



**MINUTES OF THE SIGNIFICANT ECOLOGICAL AREA
TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SEATAC)
MEETING OF 2 May 2011**

(Minutes approved as amended on 6 June 2011.)

PERSONS IN ATTENDANCE:

SEATAC MEMBERS

Dr. Jonathan Baskin
Dan Cooper
Ty Garrison
Robb Hamilton
Michael Long
Dr. Thomas Scott (absent)
Dr. Cheryl Swift (absent)

REGIONAL PLANNING STAFF

Dr. Shirley Imsand (Biologist,
SEATAC coordinator)
Dr. Wesley Colvin (Biologist)

MINUTES pagination:

1. **Approval of SEATAC minutes for 7 March 2011, p.2**
2. **Review of application of Vanessa Santistevan for SEATAC certified biologist list, p.2**
3. **Revision of SEATAC Procedures and Guidelines, p.3**
4. **Off-agenda: Discussion of criteria for review of a project by SEATAC**

NOTE: SEATAC meetings are informal working sessions. Members are appointed volunteers in an advisory capacity. Minutes are prepared by planning staff from notes and tape. Visitors are advised to take proper notes and/or record the session. Issues not discussed by SEATAC do not imply tacit approval. New or clarified information presented in subsequent submittals may raise new issues and may require further analysis. Minutes are generally approved at the next SEATAC meeting. Draft minutes may be requested but are subject to revision.

**MINUTES
2 May 2011**

OLD BUSINESS

1. Minutes of previous meeting 7 March 2011 were approved as amended. Robb Hamilton moved for approval and Mickey Long seconded the motion.
 - The Watch List of the Los Angeles County Sensitive Birds document will not be used in the preliminary table of species in the appendix nor in the sensitive list of the text of the SEATAC reports. Those bird species on the Watch List of the LA County Sensitive Bird List will only be reported in the complete list of species observed, if observed (an appendix item).

NEW BUSINESS

2. **Review of application of Vanessa Santisteven, Power Engineers, for SEATAC certified biologist list.**
 - **A major part of the report seems to be extracted from a larger work, Barren Ridge Renewable Transmission Project. The letter or report needs to make clear what biological field work Ms. Santisteven did and what part of the report she authored. It needs to demonstrate the level of familiarity with the resources expected of a SEATAC biologist. A comprehensive field survey report supervised by Ms. Santisteven should be the kind of report presented to SEATAC as an example. The sample report needs to have more of the elements of a standard SEATAC report.**
 - **The report needs to have a list of all species seen, flora and fauna.**
 - **There are some species mistakes. The southern rubber boa is not expected in the chaparral of the San Gabriel Mountains. This may be a confusion with the rosy boa. Alternatively, this may be a problem with using a report for the U.S. Forest Service as a SEATAC example. It would be better to submit a sample report in which the CNDDDB and CNPS 9-quad lists were analyzed, so that lists will be regionally appropriate.**
 - **There are careless errors in consistency. In some places species are listed as impacted and in others as not impacted by the project (eg. Pond turtle).**
 - **The report in Bee Canyon tributary of San Francisco Canyon might be more appropriate, if it is more like a SEATAC report. With the footprint of 800 feet of pipeline in a sensitive area, the report may be more extensive and be an example of the level of expertise desired.**

OLD BUSINESS (continued)

3. **Discussion of revision of SEATAC Procedures and Guidelines; the last revision was 2004.**
 - **The current procedures and guidelines version, is posted on the web, but is out of date on many points and needs revision. There was insufficient time to go through the entire document, and the process will be continued at future meetings.**
Web version: http://planning.lacounty.gov/assets/upl/case/sea_proc-guide.pdf
 - **County biologist said that due to Brown Act requirements, documents will be posted on the website in .pdf format for the public and members. Applicants will need to provide both formats, as some members need hardcopy, but hardcopies will be reduced substantially since most members can use the digital format.**
 - **County biologist indicated that parts of the document will change relating to review by SEATAC of projects with parcels having an SEA overlay in any part. The proposed revision will exempt projects with no construction or other impact such as fuel modification inside boundaries of the new SEAs. The new boundaries of the SEA include what used to be buffer areas when those areas met the SEA criteria.**

-SEATAC recommends using a buffer area of 200 feet at the periphery of the SEA boundary to determine SEATAC review of projects in the vicinity of SEAs (for projects not on the SEA overlay but nearby). Two-hundred feet (200 ft.) has been used for determining influence on oak trees for oak tree reports and for fuel modification requirements, and therefore, is used by the County as a zone of influence. This recommendation for a buffer area arises because edge effects can dramatically influence SEA biota and need to be considered.

 - **A short paragraph describing addition of biologists to SEATAC certified list has been added.**

- **Oblique aerial photos are no longer needed. Good vertical aeriels are essential.**
- **SEATAC states that surveys need to be less than or about one year old, not much older. This accords with requirements for survey by CA Dept. of Fish & Game.**
- **County biologist handed out forms for relevé analysis and direction to CNPS website where forms are available.**

-SEATAC does not recommend relevé analysis, but use of the alliance-associate system is recommended with cross-reference to the Holland system in the vegetation table. Only the alliances should be required in the vegetation map. The expectation is that the applicant will walk and survey the entire site as feasible to capture as complete a species list as possible. Concentration on the alliance system should force more diligent analysis than was done for maps using the Holland system of vegetation.

- **SEATAC recommended that surveys for vegetation need to be done in a “wet” (average or higher rainfall) year, but County biologist stated that this cannot be required. Reports must acknowledge the kind of rainfall that occurred for the season(s) of sampling and discuss how this may influence the vegetation reported.**
- **Soil maps may provide information that is useful, such as where to survey on projects of large extent—square miles. One SEATAC member argued that most features of interest are small, surface features that will not be shown on soil maps, whereas other members argued that these features do show. Finding soil data may be somewhat difficult for those without GIS facilities, but is possible. A discussion of special soil types that might have special plants should be in the text.**
- **Use of the Consortium of Herbaria information will be recommended.**
- **Coordinator recommended use of a metric of percentage of 9-quad list of sensitive species possible on site as an indicator of diversity on the site with respect to the project region, how representative of the region the site is. Coordinator argued that a count of sensitive species is not as comparable as something like percentage, which is often used for comparison. SEATAC members argued that the statistic would not reflect the value of the site (a small site with a spring could have low diversity, but be important because of the geography of the site) and a site from a region of high topographic diversity might look less valuable than it really is because it had only one type of topography.**
- **CNPS species ranked in lists 1 through 4 will be treated as sensitive species and discussed in paragraphs in the text.**
- **SEATAC rejected the idea of having the species lists of the reports in alphabetic order by species name. This was proposed as a way to have the lists more useful to the public. SEATAC stated that if the public was interested enough, they would use the lists in the traditional phylogenetic orderings by informing themselves enough to use that order or by consulting a specialist friend.**
- **Identification to subspecies level needs to be made for potentially sensitive species, but not for all species of the general floral and faunal lists.**
- **For the discussion of surrounding area, applicant should provide data on land use and projects in the immediate area. County does provide this information to applicants.**
- **A map of potential wildlife movement areas will be required.**
- **Proof of minimal wildlife movement or no potential wildlife movement will be difficult, but should be attempted. Wildlife movement is probably ubiquitous in open spaces even when the open area is a dead-end with three sides developed. It will be best for projects to do measurement in several potential areas and compare the amount of detected sign per time unit.**

- SEATAC questions how ‘compatible use’ will be identified in the revised SEA program, and if it will be.
- SEATAC stated that the goal should be 100% preservation of the natural SEA. Because much of this land is privately owned, there has to be some provision for owners to have fair use of their property. SEA land is more valuable than developed land for the biota, and SEATAC recommends a goal of at least 80% undeveloped, possibly up to 20% developed for projects in the SEAs.
- A new requirement will be completion of a form summary sheet that details SEA acreage in the project and how much of natural area will be developed by the project, how much will remain natural. Although something like this is specified in the existing procedures and guidelines, it has not always been provided, and the report to the Regional Planning Commission for SEA impact for the year has not been done for many years.
- SEATAC states that background data for the SEA acreages needs to be generated by consultation of old maps and aerial photographs.
- SEATAC recommends that there be a hierarchy of valuation of SEA lands. Fallow agricultural land, ruderal fields, non-native grasslands should be added to categories of natural land. Development should be defined as including paved, heavily irrigated, currently occupied by agriculture, heavily developed, occupied by buildings and other man-made infrastructure. Fallow agricultural land does revert to the natural condition. It takes a long time, but this land is valuable to biota. Some areas such as a dirt parking lot surrounded by natural lands may be useful for restoration. Intact land, completely natural, should be especially valued.

4. Off-agenda: Discussion of criteria for review of a project by SEATAC.

- (a) **Do the SEAs need a peripheral buffer?** County biologist presented the question.

The wind energy meteorological towers project that was originally scheduled for review will not be reviewed by SEATAC, because all towers proposed are placed outside parcels with even a portion of SEA overlay. The question was how to give recommendations on future nearby projects that could have effects on SEA resources, and how to catch omissions in the reports such as those reported below. Nearby initial studies will often devolve to County biologists, but only when planners decide biological input is needed, and certain projects are exempt from CEQA. Currently, some biota sections of Initial Studies for projects in natural areas are prepared by County biologists, and some are prepared by planners. [Initial Studies determine how discretionary projects are prepared for the Regional Planning Commission and public under CEQA: whether they have a negative declaration (ND) of no significant impacts; mitigated negative declaration (MND); or environmental impact report (EIR).]

As an example, the project that was scheduled for review formerly had a tower in a parcel with SEA overlay. The tower was proposed outside the SEA boundary, but it would have been 600-800 m from road access, across a wildflower field, and the shortest access would possibly involve crossing drainages on the north and south and crossing the wildflower field. So, there could have been significant impacts from this project on drainage at the periphery of the SEA and an adjacent wildflower field. (The wildflower field was recognized, but the impact from access was not discussed.)

Another tower of the project was not discussed as a wildflower site, but had more wildflowers than the first site and a native patch of bunchgrass. These resources were not discussed in the report.

The vernal pool on the overall project site was not recognized as a vernal pool initially in the project reports. It had filled, had flora and fauna, and was being used by sandpipers (perhaps western sandpipers, and the pool presumably had some food of interest to the sandpipers) when County biologists visited the met tower project. County biologist took pictures of a blooming plant in the pool that is typical of vernal pools, probably *Plagiobothrys acanthocarpus* (identified from photo by Michael Long).

The proposed SEA Program will exempt projects that have all construction outside the SEA boundary. Such projects may be in a parcel with SEA overlay, but will not be reviewed by SEATAC. The existing requirement is that projects in a parcel with SEA overlay are reviewed by SEATAC, regardless of where construction is intended in the parcel. The existing policy is that adjacent projects with contiguous boundaries are not reviewed by SEATAC, but several such cases were formerly reviewed.

The question raised is how the new SEA program can consider adjacent project impacts that may seriously affect the SEA resources. SEA boundary design in the revision with the General Plan will generally include what is needed as buffer area when that buffer area meets the SEA criteria.

- **SEATAC recommends using a 200-foot buffer from SEA boundaries for determining review by SEATAC. A 200-foot buffer is in use for determining what trees to list in an oak tree report and in determining fuel modification distance, and probably has been vetted as an adequate border area of concern. SEATAC's main concern is the influence of edge effects on the SEA resources.**

(b) Should utilities and County public works projects be exempt from SEATAC recommendations?

- **It is important to remember that SEATAC review is not exactly the same as CEQA review. An important difference is that SEATAC considers past and future for recommendations that concern preservation of the SEAs and all of their ecological functions.**
- **Emergency operations for public health and welfare should be exempt, but for planned projects in an SEA it would be appropriate to have SEATAC discussion and input to design of any project in an SEA, including those of public agencies.**
- **Perhaps there could be a special fee for discussion that does not require the standard biological reports and only requires one SEATAC session.**

5. **Public comment** pursuant to Section 54954.3 of the Government Code

No public comment was made.