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PROJECT BACKGROUND AND STATUS

Lower Carmel River Land Use and Flood History

The Carmel River is one of the most important streams in coastal Monterey County due to its historical, ecological, and social significance. It provides critical habitat for special status species, including the California Red-Legged Frog and Steelhead Trout. The Carmel River and its alluvial aquifer are primary sources of drinking water for the Monterey Peninsula. The river is enjoyed by residents and tourists alike for its scenic and recreational values.

For nearly a century, the lower Carmel River has been confined on both sides by levees, beginning near the river's mouth and running 1.5 miles upstream. Before farming and channelization, the entire Carmel River Floodplain and Environmental Enhancement Project (Project) area served as the integrated channel and southern floodplain for the lower Carmel River. Nonengineered levees constructed on the south bank of the Carmel River reduced the frequency of flooding into adjoining farm fields and eliminated riparian and floodplain habitats. Levees were also constructed on the north side of the river to protect the commercial and residential land uses developed on the northerly side of the channel, which created a completely confined stream corridor along the lower reaches of the river.

The construction of the elevated State Route 1 (SR 1) highway corridor south of the Carmel River divided the floodplain by placing a physical barrier between the Carmel River Lagoon (Lagoon) on the west side of the highway embankment and the agricultural fields on the east side, thereby preventing hydrologic connectivity across the former riverine landscape.

Over twenty flood events have occurred along the Carmel River since the early 1900s, with the most notable floods happening in recent history during the 1995 and 1998 El Niño storm events. The peak flow of record, occurring on March 10, 1995, is estimated just larger than a 30-year storm event. High river flows in both 1995 and 1998 flooded the urbanized area north of the Carmel River causing millions of dollars in damage to homes and businesses. This area contains the highest cost and largest number of repetitive loss properties in Monterey County covered under the FEMA National Flood Insurance Program. In addition, the March 1995 high river flows also undermined and destroyed the SR 1 vehicular bridge across the Carmel River, cutting off access to and from neighborhoods south of the river and Big Sur for six months.

Carmel River Floodplain Restoration and Environmental Enhancement Project

The concept for what is now the Carmel River Floodplain Restoration and Environmental Enhancement Project (Project, also known as CRFREE) was born out of the 1995 and 1998 flooding events. In 2014, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, acting on behalf of County Service Area 50 Mission Fields (CSA50), approved the Lower Carmel River Stormwater Management and Flood Control Report, which identified the Project as the preferred option for flood-control projects in the lower watershed of the Carmel River.

The Project's multibenefit green infrastructure design will significantly reduce flood risks and restore riverine habitat where natural and built environments intersect at the mouth of Carmel Valley. The Project is situated fronting the southern side of the lower Carmel River between river miles 0.5 and 1.5. The Project is part of a larger green infrastructure plan to reduce flood

risks and improve self-sustaining hydrologic function of the river, its adjoining floodplain, and Lagoon. The Project is located strategically at the northern terminus of a large complex of over 19,400 acres of protected open space lands conserved by Big Sur Land Trust (BSLT), California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks), and Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District (MPRPD).

Key elements of the Project include:

- a. Removing sections of the south bank levee flanking the river to redirect floodflows into the adjoining floodplain;
- b. Reconnecting the south bank floodplain with the Lagoon by allowing water to flow beneath a new 360-foot-long causeway along State Route 1;
- c. Restoring floodplain habitat in former agricultural fields where ruderal vegetation dominates.

In 2010, the County entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with BSLT, State Parks, Monterey Peninsula Water Management District (MPWMD), and Monterey County Water Resources Agency (MCWRA) that provided for the parties to work cooperatively and establish a common framework to conduct planning-level analysis and feasibility of the Project. Since then, the County, in partnership with BSLT, cosponsored the Project.

The floodplain area to the east of the SR 1 corridor, a 128-acre property owned by BSLT, is entirely within the Project footprint. A 3.6-acre portion of the Project area on the upstream end of the southern floodplain is owned by MPRPD in Palo Corona Regional Park. The Project includes a State Parks'-owned floodplain area west of the highway. A portion of the State Parks' land immediately downstream of the SR 1 bridge was restored in the late 1990s by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) for use as a riparian habitat mitigation bank. In addition, the south arm of the Lagoon was reestablished and restored in 2004 as a component of the Carmel River Lagoon Enhancement Project, which created open water and wetland habitat in former agricultural fields west of the Highway.

The Project incorporates elements to address existing deficiencies to traffic safety, site access and well water supply including: constructing a temporary bypass for SR 1 during construction; constructing a southbound left-turn lane from SR 1 into Palo Corona Regional Park and the Project site; protection in place of the Riverfield well on MPRPD property; and relocation of the State Parks water well.

Project Environment Impact Report/Environmental Assessment

Through a cooperative agreement with the Caltrans, the County is acting as the Lead Agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the proposed Project (Proposed Project or Project). Through a separate cooperating agreement with Caltrans, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is acting as the Lead Agency under National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Caltrans District 5 (as the expected delegated authority for the Federal Highways Administration [FHWA]) serves as a federal cooperating agency.

Certification of the FEIR/EA is a critical Project milestone to enable the County to apply for and obtain grant funding. The Board will consider approval of the Project at a later date; however, certification of the FEIR/EA is necessary to obtain the grants to fully fund the Project and

maintain the proposed construction schedule to avoid losing already secured grant funding, should the Board approve the Project.

Project Timeline and Next Steps

Staff is working with project partners to propose updates to the 2010 MOU to add MPRPD as a landowner Project partner and to facilitate construction of the Project should it be approved. Concurrently, staff is actively working with the Carmel Area Wastewater District (CAWD) and MPRPD to address their individual infrastructure concerns to allow them to work collaboratively with the County toward implementation of this Project.

Carmel Area Wastewater District – Pipeline Facility Over South Arm of Lagoon

In the preparation of the environmental review, CAWD objected that the Project could impact their sewer facilities, specifically its existing aboveground outfall pipeline for treated wastewater, sewage force main, and metal supporting beams and other supporting structures that cross the south arm of the Lagoon (hereafter "CAWD pipelines"). Additional technical analysis was conducted for the Project which concluded that the Project could potentially impact the CAWD pipelines by incrementally increasing floodflow velocities and debris-flow forces which could dislodge the them. The Project FEIR/EA includes mitigation for the project to avoid impacts to CAWD pipelines over the south arm of the Lagoon.

The FEIR/EA also requires County to negotiate in good faith with CAWD for an agreement for funding and implementation of a CAWD project to move CAWD pipelines underground, below the south arm of the Lagoon, or other sufficient method to protect their pipelines from potential physical impacts from increased flow velocity and woody-debris flow of the Project. County Counsel and attorneys for CAWD and BSLT have been in discussion, and they are actively working on a proposed agreement. This agreement would then be brought to the Board of Supervisors for its consideration.

Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District – Riverfield Well

The Riverfield well is located on MPRPD property near the eastern edge of the Project area outside its grading boundaries and serves as the water supply for a private residence inholding within Palo Corona Regional Park. The Project has no impacts to the well. The well is at existing risk because it is in the 100-year floodplain. The Project reduces the existing risk by reducing the flood base elevation at the well location. However, to address this existing condition and to allay concerns raised by users of the well, the Project will raise the Riverfield well above the 100-year flood elevation, incorporate physical measures to protect the well from any potential impact from stream wood, and ensure electrical power is maintained during construction. At MPRPD's request, the County is drafting a letter, or similar instrument, to present to MPRPD's Board to affirm that these measures are a component of the Project

If the CRFREE Project is approved by the Board of Supervisors, subject to securing all funding and regulatory approvals, Project construction is anticipated to begin in 2021.

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