

West San Gabriel Valley Area Plan: Conservation and Open Space Element Summary

1. Existing Conditions

BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES

The West San Gabriel Valley (WSGV) Planning Area is rich in diverse plant and animal life, including unique habitats such as rivers, forests, and scrublands. The WSGV Planning Area is home to many native species within three designated Significant Ecological Areas (SEAs). Rivers, hillsides, and mountains provide essential habitats and pathways for wildlife alongside extensive trail networks that let visitors enjoy nature. These natural areas face threats from urbanization and the impacts of climate change. Ensuring the protection of these spaces is critical to preserving biodiversity and ecological resilience within the WSGV Planning Area.

OPEN SPACE RESOURCES

Open space resources in the WSGV consist of expansive lands and waters preserved for conservation and recreation. These resources, managed by various entities, including the County, cities, joint-powers authorities, and conservancies, play a crucial role in promoting environmental health. Conservation areas in the region are recognized for their rich biodiversity, hosting a variety of plant and animal species, some of which may be endangered or threatened. The WSGV area contains the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains and parts of the Angeles National Forest, providing residents with recreation and proximity to nature.

SCENIC RESOURCES

Scenic resources include designated highways, hillsides, rivers, parks, and preserves that contribute to the aesthetic and ecological value of the WSGV. Scenic resources like the San Gabriel River and Rio Hondo River channels enhance the region's visual appeal and environmental richness. Significant ridgelines and hillsides also contribute to the unique visual identity of the WSGV. Despite their significance, some scenic features have been lost or degraded due to population shifts and development.

WATER RESOURCES

While the San Gabriel Valley has faced significant alterations to its water ecosystems over the years, including channelization of rivers and loss of wetlands and riparian habitat, resilient elements remain. The Angeles National Forest is a critical source of groundwater replenishment, contributing to the region's water sustainability efforts. In addition, the northern areas of the WSGV benefit from runoff that supports vital riparian habitats, promoting biodiversity and ecological stability. While the Angeles National Forest partially replenishes groundwater, the County relies heavily on imported water. Development has also reduced natural infiltration into groundwater basins, redirecting water to channelized rivers and ultimately to the Pacific Ocean.

2. Issues & Opportunities

CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN BIODIVERSITY PRESERVATION

Efforts to preserve biodiversity in Southern California face challenges such as habitat loss and fragmentation caused by development, threatening over 400 endangered, threatened, or sensitive species. Preserving SEAs is crucial amidst increasing climate change and development pressures. Wildlife corridors like the Arroyo Seco and San Gabriel Rivers are essential for preserving biodiversity and countering highway impacts and urbanization. Minimizing the expansion of wildland-urban interface areas along foothills is also necessary to reduce the environmental effects and human exposure to hazards like wildfires and landslides.

ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE RISKS

Climate change poses significant risks to wildlife and vegetation, disrupting regular behaviors and intensifying ecological disasters, like wildfires and flooding. Assessing and mitigating these risks is crucial for biodiversity and open space protection. Collaboration across jurisdictions is vital to conserve habitat areas and wildlife linkages. Large open spaces are vulnerable to extreme heat, threatening vegetation, and increasing wildfire risks. Maintaining vegetated hillsides helps mitigate erosion and landslides post-fire. Sustainable initiatives can enhance resilience and contribute to local climate mitigation efforts.

BALANCING DEVELOPMENT AND PRESERVATION

Balancing growth demands with open space preservation presents a challenge in WSGV, where creative land use solutions are needed to optimize available space for development and conservation needs. This balance is crucial for addressing environmental impacts and preserving the environmental resources and scenic value of WSGV. Enhancing regulations and expanding preservation efforts can balance development with preserving scenic resources.

SURFACE WATER AND GROUNDWATER IMPAIRMENTS

Well-designed land uses contribute to preventing issues that deplete and harm water resources, including surface water and groundwater. Comprehensive planning measures are needed, through a watershed-based planning approach integrated with site-level planning, to protect water resources and prevent contamination. Strategies such as reducing impervious surfaces and capturing stormwater can enhance water quality and recharge capacity, improving water resource reliability and resilience.

3. Policy Recommendations

PRESERVATION OF OPEN SPACES

A primary goal of the Conservation and Open Space (COS) Element is to protect the biodiversity and ecological health of open spaces in the WSGV in response to escalating threats from climate change. Policy recommendations direct development away from high fire hazard zones and focus on strengthening ecosystem preservation through strategic habitat conservation measures. Recommendations include enhancing protections for areas of high biological significance and sensitive natural communities, protecting local biodiversity, and restoring streambeds and rivers where feasible.

CONNECTED HABITAT NETWORK

The COS Element strives to establish a connected network of large habitat tracts with robust wildlife linkages and corridors, ensuring biodiversity conservation. Policy recommendations support efforts to minimize wildlife-vehicular collisions by directing development away from natural spaces and implementing measures to protect wildlife corridors and wetlands. Another policy recommendation is to develop safe wildlife crossings and enhance fragmented habitats through a Wildlife Protection and Corridor Implementation Program.

BIODIVERSE URBAN SPACES

Policy recommendations aim to minimize conflicts between humans and wildlife in urban areas, enhancing urban spaces for biodiversity, wildlife protection, and climate resilience. Strategies include limiting light pollution, and promoting use of locally native plant species to support biodiversity.. It's recommended that all slopes and disturbed areas be landscaped with locally native vegetation to blend with existing natural habitats. Implementing these conservation practices helps maintain vegetative hillsides, mitigating erosion and enhancing climate change resilience.

EXPANDED OPEN SPACE AREAS

The COS Element aims to ensure open spaces meet diverse needs and expand through land acquisition and development. Policies support acquiring land to preserve open space and support passive recreational use, prioritizing resource-sensitive lands and minimizing conflicts between biological resource protections and recreational access. Creating and enhancing open spaces will integrate water quality improvements, habitat restoration, and equitable community access.

PRESERVATION AND PROTECTION OF WATER RESOURCES

In addition to preserving open spaces, recommended policies are focused on preserving and protecting water resources in the WSGV. These initiatives include implementing green infrastructure for water management, prioritizing regional and inter-agency watershed health management, designing infrastructure for watershed protection, and preventing development in urban-wildland interface areas. Policy recommendations include measures to avoid soil and water contamination, prohibit alteration of streams for stream crossings, and ensure sustainable management of groundwater resources. These policies aim to preserve and maintain high-quality surface and groundwater resources for future generations.