

## **2. Altadena Foothills and Arroyos SEA**

### ***Location***

#### *General*

The Altadena Foothills and Arroyos Significant Ecological Area (SEA) is located in the westernmost portion of the San Gabriel Valley. This SEA includes incorporated and unincorporated areas. The SEA represents the lower elevation/urban interface portions of Millard, Alzada, Chiquita, Las Flores, Rubio, and Eaton canyons from the urban edge, to undeveloped wildland areas of the lower elevations of the Angeles National Forest.

The SEA is located within the Mount Wilson and Pasadena United States Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5' California Quadrangles.

#### *General Boundary and Resources Description*

On the west side of the Altadena Foothills and Arroyos, the western and southwestern boundaries track along the urban-wildland interface in the undeveloped areas of the Arroyo Seco, Fern, and El Prieto canyons, and the boundary pulls back around a small area of development at the northern-eastern edge of La Cañada-Flintridge. A developed area northeast of the junction of Millard Canyon and El Prieto is excluded. The SEA designation includes the undeveloped portions of sub-watersheds of the Arroyo Seco, and also encompasses undeveloped parts of drainages, including Alzada and Chiquita, which flow into the Devils Gate Reservoir of the Arroyo Seco. The Arroyo Seco is within the Los Angeles River watershed. This SEA includes portions of the cities of Pasadena and La Cañada-Flintridge, the unincorporated community of Altadena, and the Angeles National Forest. The eastern side of the southern boundary encompasses undeveloped areas of the sub-watersheds of Las Flores, Rubio and Eaton canyons, which are tributary to the Rio Hondo and historically to the San Gabriel River. Much, but not all, of the Rio Hondo catchment is diverted via flood-control channels to the Los Angeles River. The southern boundary of the SEA is bordered by developed properties. The southern boundary moves east along the urban-wildland interface to include undeveloped parts of watersheds, which closely follow the perimeter of Devil's Gate Reservoir, in the Hahamongna Park in Pasadena. From Hahamongna Park, the SEA boundary continues east along the edge of development into the San Gabriel River watershed. The eastern border of the SEA is the eastern ridge of Eaton Canyon near the canyon mouth. A finger of the SEA extends downstream along Eaton Wash to include the Eaton Debris Basin and Reservoir. The northern boundary is formed along ridgelines within the Angeles National Forest that define the catchment of the local canyons. Within the Angeles National Forest, development is much less dense, in the form of in-holdings and Angeles National Forest leases, and is often naturally landscaped, albeit disturbed.

The chief attribute of this SEA is a high diversity of species, which is due to the SEA's position between the mountain biome and the valley biome, which is very abrupt because the change of slope is formed by the thrust fault complex that borders the San Gabriel Mountains. Furthermore, the SEA has as its

center the dividing ridge between the two principal rivers of the Los Angeles Basin, the Los Angeles River and the San Gabriel River.

The wide range of elevation, topography, aspect, and geology represent a diverse array of physical habitats within this SEA. In general, the topography of the SEA is moderately steep to very steep, which results in a number of very narrow corridors with elevations ranging from a high of approximately 2,400 feet above mean sea level (MSL) to a low of approximately 1,200 feet above MSL. Consequently, a variety of plant communities exist, including riparian and upland shrublands and woodlands. Within these major community types, there are many vegetation series that vary according to plant species dominance.

Of particular note for this SEA is its potential to accommodate lower elevation east-west linkages. This is significant because of the constraints of development at lower elevations, the very steep terrain, and seasonal snow storms above the SEA, beginning at about 3000 feet—all of which limit potential movement for many species. There is also potential for north-south wildlife movement between the Angeles National Forest and the Verdugo Mountains via the Arroyo Seco and the San Rafael Hills. The Arroyo Seco is the eastern limit of this link and creates a potential movement corridor from the Angeles National Forest, over and under the Interstate-210. Across the Interstate-210, the linkage enters the San Rafael Hills, where blocks of habitat remain in the cities. Some are conserved in natural open space, such as the Cherry Canyon Park and Open Space Preserve of the City of La Cañada-Flintridge, just south of the County Descanso Gardens. These open spaces are interspersed with residential development and are not part of the SEA. From the San Rafael Hills, linkage potential may be traced to the west across State Route-2 and Verdugo Wash, past enclaves of residential development to access the Verdugo Mountains.

### ***Vegetation***

The variety of topography, soil types, slope aspects and water availability within the SEA creates a range of physical habitats that support numerous communities. Plant species observed or recorded in previous documentation within the SEA are indicated in the *Comprehensive Floral & Faunal Compendium of the Los Angeles County SEAs*. Sensitive plant species occurring or potentially occurring within the SEA are discussed in the Sensitive Biological Resources section.

Brief descriptions and general locations of each major plant community present within the SEA are provided below, including oak woodland, white alder riparian woodland, chaparral, and coastal sage chaparral scrub.

Oak Woodland: A plant community dominated by arborescent species of the oak genus (*Quercus*). Within this SEA, oak woodlands are dominated by one of two species: coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia* var. *agrifolia*) and canyon oak (*Q. chrysolepis*). Understory and adjacent vegetation varies from annual grasses and forbs in level areas to shrubs where topography is steeper. Coast live oak woodland often forms a closed canopy and is scattered throughout the SEA, but is most prevalent on north-facing slopes and in drainage bottoms. The canyon oak woodland canopy is typically more open and found on steep, north-facing canyon walls.

Corresponding MCV communities:

*Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oak woodland) Woodland Alliance

*Quercus chrysolepis* (canyon oak woodland) Woodland Alliance

White Alder Riparian Woodland: Found along perennially-flowing streams in bedrock-constrained, steep-sided canyons, which result in a fairly narrow riparian corridor. This community is dominated by white alder (*Alnus rhombifolia*), which may grow 50 to 60 feet high over a shrubby understory.

Corresponding MCV community:

*Alnus rhombifolia* (white alder groves) Forest Alliance

Chaparral: A shrub community comprised of robust, woody, mostly evergreen species. Within this SEA, a number of chaparral series are found according to their dominant plant species. These include chamise, laurel sumac (*Malosma laurina*), ceanothus (*Ceanothus spp.*), San Gabriel scrub oak (*Quercus dumosa* var. *gabrielensis*), and mosaics of these depending on mixtures of species and elevation. These and other shrub species form dense vegetation 5 to 10 feet in height. The development of chaparral is pronounced over the hillside areas throughout the SEA.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Adenostoma fasciculatum* (chamise chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

*Adenostoma fasciculatum-Salvia apiana* (chamise–white sage chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

*Arctostaphylos glandulosa* (Eastwood's manzanita chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

*Arctostaphylos glauca* (bigberry manzanita chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

*Ceanothus leucodermis* (chaparral whitethorn) Shrubland Alliance

*Ceanothus spinosus* (greenbark ceanothus chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

*Ceanothus oliganthus* (hairy leaf ceanothus chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

*Prunus ilicifolia* (holly leaf cherry chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

*Rhus ovata* (sugarbush chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

Coastal Sage Scrub: A shrubland community exhibiting less robust structure that is found in this SEA.

This plant community is dominated by summer-deciduous shrubs, such as California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), California brittle bush (*Encelia californica*), white sage (*Salvia apiana*), black sage (*S. mellifera*), and California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*). It also forms dense stands, which grow three to four feet in height. Within this SEA, it is generally found in scattered patches, which are highly integrated with mixed chaparral. This plant community is generally found on hotter, drier south-facing slopes, lower ridges and small flats, which are primarily located in the lower elevation hillsides of the SEA.

Corresponding MCV communities:

*Artemisia californica* (California sagebrush scrub) Shrubland Alliance

*Artemisia californica-Salvia mellifera* (California sagebrush-black sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance

*Artemisia californica-Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California sagebrush-California buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance

*Encelia californica* (California brittle bush scrub) Shrubland Alliance

*Dendromecon rigida* (bush poppy scrub) Shrubland Alliance

*Salvia apiana* (white sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance

*Salvia leucophylla* (purple sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance  
*Salvia mellifera* (black sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance  
*Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance  
*Eriogonum fasciculatum-Salvia apiana* (California buckwheat-white sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance  
*Lotus scoparius* [*Acemispom glaber*] (deer weed scrub) Shrubland Alliance  
*Malacothamnus fasciculatus* (bush mallow scrub) Shrubland Alliance

### **Wildlife**

Wildlife populations within the SEA are diverse due to the area's vegetative diversity and its location within and adjacent to the Angeles National Forest. The analysis of invertebrates is severely limited due to the lack of collection-related data; however, the SEA is likely to support healthy populations of a diverse assortment of invertebrate species based on its undisturbed nature and variety of habitats. Amphibians are present within the aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats along the Arroyo Seco, Millard Canyon, Eaton Canyon, and tributary drainages. Reptile abundance and diversity are characteristic of the habitats present, although areas closer to urban development along the southern boundaries of this SEA are likely to be degraded due to edge effects.

Bird use, diversity, and abundance within the SEA are high for several reasons. In general, this SEA provides habitat for a wide range of shrubland, woodland, and riparian species that occur at varying elevations. In particular, the riparian habitats found in drainages throughout this SEA provide essential habitat for riparian-obligate and riparian-favoring species. In addition, a number of migratory birds use this area to move across the northern portion of the Los Angeles Basin. These include a wide spectrum of birds including song birds, waterfowl and raptors.

Similarly, the mammalian fauna is very diverse and abundant. Many mammalian species, including wide-ranging, large mammals, such as black bear, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote and deer are expected to use the SEA to forage. These animals are likely to den within the more isolated areas within the Angeles National Forest; however they are known to roam the SEA for foraging and dispersal opportunities.

### **Wildlife Movement**

Wildlife movement within the SEA takes on two major forms. First, due to the extremely steep intervening topography, considerable movement of wildlife up and down the drainages, which course through this SEA to connect the forest interior with foothill areas, is expected. Consequently, this type of movement occurs on a seasonal basis, particularly for large mobile mammals with a full range of habitat needs that are typically met over broad areas.

The second major type of movement occurs across the flanks of the foothills in an east-west direction. Particularly for riparian-obligate and riparian-favoring migratory birds, the corridor linking lower elevation riparian habitats in the SEA are of high importance and heavily utilized.

### **Sensitive Biological Resources**

Sensitive biological resources are habitats or individual species that have special recognition by federal, state, or local conservation agencies and organizations as endangered, threatened, and/or rare. This is

due to the species' declining or limited population sizes, which usually results 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, which have been accorded special recognition.

#### *Sensitive Plant Communities and Habitats*

The SEA supports several habitat types considered sensitive by resource agencies. These are inventoried by California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) in the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) [2011]. The CNDDDB includes state and federally-listed endangered, threatened, and rare vascular plants, as well as several sensitive vertebrate species. Sensitive communities include hairy leaf ceanothus chaparral, holly leaf cherry chaparral, chamise-white sage chaparral, California brittle bush scrub, white sage scrub, California buckwheat-white sage scrub, and oak riparian woodland. These communities, or closely related designations, are considered high priority communities by the CDFG, which indicates that they are experiencing a decline throughout their range. The array and composition of these communities has been discussed in the Vegetation section.

#### *Sensitive Plant Species*

The following special-status plant taxa have been reported or have the potential to occur within the SEA, based on known habitat requirements and geographic range information:

- Sonoran maiden fern (*Thelypteris puberula* var. *sonorensis*) RPR 2.2
- San Gabriel manzanita (*Arctostaphylos glandulosa* ssp. *gabrielensis*) RPR 1B.2
- Braunton's milk-vetch (*Astragalus brauntonii*) RPR 1B.1, FE
- Nevin's barberry (*Berberis nevinii*) RPR 1B.1, SE, FE
- Parry's spineflower (*Chorizanthe parryi* var. *parryi*) RPR 1B.1
- Coulter's goldfields (*Lasthenia glabrata* ssp. *coulteri*) RPR 1B.1
- White rabbit-tobacco (*Pseudognaphalium leucocephalum*) RPR 2.2
- San Gabriel oak (*Quercus dumosa* var. *gabrielensis*) RPR 4.2
- Greata's aster (*Symphyotrichum greatae*) RPR 1B.3
- Slender mariposa lily (*Calochortus clavatus* var. *gracilis*) RPR 1B.2
- Plummer's mariposa lily (*Calochortus plummerae*) RPR 1B.2
- Mesa horkelia (*Horkelia cuneata* ssp. *puberula*) RPR 1B.1

#### *Sensitive Animal Species*

The following special-status animal species are reported or are likely to be present within the SEA based on habitat requirements and known range attributes:

- Coast range newt (*Taricha torosa*) SSC
- Western pond turtle (*Emys marmorata*) BLMS, SSC, FSS
- Silvery legless lizard (*Anniella pulchra pulchra*) SSC, FSS
- Coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma blainvillii*) BLMS, SSC, FSS
- Coastal whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tigris stejnegeri*) CDFG Special Animals List
- Coastal rosy boa (*Lichanura trivirgata roseofusca*) FSS

San Bernardino mountain kingsnake (*Lampropeltis zonata parvirubra*) SSC, FSS  
 Coast patch-nosed snake (*Salvadora hexalepis virgulata*) SSC  
 San Bernardino ringneck snake (*Diadophis punctatus modestus*) FSS  
 Two-striped garter snake (*Thamnophis hammondi*) BLMS, SSC, FSS  
 American peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) FD, SD, CDF, CDFG Fully Protected, BCC  
 Southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) FE, SE, ABC  
 Least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*) FE, SE, ABC  
 Coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) FT, ABC, SSC  
 American badger (*Taxidea taxus*) SSC  
 Western mastiff bat (*Eumops perotis californicus*) BLMS, SSC, WBWG High Priority  
 Big free-tailed bat (*Nyctinomops macrotis*) SSC, WBWG: Medium-High Priority  
 Pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*) BLMS, SSC, FSS, WBWG: High Priority  
 Silver-haired bat (*Lasionycteris noctivagans*) CDFG Special Animals List, WBWG Medium Priority  
 Hoary bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*) CDFG Special Animals List, WBWG: Medium Priority  
 Western yellow bat (*Lasiurus xanthinus*) SSC, WBWG: High Priority  
 San Diego desert woodrat (*Neotoma lepida intermedia*) SSC

**Ecological Transition Areas (ETAs)**

There are no ETAs designated within this SEA.

**Regional Biological Value**

The SEA meets important SEA designation criteria and supports many regional biological values. Each criterion and how it is met is described below.

**CRITERIA ANALYSIS OF THE ALTADENA FOOTHILLS AND ARROYOS SEA**

	Criterion	Status	Justification
A)	The habitat of core populations of endangered or threatened plant or animal species.	Not Met	None within this SEA.
B)	On a regional basis, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution.	Met	The SEA is designating one of the principle ecotones of the Southern California coastal areas: the area where the sediment of the coastal alluvial fans from the mountain streams and drainages is exiting the abrupt upthrust rock of the mountains. Here one finds the biotic communities of the mountains meeting the communities of the coastal plain areas, combining with the organisms that are only found at the junction. The natural habitats of this kind of biological area are fast dwindling as urban communities expand to the limits of easily buildable space.
			The SEA is designating one of the principle ecotone areas of the County coastal exposure: the area where

Criterion		Status	Justification
C)	Within the County, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution.	Met	the sediment of the alluvial fans from the mountain streams and drainages is adding to the mile-deep sediments of the Los Angeles Basin, as the watercourses exit the abrupt upthrust rock of the San Gabriel Mountains. It is an area where one can often encounter flora that is characteristic of the Peninsular Ranges to the south and flora of the coastal ranges and Sierra Nevada to the north, among typical flora of the Transverse Ranges. The SEA contains prime examples of coastal sage scrub and other kinds of chaparral, riparian oaks, woodlands of the canyon oak of the mountains, woodlands of the coast live oak, which occurs both in the lower mountains and the valleys, good stands of the San Gabriel endemic oak ( <i>Quercus dumosa</i> var. <i>gabrielensis</i> ), diverse and beautiful flora characteristic of the continually changing beds of the mountain streams, both perennial and intermittent, and the wildlife that reside in these various habitats.
D)	Habitat that at some point in the life cycle of a species or group of species, serves as concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or migrating grounds and is limited in availability either regionally or in the County.	Met	The SEA provides a low-elevation constrained corridor. The SEA serves as the only corridor to provide interacting component habitat areas for species to feed, rest, and migrate from low basin and foothill elevations to the sub-alpine elevations of the high San Gabriel Mountains.
E)	Biotic resources that are of scientific interest because they are either an extreme in physical/geographical limitations, or represent unusual variation in a population or community.	Not met	None within this SEA.
F)	Areas that would provide for the preservation of relatively undisturbed examples of the original natural biotic communities in the County.	Met	Areas encompassed within the SEA represent the only remaining stands of low-elevation foothill scrub, chaparral, and canyon woodland communities within the north San Gabriel Valley. These communities once extended throughout what are now the communities of the north San Gabriel Valley, bridging the transition between high chaparral on the southern slope of the San Gabriel Mountains to the alluvial fans extending beneath the mountains to the coastal basin.

In conclusion, the area is an SEA because it contains (B-C) a good example of the biotic communities typical of the area where the abrupt upthrust of the mountains meets the alluvial fans of the valleys, a

natural habitat that is limited in availability in the County and the coastal Southern California region; (D) it has a constrained connective corridor area near the Devil's Gate Dam where the freeway underpasses provide access between the San Rafael Hills and the San Gabriel Mountains; and (F) it supports intact remnant stands of low-elevation chaparral and scrub communities that were once more widespread within the region.

## **2. Altadena Foothill and Arroyo SEA Sources**

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