

SUMMARY COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVES

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This section compares the environmental impacts of the Species Conservation Habitat (SCH) Project alternatives and identifies the environmentally preferable/environmentally superior alternative, as well as the California Natural Resources Agency’s preferred alternative. The United States Army Corps of Engineers has not yet identified a preferred alternative among the alternatives evaluated by the Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR).

In Section 3, the impacts of the SCH Project alternatives on each resource evaluated in this Draft EIS/EIR were compared to both the existing environmental conditions, as well as those that would occur under the No Action Alternative. For many resources no substantive differences existed between the two scenarios, either because impacts would cease upon the completion of construction, in which case the future conditions would not be relevant, or because future changes at the Salton Sea would not be relevant (e.g., the amount of noise generated by pumps used to divert river water to the SCH ponds would not be affected by changes in the salinity or surface water elevation of the Salton Sea). For resources such as biological resources and recreation, the benefits of the Project alternatives would be greater when compared to the No Action Alternative because the increasing salinity and decreasing water surface elevation of the Salton Sea will result in the collapse of the Sea’s ecosystem, and the SCH Project would help offset some of the impacts from this occurrence. The beneficial impacts of the Project on aesthetic resources also would be greater in comparison to the No Action Alternative. In no case, however, did the comparison of impacts between the existing conditions and the No Action Alternative result in a change in the significance of the impact.

7.2 COMPARATIVE IMPACTS OF THE PROJECT ALTERNATIVES

Table 7-1 compares impacts, by resource, for each of the six Project alternatives. In a number of cases, multiple categories of impacts would occur; that is, one resource could experience significant, less-than-significant, and beneficial impacts. Table 7-1 only shows the most adverse impact for purposes of comparison. As shown, impacts are generally comparable between alternatives. The primary differences are that those alternatives requiring a brackish water pipeline leading from the rivers (Alternatives 1 and 4) would result in less than significant impacts from the permanent conversion of Important Farmland and significant impacts from the potential conversion of land under Williamson Act contracts for use as a sedimentation basin. More subtle differences result from the acreage that would be restored under each alternative. In general, those alternatives with greater acreage would have greater benefits to resources such as biological resources, aesthetics, recreation, and socioeconomics, but also would result in greater impacts on air emissions, energy demand, transportation impacts, and demand for public services.

SECTION 7.0
SUMMARY COMPARISON OF ALTERNATIVES

1

Table 7-1 Summary of Impacts, by Resource, of Each Project Alternative						
Resource	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3	Alternative 4	Alternative 5	Alternative 6
Aesthetics	L	L	L	L	L	L
Agricultural Resources	S	O	O	S	O	O
Air Quality	U	U	U	U ^a	U ^a	U ^a
Biological Resources	S	S	S	S	S	S
Cultural Resources	S	S	S	S	S	S
Energy Consumption	L	L	L	L	L	L
Environmental Justice	U	U	U	U	U	U
Geology and Soils	L	L	L	L	L	L
Greenhouse Gas Emissions	L	L	L	L	L	L
Hazards and Hazardous Materials	L	L	L	L	L	L
Hydrology and Water Quality	L	L	L	L	L	L
Indian Trust Assets	O	O	O	O	O	O
Land Use	L	L	L	L	L	L
Noise	L	L	L	S	S	S
Paleontological Resources	S	S	S	S	S	S
Population and Housing	L	L	L	L	L	L
Public Services	L	L	L	L	L	L
Recreation	B	B	B	B	B	B
Socioeconomics	L	L	L	L	L	L
Transportation	L	L	L	L	L	L
Utilities and Service Systems	L	L	L	L	L	L
<p>Notes:</p> <p>a.* Alternatives 4, 5, 6 would result in a significant unavoidable impact from nitrogen oxides emissions during construction, as would Alternatives 1, 2, and 3; but unlike the latter alternatives, they would not result in a significant impact from fugitive dust emissions.</p> <p>O = No Impact L = Less-than-Significant Impact S = Significant Impact, but Mitigable to Less than Significant U = Significant Unavoidable Impact B = Beneficial Impact</p>						

2

1 **7.3 ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE/ENVIRONMENTALLY SUPERIOR**
2 **ALTERNATIVE**

3 The Council on Environmental Quality’s National Environmental Protection Act Guidelines, section
4 1505.2(b) requires that, in cases where an EIS has been prepared, the Record of Decision (ROD) must
5 identify all alternatives that were considered, “. . . specifying the alternative or alternatives which were
6 considered to be environmentally preferable.” The environmentally preferable alternative is the
7 alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in National Environmental
8 Protection Act section 101. Ordinarily, this designation means the alternative that causes the least damage
9 to the biological and physical environment; the designation also means the alternative that best protects,
10 preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources. Additionally, the United States
11 Environmental Protection Agency’s section 404(b)(1) Guidelines require the Corps to issue a permit only
12 for the “least environmentally practicable alternative,” which is the most practicable alternative that
13 would result in the least damage to aquatic resources and is not contrary to the public interest. Therefore,
14 the “least environmentally damaging practicable alternative” will be the Corps’ preferred alternative.
15 California Environmental Quality Act Guidelines section 15126.6 also requires the identification of the
16 environmentally superior alternative; if the No Action Alternative is considered environmentally superior,
17 then an environmentally superior alternative must be chosen from one of the Project alternatives.

18 The No Action Alternative for the SCH Project is not considered environmentally superior. As discussed
19 in Section 1, Introduction, declining inflows in future years from various factors will result in collapse of
20 the Salton Sea ecosystem due to increasing salinity and other water quality issues, such as temperature,
21 eutrophication, and related anoxia and algal productivity. The SCH Project alternatives would restore a
22 portion of the habitat that will be lost under the No Action Alternative and are considered preferable.

23 Of the Project alternatives, those that would require gravity diversion of water from the New or Alamo
24 rivers (Alternatives 1 and 4, respectively) are not considered environmentally superior because
25 construction of the sedimentation basin would result in the permanent loss of Important Farmland, which
26 is a less than significant impact and the potential conversion of land under Williamson Act contracts to
27 nonagricultural use. These impacts would not occur under the alternatives requiring pumped diversion
28 (Alternatives 2, 3, 5, and 6) because the sedimentation basins would be located within the footprint of the
29 SCH ponds, which would not be constructed on farmland. Of Alternatives 2, 3, 5, and 6, those located at
30 the Alamo River (Alternatives 5 and 6) are not considered environmentally superior for a variety of
31 reasons. Alamo River water includes higher levels of selenium than that of the New River. Although
32 impacts from selenium would be less than significant, selenium would have adverse effects on wildlife,
33 and lower levels would be preferable within the SCH ponds. Similarly, the Alamo River area is more
34 geologically active than the New River area (mud pots are present adjacent to and within the Project area
35 east of the Alamo River in Morton Bay), which could lead to an increased risk of berm failure. Although
36 this impact is not considered significant, it would not be desirable and would result in temporary, but
37 adverse impacts on SCH pond operation. The Alamo River area also is in a Known Geothermal Resource
38 Area and known geothermal resources diminish west of the New River. Although the SCH Project would
39 not preclude geothermal development, the New River area is considered preferable because the potential
40 for conflicts with geothermal development companies would be minimized. Thus, Alternatives 5 and 6
41 were eliminated from consideration as the environmentally superior alternative.

42 Alternatives 2 and 3 would be located at the New River and would restore 2,670 and 3,770 acres of
43 habitat, respectively. Alternative 3 would cause somewhat greater impacts during construction (and
44 indirect air emissions during operations), but it would have greater long-term benefits because more
45 habitat would be restored. The long-term benefits would offset the short-term, incremental increase in
46 construction impacts (and incremental increases in power demand), and thus, Alternative 3 is considered
47 the environmentally preferable/environmentally superior alternative.

1 **7.4 PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE**

2 The Natural Resources Agency has identified Alternative 3 as the preferred alternative because it would
3 provide greater long-term benefits by restoring the greatest amount of habitat, while minimizing
4 environmental impacts to the extent feasible.

5