

SEAs and the Draft General Plan

Significant Ecological Areas (SEAs) are called out as “special management areas” in the Land Use Element of the Draft General Plan. The SEAs are shown within the Land Use Element of the Draft General Plan as part of Figure 3.1, the Special Management Area Policy Map (pg 52).

More detail is provided on the proposed SEAs in Chapter 6: the Conservation and Open Space Element. In this section of the Draft General Plan the SEAs are called out as identifying the most important biological resources in the County. The SEAs are delineated to create a program of preservation that seeks to balance development rights with the need to protect habitats and species which are unique and rare (pg 104). The goals and policies for Biological Resources (pg 107) apply to all biological resources in the County, but most specifically to SEAs as they have already been identified as the County’s priority resources.

The Draft General Plan also outlines how the SEAs will be preserved through implementation actions. “Part III: General Plan Implementation Program” is a section of the General Plan which highlights how the goals and policies will be achieved through actions taken by the County. The Environmental Resource Management section of the Implementation Program includes an action calling for an update of the SEA ordinance (pg 216).

SEA MAP & Descriptions

The Conservation and Open Space Element also contains the proposed SEA map (pg 104). This map, Figure 6.2 is one of the most important parts of the SEA program. In many ways the new SEA boundary map is also an old map. The earliest concept maps in the 1970 Environmental Development Guide (pg 66 & 67) and the vegetation and wildlife map in the 1973 General Plan (pg 83) look extremely similar to the proposed 2011 SEA map.

However, this map is “new” in the sense that it greatly expands the boundaries of the existing adopted SEAs. There are 125,787 acres of adopted SEAs in LA County, divided into 61 individual SEAs. Currently County unincorporated areas make up the bulk of the SEA program at 82,079 acres. The proposed SEA map represents a significant expansion of these areas, to some 645,517 acres (including coastal resource areas), with 535,074 of those acres falling in unincorporated Los Angeles County. The new SEA ordinance is made up of 27 large SEAs, instead of the 61 smaller versions we have today. Much of the expansion has to do with the new approach to resource protection, which links larger spaces together to preserve genetic diversity and increase wildlife movement across the region.

However, many of the expanded SEAs are already developmentally constrained due to existing open space, including portions of the Angeles National Forest, watercourses and Federal Emergency Management Area (FEMA) flood plains, hills and mountains

with greater than 25% slope, mineral resource zones monitored by the State, and areas with critical biological habitat where state and federal resource agencies have jurisdiction over species.

The SEA map is also supported by technical descriptions of the SEAs' resources, located in Appendix E of the Draft General Plan (pg 56). The descriptions released with the 2011 Draft General Plan, were further updated by our biological consultants in the fall of 2011, and are being checked for additional accuracy by our staff biologist. We anticipate releasing the expanded descriptions in April.

The map itself and the technical descriptions of the SEAs have been extensively studied by expert biologists. The original SEAs were studied in 1976 in order to be incorporated into the 1980 General Plan. In 1991 Michael Brandman Associates conducted a "Phase 1" study of 7 of the adopted SEAs in order to establish baseline data on SEA resources. In 2000 the County hired PCR Services to conduct an update study on all of the County's SEAs. PCR developed a 6 point criteria to assess the areas, based on the 8 point criteria originally developed to evaluate SEA significance in 1976. At the end of the survey they proposed 12 SEAs covering 442,983 acres, which linked many existing SEAs together. The 2000 Update included public outreach and recommendations for areas of study, literature and database reviews, aerial surveys, and field surveys. This methodology is explained in detail on page 14 of the Los Angeles County Significant Ecological Area Update Study 2000. The final product of the 2000 Update Study was comprised of a Background Report, Executive Summary, and 12 individual reports for each recommended SEA.

The 2000 study was not the end of the process. In 2002 a proposed SEA map was publicly released as part of the 2002 Draft General Plan Initial Study. In 2005, following additional public comment and outreach, the SEA map was again revised after additional supporting field work and literature review. This work resulted in updated support materials released by PCR Services and revisions to the SEA boundaries made by DRP staff biologists and consulting biologists. In 2007 the next public release of the Draft General Plan included a revised SEA map, and again in 2008, the Draft General Plan was released with an updated SEA map. In 2010 a panel of expert biologists was convened to examine the SEA boundaries. Using species databases and over 200 maps with high resolution aerial photography of the proposed SEAs, they compared the proposed boundaries with their own expert knowledge and provided final recommendations on the SEA boundaries, which were incorporated into the current proposed SEA publicly released on October 2011.

SEA ordinance

The current SEA ordinance is combined in our zoning ordinance with Hillside Management Area (HMA) regulations. The preliminary draft of the updated SEA Ordinance separates SEAs and HMAs into two distinct processes, clarifying which regulations apply to each. The primary method for SEA preservation is the SEA ordinance, and takes the form of a required SEA Conditional Use Permit (CUP).

Projects requiring an SEA CUP go through a Significant Ecological Areas Technical Advisory Committee (SEATAC) review. SEATAC review includes the preparation of biological studies, recommendations about project design, and an assessment of project compatibility with the SEA.

A preliminary draft of the SEA ordinance was released on the DRP SEA Program Webpage in November of 2011. The comment period for this preliminary draft closed on February 1st, in anticipation of a March-April release date of a second revision of the ordinance.

The draft SEA ordinance changes the way the County would handle projects in the SEAs in a number of significant ways. The draft ordinance has fewer by-right exemptions from the SEA CUP, including expanded applicability to grading projects, Single Family Residences, and vegetation clearance once any of those uses reach certain sizes. The draft ordinance also explicitly names site design and development standards that conform with best practice in design for environmentally sensitive areas. Examples of this approach include standards which require a riparian setback for structures, and a standard that requires minimized lighting onsite.

The draft ordinance also proposes a new phase of the process; an “initial project appraisal” given before SEATAC which would occur before an applicant is even allowed to submit a complete CUP application to the department. This initial appraisal is intended to ensure an early County review of a project before the end of the design phase, allowing staff planners and SEATAC biologists to help an applicant prepare a superior project which minimizes impacts from the beginning. In order to further streamline the process the draft SEA ordinance also proposes that SEATAC could recommend that a project be exempted from the SEA CUP process, if they are satisfied during the initial project appraisal that the overall impact of the project is minimal. This opportunity to be opted out of the SEA CUP is intended to balance against the greater applicability of the SEA Ordinance to previously exempted uses.

SEATAC Procedure

SEATAC procedures are guided by a series of Board motions and reports to the Board made in 1991. In 2004 the Department of Regional Planning also released an instructive manual that further outlines SEATAC procedures and policy, with an emphasis on guiding applicants as to the types of materials applicants will need to prepare in order to complete the two major documents required for the SEATAC review: the Biota Report and the Biological Constraints Analysis.

SEATAC review is an extremely thorough process, however staff has identified areas which could be improved as a component of the SEA program, and implemented through updates to the 2004 SEA procedures and the revisions to process in the the draft SEA ordinance. These updates are opportunities to improve alignment between County planners and biologists during project review.

Additional SEA Program Information:

The SEA Program website (<http://planning.lacounty.gov/sea>) has undergone a number of updates during the last few months. One of the most significant releases on our webpage is access to PDF files of the SEA studies and resources (<http://planning.lacounty.gov/sea/studies>), which creates a publicly available file of all the past studies the County has conducted on the SEA areas, as well as access to GIS shapefiles of both the proposed and adopted SEA boundaries.