



Monterey County

Item No.

Board Report

Board of Supervisors
Chambers
168 W. Alisal St., 1st Floor
Salinas, CA 93901

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Consider receiving an update on Salinas River Lagoon Sandbar Management and the Low-Effect Habitat Conservation Plan.

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the Monterey County Water Resources Agency Board of Directors:

Receive an update on Salinas River Lagoon Sandbar Management and the Low-Effect Habitat Conservation Plan.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION:

Like many central California coastal river systems, the Salinas River is not hydrologically connected to the ocean for much of the year. A naturally occurring sandbar forms at the river mouth during periods of low streamflow creating the Salinas River Lagoon (Lagoon). Over the course of the year the sandbar can build up to be significantly higher than typical dry season Lagoon stage. When winter storms once again create natural streamflow in the Salinas River, flow is trapped behind the sandbar in the Lagoon. Because of the height of the sandbar, the Lagoon has the potential to flood low lying farmland and homes before overtopping the sandbar and flowing to the ocean.

The Agency performs sandbar management on an emergency basis to prevent flooding. Sandbar management is required in most years including 7 of the past 10. Sandbar management has the potential to result in take of federally listed species in and around the lagoon and the Agency does not have a permit to cover incidental take of any listed species.

In 1997 the Agency developed the Salinas River Lagoon Management and Enhancement Plan followed by the 2018 Salinas River Lagoon Sandbar Management Plan Project Description (a project description for an updated sandbar management plan that has yet to be developed) and the Salinas River Sandbar Management Monitoring and Reporting Plan to address concerns related to sandbar management activities related to flood prevention. The plans define criteria for managing the sandbar elevation for flood prevention and define actions to minimize the impact to sensitive species in and around the Lagoon. The existing plans provide guidance for sandbar management activities but do not constitute a current sandbar management plan or the necessary permits to protect the Agency from incidental take under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The proposed Salinas River Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) will address these issues and serve as the basis for the Agency to apply for an incidental take permit (ITP) from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFS) under the ESA. The HCP is expected to take around three years to complete.

Because of the multi-year timeline for development of the HCP, the USFWS has strongly encouraged the Agency to pursue a short-term solution to obtain an ITP for sandbar management activities while the HCP is being developed.

To meet the short-term need for an ITP, Agency staff have been working with the USFWS on a strategy to develop a Low-Effect HCP (LEHCP) to cover flood prevention sandbar management activities until the full HCP can be completed. Because of significant overlap between the proposed LEHCP and the full HCP as well as reduced regulatory requirements for LEHCPs, USFWS and Agency staff believe the LEHCP can be completed on a much shorter timeline and at a much lower cost than development of a full HCP. It is estimated that an LEHCP that only covers flood prevention sandbar management and the species directly impacted could be developed in approximately one year with much of the cost being covered under the existing HCP funding mechanisms.

Agency staff plans to continue working with our HCP consultant ICF, the USFWS, and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to develop a LEHCP for emergency sandbar management in parallel with the full HCP with a goal of having an ITP prior to the winter of 2022/23.

Development of the LEHCP for sandbar management supports Strategic Plan Goal D by pursuing a necessary permit for the core function of flood prevention through Salinas River Lagoon sandbar management; Goal B by performing analysis in conjunction with the Salinas River Habitat Conservation Plan; and Goal C by leveraging grant funding to support these actions.

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:

Agency staff has been involved in discussion with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service regarding the LEHCP.

An update on Salinas River Lagoon Sandbar Management and the LEHCP was presented to the Planning Committee at the meeting on February 2, 2022.

FINANCING:

Much of the LEHCP will draw on analysis to be conducted under the full Salinas River HCP and funded through existing reimbursable grants acquired for HCP development. Remaining LEHCP development tasks will require estimated Agency funding of approximately \$45,000. Work will begin using HCP and sandbar management funds budgeted in the current fiscal year. The remaining cost will be incorporated into the upcoming fiscal year 2022/23 budget. Once completed, the LEHCP will incorporate mitigation measures designed to offset the impact of sandbar management actions on the covered species. Mitigation measures are estimated to cost between \$20,000 and \$50,000 per year during the permit term. Once identified, the cost of these mitigation measures will be identified in future Agency budgets.

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