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## **SANTA FELECIA (FORMERLY PIRU CREEK) SIGNIFICANT ECOLOGICAL AREA**

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### **General**

The Santa Felecia Significant Ecological Area (SEA) encompasses the almost the entire Los Angeles County portion of the Santa Felecia watershed draining into Lake Piru. This watershed is largely undeveloped and contains vast stands of intact coast sage scrub and chaparral communities on south and north facing slopes, respectively. In addition to the undisturbed upland habitats, the watershed is dissected by excellent examples of mixed riparian (sycamore-willow), oak riparian and coast live oak forests and alluvial scrub in the bottomlands. Non-native grasslands occur in areas where grazing has taken place; however, there is little invasion of these ruderal taxa into the native communities. A brief summary of the plant communities present, or likely to occur, within the SEA is provided in the vegetation section below.

### **Description**

The Santa Felecia SEA includes a wide variety of topographic features and habitat types. The orientation and extent of the SEA encompasses the surface and subsurface hydrology of the Santa Felicia watershed, from its headwater, tributaries, and basin to the point at which it exits Los Angeles County jurisdiction. The northern portion of the SEA is within the Angeles National Forest. Capturing the watershed tributaries, the eastern boundary follows a predominate ridgeline, the western boundary is the county border and the southern boundary captures two other small tributaries that feed the Santa Felicia, to encompass almost the entire watershed that ultimately drains into Lake Piru in Ventura County.

### **Vegetation**

Plant communities within the SEA include: coast live oak woodland, coast live oak riparian forest, chaparral, coastal sage scrub, coastal sage scrub, chaparral, non-native and native grasslands, alluvial fan sage scrub, and sycamore-willow riparian woodland. Sensitive plant species occurring or potentially occurring within the SEA are discussed in the Sensitive Biological Resources section of this document.

Plant communities within the SEA were classified using standard methodology and terminology. Most of the communities discussed correspond directly with those listed in Holland's Preliminary Descriptions of the Terrestrial Natural Communities of California (1986 and 1992 update); some communities are named based upon the dominant species within them and/or other commonly used terminology. Descriptions of several plant communities present within the SEA are given below.

**Coast live oak woodland** consists of moderate-density overstory formations of coast live oak trees, usually on erosional plains along the margins of canyon bottoms and on lower slopes in chaparral and coastal sage scrub understory habitats.

**Coast live oak riparian forest** is a variation of coast live oak woodland wherein the canopy is more closely grown, and the trees occur in narrower formations along watercourses. Willow, California bay, mulefat, and other riparian species often occur in the understory.

**Sycamore-willow riparian woodland** may include the following: western sycamore, black willow, arroyo willow, skunkbush, and California blackberry.

**Alluvial fan scrub** generally consists of a mixture of shrubs, including scalebroom, California buckwheat, and white sage, which colonize and persist within infrequently scoured and flooded terrain such as floodplains, alluvial plains, or along seasonal streams.

**Chaparral** consists of broad-leafed or needle-leafed, sclerophyllous (hard-leafed), medium height to tall shrubs that form a dense cover on steep slopes, usually below 5,000 feet in Southern California. Dominant species found within this community include scrub oak, toyon, manzanita, and white sage.

**Coastal sage scrub** dominant species typically are California sagebrush, purple sage, giant wildrye, coyotebush, and California buckwheat.

**Non-native grassland** consists of invasive annual grasses that are primarily of Mediterranean origin, including short-pod mustard, tocalote, and riggut brome.

**Native grassland** communities consist of low, herbaceous vegetation dominated by grasses, with native formations generally mixed with native bulbs and other herbaceous species, often intermixed with naturalized annual taxa.

## **Wildlife**

Wildlife within the SEA is extremely diverse and abundant, commensurate with extensive acreages of natural open space and great diversity of habitat types, within the stream channels and on the surrounding uplands. While a few wildlife species may be entirely dependent upon or obligate within a single vegetative community, the mosaic of vegetation communities within the area and adjoining uplands constitutes a continuum of functional ecosystems. These ecosystems support a wide variety of wildlife species, within the SEA boundaries and as a part of the regional ecosystem.

Analysis of invertebrates on any given site generally is limited by a lack of specific data, but the size of the SEA and diversity of habitats present are considered sufficient to support healthy populations of a very large number of invertebrate species. The riparian formations and aquatic habitats within the SEA support diverse faunas of arthropods, which may include native fairy

shrimp, craneflies, blackflies and other aquatic dipterans, stoneflies, caddisflies, and dobsonflies, water boatmen, giant water bugs, ground beetles, diving beetles, and tiger beetles. Terrestrial insects abound around riparian corridors and in scrub habitats, and are particularly abundant in oak-dominated habitats.

Amphibians are abundant and relatively diverse within moister woodland areas, along montane canyon bottoms, in riparian areas, and within surface water features of the SEA. The overall riparian systems of the SEA provide habitat for a number of frog and toad populations, which may include populations of Pacific and California chorus frogs, western toad, and western spadefoot toad as well as the California red-legged frog and southwestern Arroyo toad. Open scrub, chaparral and alluvial fan habitats support diverse reptile populations, and the overall herpetofauna of the SEA would encompass numerous lizard species as well as a robust snake fauna.

Bird diversity within the SEA is related to habitat opportunities for year-round residents, seasonal residents, migrating raptors, and song birds. Coastal sage scrub and chaparral host a suite of birds typical of such sites at lower elevations over most of the coastal slopes of Southern California. The most productive sites for resident coastal sage scrub and chaparral birds are around riparian and freshwater systems, which also attract large numbers of migrants during Spring and Fall. Oak woodlands and riparian areas generally support many more species; notable species consist of the summer tanager, Bullock's oriole, black-headed grosbeak, band-tailed pigeon, western wood pewee, several swallow species, western yellow-billed cuckoo, willow flycatcher, and least Bell's vireo.

Native mammal diversity within the SEA is considerable. These likely include bats, rodents, squirrel, rabbits, mole, weasel, badger, skunks, raccoon, gray fox, bobcat, coyote, and mule deer. Black bear may also occur within the SEA boundaries, at least occasionally, but the San Gabriel Mountains population was introduced for game use, and this species is not native within the SEA.

### **Wildlife Movement**

Historically riparian corridors have served as linkages between the Pacific coastline, coast ranges, interior ranges, the high desert and southern Sierras (via the Tehachapi range). Animals move through the Santa Felecia watershed along and within the riparian systems between Piru Lake in Ventura County and the San Gabriel Mountain range and beyond. The tributary drainages in this SEA appear fully intact and open.

### **Sensitive Biological Resources**

Sensitive biological resources are habitats or individual species which have been afforded special recognition by federal, state, or local conservation agencies and organizations as endangered, threatened, rare, or otherwise of concern; this is principally due to the species' declining or limited population sizes, usually resulting from habitat loss. Watch lists of such resources are maintained by

the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and special groups such as the California Native Plant Society (CNPS). The following sections indicate the habitats as well as plant and animal species present, or potentially present within the SEA, that have been afforded special recognition.

### **Sensitive Plant Communities/Habitats**

The Santa Felecia SEA supports several habitat types considered sensitive by resource agencies, namely the CDFG [California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB)] because of their scarcity and support of a number of state and federally listed endangered, threatened, and rare vascular plants, as well as sensitive bird and reptile species. These communities include: coast live oak, coast live oak riparian forest, alluvial fan sage scrub, and native grassland. These communities or closely related designations are considered highest-inventory priority communities by the CDFG, indicating that they are declining in acreage throughout their range due to land use changes.

### **Sensitive Species**

Sensitive species include those listed, or candidates for listing by the USFWS, CDFG, and CNPS. These species include, but are not limited to, the California condor, red-legged frog and Arroyo toad. The SEA identifies other species observed, recorded in the CNDDDB, or reported in previous documentation as observed within or in the immediate vicinity of the SEA.

### **Ecological Transition Areas (ETAs)**

There are no ETAs designated within this SEA.