during the public scoping period.

PUBLIC SCOPING MEETING:

When: Tuesday, April 1, 2025 at 6:00 p.m.

Location: https://sdcountry-ca-gov.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_MkgzFclhQEeTEcmeC9uajg

SUBMITTING COMMENTS:

At this time, the County is soliciting comments on the NOP regarding your views on how the project may affect the environment. This information will be considered when preparing the EIR's discussion of environmental topics, significant effects, mitigation measures, and alternatives. Because of time limits mandated by state law, comments should be provided no later than April 5, 2025, at 5:00 p.m. You have several options for submitting comments: (1) during the scoping meeting, (2) by U.S. mail, or (3) by email. Comments provided by email should include "North County Plan – NOP Scoping Comments" in the subject line. Please send all comments to:

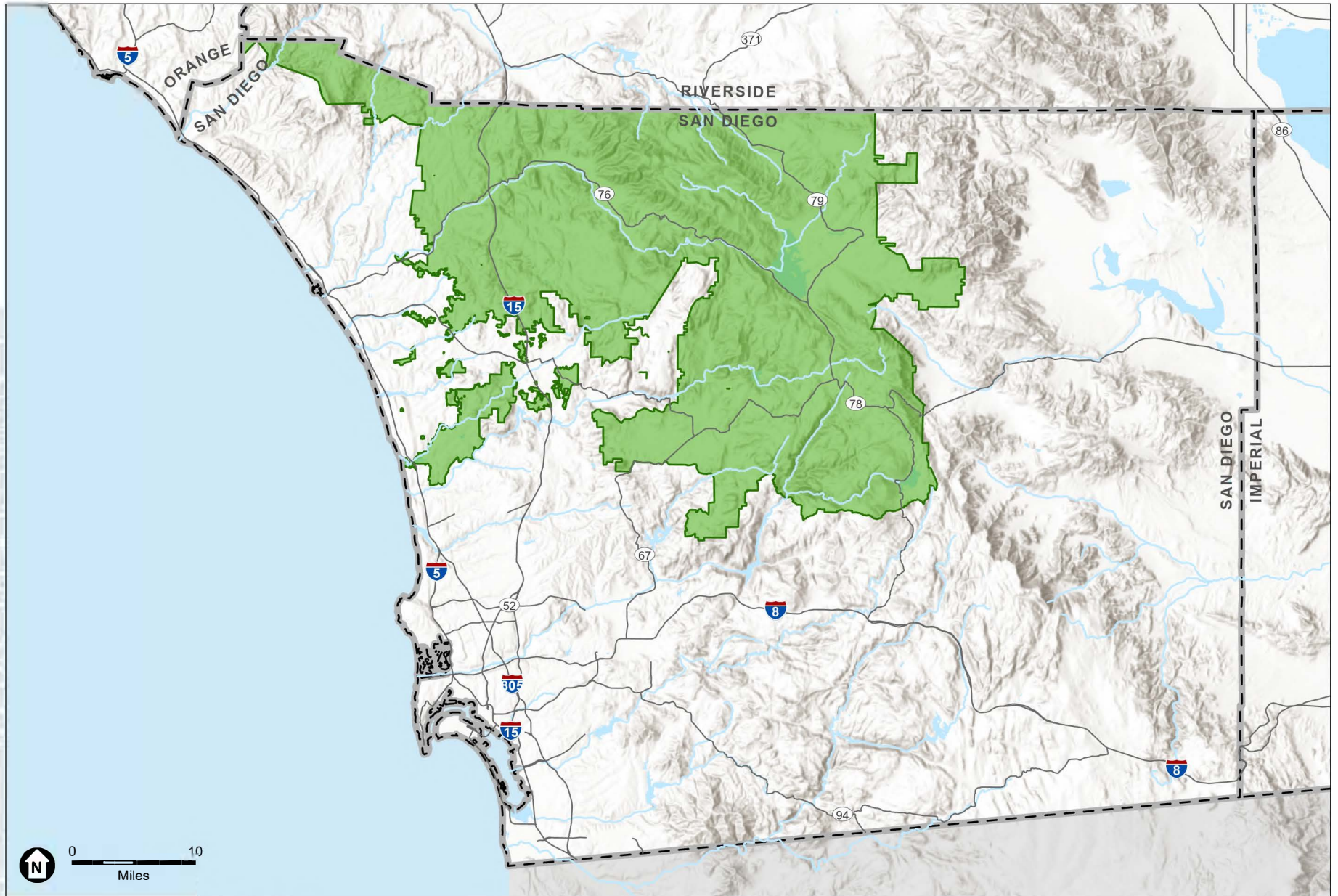
County of San Diego, Planning & Development Services, Sustainability Planning Division
Attention: Stephanie Neal, Project Manager
Mailing Address: 5510 Overland Avenue, Suite 210, San Diego, CA 92123

OR via email: MSCP@sdcounty.ca.gov

For additional information regarding the North County Plan, please contact Stephanie Neal by e-mail at Stephanie.Neal@sdcounty.ca.gov.

Attachments:

Figure 1 – County of San Diego North County Plan Area Map



SOURCE: ESA, 2024; San Diego County, 2024.

North County Plan IS

Figure 1
County of San Diego North County Plan Area Map

