WILDLIFE CORRIDOR CONSERVATION AUTHORITY

570 WEST AVENUE 26, SUITE 100, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90065
TELEPHONE: (310) 589-3230
FAX: (310) 589-2408

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Ms. Karen M. Taylor
Senior Community Relations Specialist
Orange County Transportation Authority
P.O. Box 14184
Orange, California 92863-1584

Initial Study/Environmental Assessment with Proposed Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Proposed Improvement Project on State Route 91 Between State Route 241 and State Route 71

Dear Ms. Taylor:

The Wildlife Corridor Conservation Authority (WCCA) reviewed the Initial Study (IS) with Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND)/Environmental Assessment (EA) for the State Route 91 Eastbound Lane Addition Project Between State Route 241 and State Route 71 (Project). This letter is substantially similar to that letter previously sent by staff. This letter was adopted by the Governing Board of WCCA at its recent meeting. WCCA staff did not have the opportunity to review the Natural Environment Study (2007) and Biological Assessment (2007), as these were not available (on the website). However, we understand that these are being to mailed to us at our request. The following comments are limited to the IS/MND/EA.

WCCA was created for the proper planning, conservation, environmental protection and maintenance of the habitat and wildlife corridor between the Whittier-Puente-Chino Hills and the Cleveland National Forest in the Santa Ana Mountains. The IS/EA did not adequately account for the cumulative impacts to biological resources, and specifically to the Puente-Chino Hills wildlife corridor. Additional mitigation must therefore be required, in the form of funding (from Measure M or some other funding source) both to purchase biologically-important open space land and restore native habitats, in order to directly benefit the Puente-Chino Hills wildlife corridor.

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), in conjunction with Orange County Transportation Authority and the Riverside County Transportation Authority, propose to add an additional general-purpose lane and widen all lanes and shoulders to standard widths on eastbound State Route 91 (SR-91), to the south, between State Route 241 in eastern Orange County and State Route 71 (SR-71) in western Riverside

County (IS, p. 1). The total length of the project is 6.9 miles. The purpose of the project is to reduce traffic congestion, improve operational deficiencies, and comply with legislative requirements, consistent with Caltrans design standards (IS, p. 9).

Least Bell's vireo, a species considered endangered by the Federal and State government, is present in the project area in Fresno Canyon/Wardlow Wash (IS/MND, p. 211) and coastal California gnatcatcher, a species considered threatened by the Federal government, was observed onsite (IS/MND, p. 219). The project would result in direct, permanent impacts to approximately 5.69 acres of coastal sage scrub, of which 1.47 is designated critical habitat for the gnatcatcher by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Vegetation clearance within Caltrans right-of-way would be needed where Chino Hills State Park and Fresno Canyon/Wardlow Wash meet SR-91, and disturbed vegetation would be restored (IS/EA, p. 61). The IS (p. 18) states that the Coal Canyon Undercrossing, and other undercrossings/bridges, would be widened.

Importance of Coal Canyon and Maintenance of the Puente-Chino Hills Connection to Santa Ana Mountains

WCCA cannot overemphasize the regional biological value of the Coal Canyon Biological Corridor, which is the ecological connection between the Puente-Chino Hills and the Santa Ana Mountains. According to Haas and Crooks (1999), the eastern edge of the Puente/Chino Hills corridor is the most critical, and probably the only link that will ensure exchange of wildlife between the Santa Ana Mountains and eastern Chino Hills. Due to extensive urbanization, the only option for dispersing individuals to leave the Puente/Chino Hills is through the Coal Canyon Biological Corridor. Haas and Crooks (1999) state that clearly this area (Area 1; SR-91 to Carbon Canyon Road [SR-142]), combined with Area 2 (SR-142 to State Route 57 [SR-57]), represents the most crucial block of core habitat within the Puente/Chino Hills.

Mountain lion has been documented crossing SR-91 at Coal Canyon (Beier and Barrett 1993). Haas and Crooks (personal communication, as cited in Noss et al. undated) have documented use of the Coal Canyon Biological Corridor by coyotes, bobcats, skunks, raccoons, opossums, foxes, and cougars.

The importance of the Coal Canyon Biological Corridor is emphasized in that Beier concludes that Coal Canyon was the only viable linkage between Santa Ana Mountains and the Puente-Chino Hills for mountain lions, and that the Chino Hills cannot support a population of cougars if it were to become isolated (from the Santa Ana Mountains) (Beier and Barrett 1993, as cited in Noss et al. undated). As Noss et al. (undated) state, Coal Canyon clearly represents the last viable opportunity to maintain and enhance a critical ecological linkage between the Puente-Chino Hills and the Santa Ana Mountains (Noss et al. undated).

In the area, Lyren (2001) document individual coyotes utilizing both the north and south sides of SR-91, west of SR-71. Coyote, bobcat, fox, and mountain lion have been documented using the area around Santa Ana River near Featherly Park (Haas and Crooks 1999).

Haas and Crooks (1999) state that while certain species are utilizing the culvert (91 east) adjacent to the bridge at Coal Canyon, other species such as deer may be deterred due to its low height and long length. Noss et al. (undated) recommend enhancements to the bottleneck at the Riverside Freeway, so other organisms could use the underpass (e.g., deer, rabbits, rodents, and birds). Coal Canyon could thus provide a critical stepping stone in maintaining connectivity for the coastal California gnatcatcher between the Santa Ana Mountains and the areas to the north (Noss et al. undated).

Concurrence with Several Biological Mitigation Measures

WCCA concurs with several project elements and mitigation measures proposed to partially mitigate impacts to biological resources during construction. Some of these include locating equipment maintenance and staging in designated areas away from wildlife corridor entrances, directing lighting away from wildlife corridors, and limiting hours of construction to daylight at Coal Canyon, Fresno Canyon, and Wardlow Wash (IS/EA, pp. 31, 202-203). These measures must not be weakened.

Project Impacts to Culverts/Wildlife Crossings

The California Environmental Quality Act/National Environmental Policy Act (CEQA/NEPA) document must clarify which culverts/wildlife crossings would be affected by the project and any project alternatives. The IS/EA identifies 26 culverts/wildlife crossings in the Biological Study Area (BSA), which are considered to have high, moderate, and low potential for wildlife use (IS/EA, p. 199). Figure 1-4 (5 sheets) indicates that five bridges would be affected, but it is not clear which of these are considered high, moderate, and low potential for wildlife use (as defined in the IS/EA). (The Coal Canyon bridge is considered high potential [IS/EA, p. 199].) The IS/EA must also clarify if all 26 culverts/undercrossings would be widened in order for decision-makers to adequately weigh the balance between the proposed impacts and mitigation. (This information may be in the additional biological documents that WCCA staff did not have available at the time of reviewing the IS/EA.)

The IS/EA (p. 201) relies on the openness ratio (dividing the width of the opening of the wildlife crossing by the length of the crossing) in the analysis of impacts to culverts/wildlife crossings. The IS/EA discusses a decrease in openness of culverts/wildlife crossings that are already above the threshold of 0.75 for large mammals, or for those that are below. The IS/EA state that some culverts/wildlife crossings (e.g., bridge at Coal Canyon) are substantially larger than recommended for large mammals, or that the decrease in the

openness ratio would be moderate. The IS/EA is deficient for concluding that the project would not result in long-term impacts, such as an increase in habitat fragmentation or a substantial degradation of existing wildlife corridors.

This approach does not appear to consider a suite of animals (e.g., large, medium, small mammals, birds, etc.) that use or potentially could use these culverts/wildlife crossings. Noss et al. (undated) recommend enhancements at the Coal Canyon SR-91 crossing to foster use by other species. Also, the IS/EA does not adequately consider the combined impact from the project of diminishing the openness ratio over multiple culverts/wildlife crossings in this critical area. Nor does the document address how increased traffic, development of private land, and climate change make any reduction in openness ratio scientifically supportable.

Need for Expanded Affected Environment and Analysis of Cumulative Impacts

The Biological Study Area (BSA) was defined in the IS/EA (p. 192) as extending between the edge of pavement of eastbound SR-91 on the north and the limits of the existing State-owned right-of-way on the south, and it also includes temporary construction easements. The IS/EA (p. 232) states that the cumulative study area for the proposed project includes the areas in the cities of Anaheim, Yorba Linda, and Corona and unincorporated Orange and Riverside counties in the vicinity of the project segment of SR-91. According to the IS/EA (p. 238), the impacts to biological resources are localized and do not impact areas, resources, or plans beyond the project disturbance limits. The conclusion that the proposed project would not result in environmental impacts beyond the project limits because it would not directly or indirectly impact resources outside the project area (IS/EA, p. 7) is deficient. The IS/EA (p. 62) states there would be no impact to Coal Canyon Ecological Reserve due to lack of proximity.

On the contrary, the adverse effects of this project on biological resources, in conjunction with other projects in the area, would extend beyond this BSA and Affected Environment, as currently defined in the IS/EA. The IS/EA (p. 235) states that the future widening of SR-91 associated with the other transportation projects would likely result in additional impacts to designated open space on both the north and south sides of SR-91. As a result, the IS/EA must be modified to expand the definition of the Affected Environment for the discussion of cumulative impacts on biological resources. Specifically, as the last major natural open space resource connecting Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties, the Puente-Chino Hills wildlife corridor exists as a single ecosystem in which changes that affect one part may also affect all other parts. As Noss et al. (undated) state, these two areas (Puente-Chino Hills and Santa Ana Mountains) are naturally connected and they are fundamentally one ecological system. Contrary to the conclusion in the IS/EA (p. 239), implementation of the project would contribute to adverse impacts to biological resources, and specifically to wildlife movement and habitat connectivity.

One major cumulative impact of concern to WCCA is how regional wildlife movement and habitat connectivity will be affected by the future widening of culverts/wildlife crossings along SR-91 and loss of native vegetation in the vicinity of the culverts/wildlife crossings. For example, at least two future SR-91 widening projects overlap the subject project area (Table 2.37, IS/EA, p. 234). The CEQA/NEPA document is deficient for not including a discussion of how the cumulative widening of specific underpasses and culverts along SR-91, and associated removal of native vegetation, would impact wildlife movement through those culverts/wildlife crossings. After all these projects are implemented, what will the wildlife crossings look like (e.g., final length of crossings, extent of undisturbed and restored native vegetation, etc.)?

The CEQA/NEPA document is also deficient for not adequately discussing the cumulative impacts to native vegetation, hydrology, and water quality along the Santa Ana River and tributaries, in the context of biological resources. The IS/EA (p. 238) states that because of the proximity of the Santa Ana River to SR-91, indirect impacts to aquatic habitat would potentially occur in the future. Hypersedimentation and the introduction of toxins through runoff may have a negative effect on aquatic habitats (IS/EA, p. 238). Future projects that involve additional road widening may result in the loss of riparian and coastal sage scrub habitats (IS/EA, p. 238). The list of cumulative projects lists several SR-91 widening projects (Table 2.37, IS/EA, p. 234), including at least two that cover the same project segment as the subject project, and others that cover nearby areas along SR-91. This cumulative impacts discussion should include other anticipated projects expected to affect the biological resources of the Santa Ana River watershed, in the vicinity of the project. The Santa Ana River Interceptor Protection/Relocation Project should be included in this analysis.

The CEQA/NEPA document must also address potential cumulative impacts to sensitive wildlife species (e.g., coastal California gnatcatcher and least Bell's vireo) in the Santa Ana River watershed in the vicinity of the project.

Need for Mitigation for Cumulative Impacts to Biological Resources

The CEQA/NEPA document must include measures that will mitigate the cumulative effects on biological resources, including those effects that could diminish wildlife movement and lead to the potential loss and fragmentation of wildlife habitat within the Puente-Chino Hills wildlife corridor. WCCA recommends that Measure M funds, or some other funding source, be allocated to fund both habitat acquisition and restoration that is directly tied to preserving or enhancing the resources within the Puente-Chino Hills wildlife corridor within a one-mile radius of the Project segment, or otherwise as defined by California Department of Fish and Game. This mitigation would be beyond the currently proposed restoration/acquisition/enhancement measures proposed for direct impacts to coastal sage

scrub (IS/EA, p. 203). WCCA is the best-positioned agency to accept, hold, and expend such funds. WCCA staff can acquire properties and contract with private and public entities to provide habitat restoration.

In summary, WCCA asserts that the IS/EA must be modified to more accurately assess the cumulative biological impacts, specifically on regional wildlife movement. Most importantly, the IS/EA must include a mitigation measure requiring the funding of both habitat acquisition and restoration to offset those cumulative impacts to the Puente-Chino Hills wildlife corridor. Thank you for your consideration of these comments and recommendations. Please direct further inquiries and comments to Judi Tamasi of our staff at (310) 589-3200, ext. 121, and judi.tamasi@mrca.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

Bob Henderson
Chairperson

Literature cited

Beier, P. and R.H. Barrett. 1993. The cougar in the Santa Ana Mountain Range, California. Final Report. Orange County Cooperative Mountains Lion Study. June 1.

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Lyren, L. M. 2001. Movement patterns of coyotes and bobcats relative to roads and underpasses in the Chino Hills area of southern California. A thesis presented to the faculty of California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

Noss, R., P. Beier, and W. Shaw. Undated. Evaluation of Coal Canyon Biological Corridor.