

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE SIGNIFICANT ECOLOGICAL AREAS (SEA) PROGRAM

Los Angeles County (“County”) is host to one of the most remarkable assortments of biological diversity in North America. Natural communities in the County extend from the Pacific Ocean to the Mojave Desert, with coastal plains and valleys, a 10,000-foot tall mountain range, and hills and canyons in every orientation in between. This irreplaceable diversity of natural and biological resources is our heritage, and the reason for which the County developed the Significant Ecological Area (SEA) Program.

The biodiversity of the County is a product of the forces that shaped California, and its variety corresponds directly to the variety of places in the County where we choose to live. The feelings and images we associate with these locations are inextricably entwined in the biota they support. Imagine Palos Verdes without California sagebrush; Saddleback Butte without Joshua trees and creosote; the Tehachapi Mountains without vibrant wildflower fields; the Puente Hills without black walnut and coast live oak; or San Antonio Canyon without California scalebroom, white alder, and western sycamore. Even if you are not familiar with the names of these plants, it doesn’t matter—you recognize these places in large part because of their characteristic vegetation and habitats.

Nature is slow, and the landscape that supports nature is changing, in some cases more rapidly than nature can keep up. Much of this change has already taken place—the San Fernando Valley was once an oak savanna; the western Antelope Valley was once a Joshua-juniper forest. Some of the changes we face may be out of our control, but many are within our ability to shape. Siting development to avoid obvious detrimental impacts to biota is the biggest part of the SEA program and is an effective method for protecting the important biodiversity of Los Angeles County.



Figure 1. Palos Verdes Coastline, April 2017. Photo by Sergei Gussev (source: Flickr)



Figure 2. Joshua trees under the milky way in the Antelope Valley. Photo by Mayra Vasquez, Los Angeles County



Figure 3. Wildflower fields in front of the Tehachapi Mountains, March 2009. Photo by Rennett Stowe (source: Flickr)

IT TOOK A VERY LONG TIME FOR THIS BIODIVERSITY TO BE GENERATED AND DISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY THE WAY WE SEE IT TODAY, AND THE LAND USE DECISIONS WE MAKE TODAY WILL PERMANENTLY AFFECT THE BIODIVERSITY WE LEAVE FOR THE FUTURE.

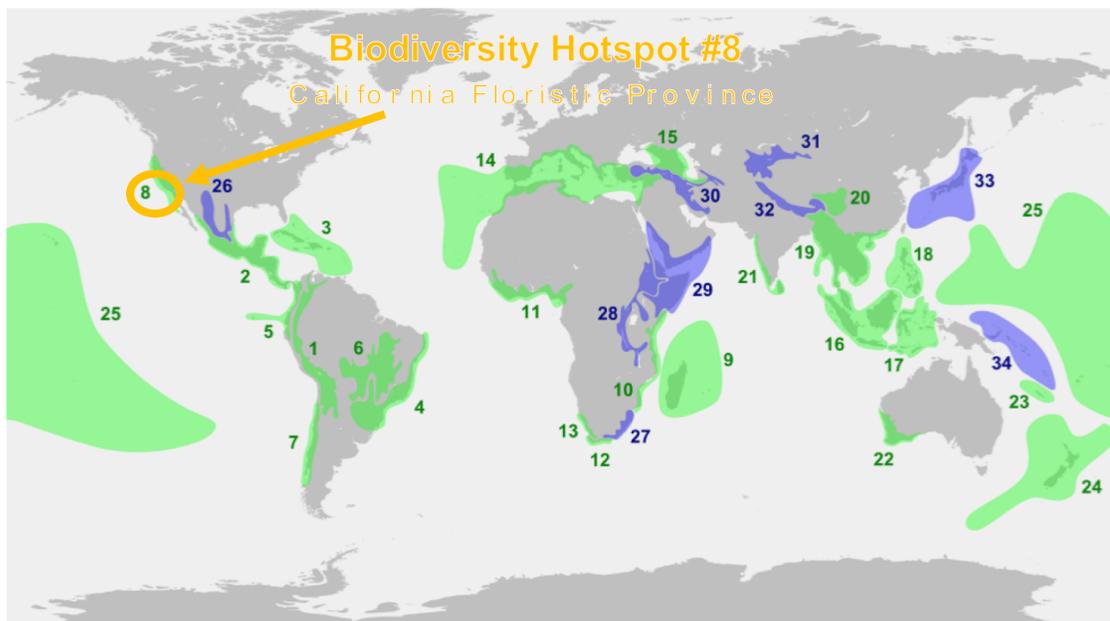


Figure 4. Los Angeles County lies within the California Floristic Province, which is globally recognized as a hotspot of native biodiversity.

SEA PROGRAM COMPONENTS

The SEA Program was originally established as a part of the 1980 County General Plan, to help conserve the genetic and physical diversity within Los Angeles County by designating biological resource areas capable of sustaining themselves into the future. The General Plan 2035 (“General Plan”) updated the SEA boundary map, goals and policies in 2015.

SEAs are places where the County deems it important to facilitate a balance between development and biological resource conservation. Where occurring within SEAs, development activities are carefully guided and reviewed with a key focus on site design as a means for conserving fragile resources such as streams, woodlands, and threatened or endangered species and their habitats. The SEA Program does not change the land use designation or the zoning of a property; rather it uses guidance and biological review and the application of certain development standards to balance the preservation of the County’s natural biodiversity with private property rights.

The SEA Program consists of the following components, which are discussed in further detail below:

1. The SEA Goals and Policies found in the Conservation and Natural Resources Element of the Los Angeles County General Plan 2035;
2. The Significant Ecological Areas and Coastal Resource Areas Policy Map (“SEA Boundary Map”) also found in the Los Angeles County General Plan 2035; and
3. The SEA Ordinance of the County Zoning Code.

SEA GOALS AND POLICIES (GENERAL PLAN 2035, CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES ELEMENT)

[Chapter 9: Conservation and Natural Resources Element](#), of the General Plan establishes goals and policies for SEAs. Areas of the County designated as SEAs satisfy at least one of the following six SEA Selection Criteria:

- A. Habitat of core populations of endangered or threatened plant or animal species.
- 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.
- C. Within the County, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution
- D. Habitat that at some point in the life cycle of a species or group of species, serves as concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, migrating grounds and is limited in availability either regionally or in the County.
- 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.
- F. Areas that would provide for the preservation of relatively undisturbed examples of the original natural biotic communities in the County

[Appendix E of the General Plan](#) includes detailed descriptions of each SEA, including boundaries, representative resources, wildlife movement opportunities, and designation criteria analysis. The SEA designation does not identify every individual biotic resource, and SEAs are not preserves or conservation areas; rather, SEAs are areas in which planning decisions are made with extra sensitivity toward biological resources and ecosystem functions.

SEA BOUNDARY MAP (GENERAL PLAN 2035 - FIGURE 9.3)

The General Plan 2035 established the current SEA boundaries, as depicted on the SEA Boundary Map (Figure 5). In order to facilitate maintenance of sufficient habitat and to promote species movement, the SEAs were mapped over large areas of undisturbed or lightly disturbed land, linking together and supporting regional resources, such as agricultural lands, forests, mountains, canyons, and open space.

SEA ORDINANCE (TITLE 22 PLANNING AND ZONING CODE)

The SEA Ordinance implements the goals and policies of the General Plan by establishing permitting requirements, design standards, and review processes for development within SEAs. The goal of the SEA Ordinance is to guide development to the least impactful areas on a property in order to avoid adverse impacts to biological resources. The level of SEA assessment is dependent on the area of disturbance, sensitivity of biological resources impacted, and consistency with Development Standards. Chapter 2 explains the SEA assessment process in more detail.



Figure 5. The SEA Boundary Map depicts 21 SEAs and nine Coastal Resource Areas (CRAs)¹. Four SEAs are located entirely outside of the County’s jurisdiction, while 12 others have portions located within incorporated cities. The SEA Boundary Map shows CRAs and SEAs within cities for reference and visual continuity only. The SEA Program applies solely to adopted SEAs located within unincorporated areas. Conceptual SEAs will be subject to SEA Ordinance once they are formally adopted as SEAs.

¹ CRAs include biological resources equal in significance to SEAs, but, since they occur in the coastal zone, they fall under the authority of the California Coastal Commission. Ecological resources of CRAs are protected by specific provisions within an area’s certified local coastal program.

For development located in the Santa Monica Mountains, consult the SMM North Area CSD or the SMM Local Coastal Program for biological regulations (see page 48).

SEA IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

The purpose of this SEA Implementation Guide (“Guide”) is to provide an overview of the SEA Program, guidance for reviewing proposed development in SEAs, and counseling to the public on appropriate development within SEAs. As its name suggests, this document should guide implementation of the SEA Program and clarify regulatory language in the SEA Ordinance, and as such, it should always be used in conjunction with goals and policies of the General Plan, the SEA boundary map, and the SEA Ordinance regulations.

This Guide contains tools and information for:

- ❖ identifying and prioritizing SEA Resources present on a project site;
- ❖ complying with SEA Development Standards;
- ❖ understanding the SEA assessment process, including permit requirements and analysis;
- ❖ guiding project design to avoid impacts to SEA Resources;
- ❖ meeting natural open space preservation requirements; and
- ❖ monitoring the overall effectiveness of the SEA Program in protecting resources.

CHANGES TO THIS GUIDE

This Guide does not provide additional policies or regulatory provisions and is only to be used to clarify goals, policies, ordinance provisions, and processes. Please refer to the SEA Ordinance within Title 22 of the Los Angeles County Code for the specific SEA Ordinance regulations.

The SEA assessment process described within this Guide reflects current and best practices of the Department of Regional Planning (“Department”). This Guide will be updated as necessary by the Director to reflect current permit processing practice. This Guide does not change or revise existing regulatory provisions found within the SEA Ordinance, General Plan, or other applicable regulations or policies of the Los Angeles County Zoning Code or General Plan.

Public notification of changes to this Guide will be posted on the SEA website (planning.lacounty.gov/sea) and emailed to those who subscribe to our email list. Such changes may include revisions affecting the permitting process or updates to the Department maintained lists in the appendices. Email the Environmental Planning and Sustainability section at sea@planning.lacounty.gov to subscribe to the SEA email list.