



**MINUTES OF THE SIGNIFICANT ECOLOGICAL AREA
TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SEATAC)
MEETING OF 5 December 2011**
(Minutes approved on 9 January 2012)

PERSONS IN ATTENDANCE:

SEATAC MEMBERS

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

REGIONAL PLANNING STAFF

Dr. Shirley Imsand (Biologist,
SEATAC coordinator)
Emma Howard (Planner)
Brianna Menke (Planner)

PARKS AND RECREATION STAFF

Jui Ing Chien	jchien@parks.lacounty.gov	213-351-5129
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**MINUTES
5 December 2011**

OLD BUSINESS

- A. Minutes of the SEATAC meeting of 3 October 2011 were approved as amended by electronic mail on 24 October 2011. Michael Long moved for approval, and Robb Hamilton seconded the motion.

NOTE: SEATAC meetings are informal working sessions, open to public for observation and brief comment related to biology. 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.

**B. Presentation of the draft of the Significant Ecological Area ordinance for the new General Plan implementation and coordination of the SEATAC Procedures and Guidelines
by Ms. Emma Howard, Planner for Department of Regional Planning**

Presentation by Ms. Howard: The SEA program's position in the General Plan revision and ordinance revisions to SEATAC procedure were described in detail by Ms. Howard. There are two major goals of the new ordinance: (1) to facilitate interactive site design between applicant, applicant's biologist, planner, and SEATAC, and (2) to make the process of SEATAC review more clear to the applicant and to streamline the review process. The ordinance has measures to change the current SEATAC process. Ms. Howard had several requests for SEATAC's assistance.

A request of the staff preparing the ordinance is for guidelines that the planners can use. In all cases possible, suggest wording that could be used. SEATAC is specifically requested to improve on site design standards, especially if design could be more specific. (See 22.56.215.H) Staff would like a list of all foreseeable impacts; a list of probable mitigation measures which could connect to findings and then lead to conditions; a list of impacts that lead to a judgment of "incompatible with the SEA" related to the findings (22.56.215.J); suggestions for a form to be filled out at the end of each review related to findings for the planner.

SEATAC Recommendations and Comments:

(1) The proposed early input by SEATAC to the planning process is the most important correction of the new ordinance.

(2) Three SEATAC meetings should be adequate for biological review. Applicants do not change projects much in response to SEATAC review, but this is probably because the SEATAC review is so disconnected from the permit process.

(3) One of the SEATAC members stated that in the past there has been "initial project appraisal" by the staff biologist that resulted in an "initial project decision" that projects need not go through the SEATAC review. Dr. Inсанд stated she has reviewed such a project by discussion with SEATAC, and they advised they should counsel the applicant (i.e. SEATAC reviewed the project). Dr. Koutnik probably did eliminate some minor projects from SEATAC review after short discussion with SEATAC.

(4) SEATAC stated that there should be review of adjacent projects and projects whose parcels include some part of SEA overlay. If such cases were reviewed, then it is more likely that projects would frequently be judged as not needing SEATAC review.

Ms. Howard stated that there will not be SEATAC review of adjacent projects, and there will not be SEATAC review of a project with parcels having SEA overlay when the project disturbance is designed to be totally off the SEA overlay.

(5) Because most recommendations on biological resources of a project will be subjective and distinctive for the site, the standardization of impacts and significance thresholds is not going to be possible. One can mimic the State standards, but these are very general. The planning process can be exact, but the biological review will not have entirely predictable nor certain outcome because of the inherent vast variability of biology among sites. Defining thresholds that apply to all of Los Angeles County is probably not going to be possible.

(6) An example of the difficulty in specifying what is an allowable impact is that development of 8% of natural area of a watershed will substantially change amphibian populations, because they are so sensitive to site configurations and moisture regimes. For amphibians present on a site, allowable impact might be less than for a site where they are absent.

(7) At recent SEATAC meetings, it has been proposed that staff biologist review submitted BCAs and not present them to SEATAC until they are adequate. Adding a preliminary meeting with County biologist, applicant biologist, and planner after the BCA preparation, might be a better use of the SEATAC advisory group. Preliminary review by staff and empowerment of staff to require changes will probably get more adequate BCAs to the first meeting with SEATAC than those that have been received recently.

(8) Elimination of SEATAC review of the BCA may cause the applicants to need to appear more often than the currently required three meetings, especially if SEATAC sees a need for study that staff biologist missed. Sites are usually complex, and because most organisms are on yearly cycles, a

missed study or studies could really delay review of the project much more than the current system. A completed BCA is really needed for the first of the three SEATAC meetings. Preliminary assessment of impacts and mitigations can be added to the BCA if the applicant wants and discussed along with the BCA needs.

(9) Perhaps there should not be a distinction between BCA and Biota report and all reports be the Biota report, incorporating the biology studies of the BCA and the impact and mitigation analysis of the Biota Report.

(10) The certified biologists should know how to prepare an adequate BCA, and should be advised in this by staff biologist in a preliminary advisory review and meeting. SEATAC should not need to do this. Speed of review is often determined by the level of expertise of the applicant's biologist.

(11) Delays are not caused by inexact thresholds. Alternative explanations of delay include the following. (a) Recent BCAs have been inadequate. Staff biologist has not been able to review BCAs before posting them for review, because applicants insist on the three-week pre-meeting submittal date. (b) Procedures and guidelines have not been followed by applicant's biologist, possibly due to inconsistencies in the text of guidelines or possibly due to reluctance to document the extent of natural habitat and biological resources. (c) Some applicant biologists have a tendency to be overly client-friendly and often do not do analysis necessary for adequate review. (d) Some BCAs are so substandard, that they cannot be reviewed for all problems in a single SEATAC meeting, and subsequent meetings are needed just for the BCA review.

(12) Standardization of the planner process is possible. Standardization of biological review outcomes is much less likely. The objectives should be to produce the bare minimum of information needed for biological review, but this is not a simple review for a large project with multiple kinds of habitat and biological resources that interact with one another and the habitat.

(13) Currently the record of the SEATAC meetings is the minutes, which have recommendations numerically ordered. A form seems like an overly mechanical device that would not really serve to convey the information that needs to be conveyed. It would need to be exceedingly (impossibly?) detailed to apply to every project.

(14) There are trends towards recurring topics in SEATAC meetings such as riparian areas, fuel modification clearance of vegetation—recurring topics that do appear in the findings topics.

(15) Organization and scanning of previous SEATAC reports is an important task to promote. Scanning in a format with OCR so that information can be searched and extracted is strongly supported by SEATAC. These reports have been saved from discard, but the information is not accessible now. One use would be to direct applicants towards model reports that answer the findings questions in a somewhat standard way. SEATAC would also be able to use data in these reports to analyze newly submitted projects.

(16) Procedures should cover items of procedure and guidelines that need to be adjusted periodically.

(17) Mr. Scott Harris of CDFG was recommended as a reviewer for the ordinance.

(18) SEATAC is very supportive of the 200-ft. buffer at the edge of SEA to enable fuel modification for the project outside of the SEA overlay.

(19) The vernal pool protection in site design is ill-defined (22.56.215.H.4.ii) Protecting the sub-watershed is much preferred.

(20) SEATAC asked if the SEA biennial report will relate to the SEAs as they stand when the SEA ordinance is approved. Ms. Howard replied yes, that will be the baseline.

C. Public comment pursuant to Section 54954.3 of the Government Code.

The public asked for an explanation of the difference between a BCA and a Biota Report.

A BCA is based on literature and biological surveys, defines what sensitive biological resources (constraints) are predicted to be on a site, and maps where they are located. A brief sketch of the intended project should be included. The BCA should rate the areas on the site and map what should be left undisturbed and map the best area(s) to site the project.

The Biota Report uses the biological information of the BCA as a basis and may contain biological information from further study. The Biota Report uses the biological information and the project plan to predict the impacts of the project and recommend mitigations for the impacts, with the goal of reducing the impacts to no significant effect.