COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 22, 2022

Upper Los Angeles River Watershed *Arundo donax* Eradication Program
Project No. 22-018-01
Project Manager: Joel Gerwein

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $41,500 to the Council for Watershed Health for permitting for, and implementation of a portion of, an *Arundo donax* eradication program in the Upper Los Angeles River Watershed in Los Angeles County, and adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Pacoima Wash, Los Angeles County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Photographs

Exhibit 3: California Vegetation Treatment Program Statewide Programmatic Environmental Impact Report

Exhibit 4: Project Specific Analysis Checklist and Addendum under the California Vegetation Treatment Program Statewide Programmatic Environmental Impact Report

Exhibit 5: Project Letters

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed forty-one thousand five hundred dollars ($41,500) to the Council for Watershed Health ("the grantee") to obtain permits and conduct surveys for an *Arundo donax* eradication program in the Upper Los Angeles River Watershed in Los Angeles County and to implement 1.82 acres of the program.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.

2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 3, Section 31113, of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding addressing the impacts of climate change.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Council for Watershed Health is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the California Vegetation Treatment Program (CalVTP) Statewide Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (PEIR), which was certified by the California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection on December 30, 2019 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA"), and the Project-Specific Analysis and Addendum to the CALVTP PEIR for the Upper Los Angeles River Watershed Arundo donax Eradication Program ("PSA-Addendum") (attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibits 3 and 4), and the Conservancy finds:
    a. The Upper Los Angeles River Watershed Arundo donax Eradication Program (Program) is within the scope of the CALVTP, and the CALVTP PEIR adequately describes the Program for purposes of CEQA. As described in the PSA-Addendum, although portions of the Program will take place outside the treatable landscape as identified in the CALVTP, the Program area landscape conditions are similar to those of the treatable landscape, and the treatment types and activities are the same as those described in the CALVTP. None of the conditions described in State CEQA Guidelines Section 15162 calling for preparation of a subsequent EIR have occurred.
    b. The PEIR and PSA-Addendum identify potentially significant impacts of the Program in the areas of Cultural Resources, Biological Resources, and Hazardous Materials as identified in the accompanying staff recommendation. With implementation of mitigation measures, these impacts will be mitigated to a less than significant level.
    c. The PEIR and PSA-Addendum identify significant and unavoidable impacts of the Program in the areas of Air Quality and Public Services. The project's air quality impacts are due to vehicles and gas-powered tools associated with the initial and maintenance treatments. The standard project requirements and two mitigation

measures will reduce these impacts but will not avoid them. The project's public services impacts are due to the solid waste generated by cutting and chipping small Arundo stands and taking some of the resulting material offsite to processing facilities (biomass power plants, wood product processing facilities, and composting facilities). The potentially significant impact stems from the fact that such facilities may not have the capacity to process the material resulting from the project. The standard project requirements and one mitigation measure will reduce this impact but will not avoid it. The Conservancy finds it is infeasible to avoid, reduce, or mitigate the possible significant environmental effects of the project in these areas but that the specific environmental and other benefits of the proposed project as described in the Statements of Overriding Considerations contained in the accompanying Conservancy staff recommendation outweigh and render acceptable the significant unavoidable effects.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a $41,500 grant to the Council for Watershed Health (CWH) for permitting and implementation of the Upper Los Angeles River Watershed *Arundo donax* Eradication Program. The proposed project includes obtaining permits for the 82-acre program, pre-treatment cultural and natural resources surveys for the 1.82 acres of Arundo infestation within the Pacoima Wash, and the removal of those 1.82 acres of Arundo.

The project is needed to reduce the significant negative impacts of Arundo infestations on water availability, water quality (i.e., sediment loads, temperature, pathogens, nutrient loading, flow modification), habitat, fires, and infrastructure. Arundo stands can significantly increase fuel loads and fire frequency potential (acting as both an ignition source and fire conveyance across riparian areas). Arundo reduces streamflow, thus degrading fish and wildlife habitat. Arundo transpires water at a rate that is five times higher than native vegetation. Analysis from California Invasive Plant Council's 2011 *Arundo donax Distribution and Impact Report* demonstrates that for every one-acre of Arundo removed, 20-acre feet per year of water would be available downstream for capture/recharge and in-stream flows. This clonal plant from eastern Asia grows into dense stands via horizontal underground stems and can reach heights up to 30 feet. Arundo becomes so dominant in riparian systems that it alters hydrological and geomorphic processes. The plant out-competes all native vegetation. It has almost no biological value – no insects or wildlife feed on it, few organisms inhabit stands (i.e., poor nesting structure for birds), and stands impede movement in and through riparian zones. Climate change impacts make Arundo eradication an urgent priority to safeguard public safety and ecosystem resiliency, because the plant's impacts to wildfire frequency, streamflow, and habitat are exacerbated by increased heat and drought associated with climate change. In addition, the planned restoration of the Los Angeles River makes it important to eliminate sources of Arundo in the upper watershed that could otherwise invade and degrade restored habitat.

This project will focus on reducing spread of Arundo to the Los Angeles River. CWH has conducted baseline surveys documenting the distribution and acreage of the plant. Approximately 82 acres remain within the larger programmatic area. The Conservancy-funded project elements are a short-term (18-month) component of the larger eradication program that will target and remove select populations of Arundo that can have significant impacts downstream. This project includes permitting for the larger program and will thus facilitate additional Arundo eradication in the program area. Completion of permitting is a pre-condition for CWH to spend $532,277 in Proposition 1 funds secured for the program from the Greater Los Angeles County Integrated Regional Water Management program.

The project is being implemented in collaboration with numerous partners, including the Bonneville Environmental Foundation, National Forest Foundation, Santa Monica Mountains Resource Conservation District, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, City of Burbank, and the California Conservation Corps. CWH is working with the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians to survey and avoid impacts to cultural resources in the project area. CWH reaches out to residents in the project area to solicit input on concerns about the project and adapt eradication methods to their needs and concerns.

The project includes permitting, pre-treatment surveys, treatment, and monitoring/ maintenance. Each component is briefly described below.

Permitting: CWH will work with regulatory agencies to obtain a Section 1600 Streambed Alteration Agreement from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife for work to be performed within the upper reaches of the Pacoima Wash riparian corridor where Arundo is present.

Pre-treatment Surveys: CWH will consult and coordinate survey efforts with the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians and other affected tribes on cultural and archeological resources that may be impacted in the 1.82 acres of Arundo infestation within the Pacoima Wash. In partnership with the tribe, effective protection measures will be developed for important cultural resources located within treatment areas. These measures may include adjusting the treatment area or changing treatment activities to avoid damaging cultural resources. The tribe or tribes will also conduct a Worker Environmental Awareness Program. Pre-treatment surveys are a required measure under the PEIR. Depending on the findings of the surveys, other mitigation measures to avoid, minimize and mitigate impacts to resources documented by the surveys may be required.

Treatment: Treatment will involve the methods described in the CWH's Strategic Implementation Plan for the Upper Los Angeles River Program (available at: https://www.watershedhealth.org/arundo). The treatment approach (biomass removal, foliar spraying, cut and dab, etc.) will vary by landowner and will be determined in consultation with the permitting agencies and dictated by the environmental analysis to mitigate any potential impacts. A licensed herbicide applicator/contractor will conduct treatments and re-treatments with support from a local Conservation Corps and progress will be monitored annually to track treatment efficacy. Revegetation onsite will primarily be passive. Remnant native plant species (i.e., black walnut, laurel sumac, willow) will be allowed to re-establish while the site is

monitored and any Arundo resprouts are controlled. Treatment and biomass removal will occur over the next two years, with monitoring and spot treatments for maintenance occurring thereafter (see below).

Monitoring and Maintenance: Annual monitoring and evaluation of the eradication process will be conducted via a combination of on-site observations from the treatment team, review of aerial images, and ground verification to document the treatment success. An annual report will be provided documenting the eradication success to date. Based on updated mapping, the team will determine treatments and locations for the following year.

Site Description: This project will target all populations in the riparian corridor of the upper Pacoima Wash (Exhibit 1). The larger programmatic area of interest focuses on Arundo populations in the Upper Los Angeles River Watershed, both in the City of Los Angeles jurisdiction and upstream in the surrounding San Gabriel, Santa Susana, and Santa Monica Mountains (Exhibit 1). Targeting these Arundo populations strategically eliminates opportunities for its expansion downstream.

Riparian habitat in the project area has the potential to support sensitive plants and wildlife, including Nevin's barberry, Braunten's milk-vetch, San Fernando Valley spineflower, slender-horned spineflower, and least Bell's vireo, all of which will benefit from Arundo removal. Impacts to these species will be avoided through pre-treatment surveys and treatment timing.

Ownership varies across the treatment sites and includes Angeles National Forest, US Army Corps of Engineers, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, County of Los Angeles, City of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation, and private in-holdings. CWH is currently working on collecting 10-year right-of-entry agreements from owners to maintain treatments over the long term.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Over the past 15 years, CWH has been involved in several Arundo removal programs across the State in partnership with the California Invasive Plant Council. CWH contracts with State-certified herbicide applicators for Arundo treatments. In the project vicinity, CWH has completed Arundo control programs at Whittier Narrows along the San Gabriel River through previous grants from the California Department of Food and Agriculture and the California Department of Water Resources (DWR).

In its 25 years as an organization, CWH has directly managed several State grants from the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, the California Natural Resources Agency, DWR, the Department of Conservation, and the Coastal Conservancy. CWH has dedicated staff to oversee financial operations and administer grant awards. The organization follows GAAP standards and financial audits are completed annually. To help maintain steady cash-flow across grants, CWH includes language in contractor sub-agreements that defers reimbursements until CHW receives payment from a granting agency.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

Selection Criteria

1. **Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplishes the objectives in the Strategic Plan.**

See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Strategic Plan" section below.

2. **Project is a good investment of state resources.**

The project will reduce wildfire risk and enhance streamflow and riparian habitat value, benefits that are especially important considering increased heat and drought resulting from climate change. Arundo removal is feasible and will be implemented using proven methods used by many successful projects. The project budget is reasonable, based on costs from previous Arundo removal projects, and the project will leverage partnerships with multiple landowners, funders, tribes, and local agencies.

The project advances statewide goals for wildfire resilience and habitat enhancement and is consistent with state and regional plans as discussed below.

- **State Wildlife Action Plan** (CDFW 2015): The Project will implement Province-Specific Conservation Strategies – South Coast, Conservation Strategy 5 (Direct Management): "Manage invasive species, with focus on reducing the extent of invasive species (particularly *A. donax* and tamarisk) and improving structural diversity of native vegetation".
- **California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan** (Governor's Forest Management Task Force, January 2021), which calls for activities such as fuels reduction, forest thinning, vegetation management, prescribed fire, shaded fuel breaks, defensible space, and enhancement of fire-prone habitats to reduce fire risk.
- **Safeguarding California Plan: 2018 Update** (California Natural Resources Agency, 2018): The project would help meet Objective F-18 of the Plan: "Expand grants and cost share agreements to Tribes, public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and landowners for selectively removing hazardous wildfire fuels."
- **Greater Los Angeles County Region Integrated Regional Water Management Plan** (Los Angeles County Flood Control District 2014): The project would help meet the following plan objectives: Improve water supply; Enhance habitat; and Address Climate Change. Removing Arundo will increase streamflow, facilitate recolonization of riparian areas by native plants that will provide improved fish and wildlife habitat, and reduce wildfire risk exacerbated by climate change.

3. **Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.**

CWH reached out to tribes on the Native American Heritage Commission list for the program area on March 31, 2022. A response was received from the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians and a meeting was held on April 7, 2022. CWH is working with the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians on partnership opportunities for the project

as well as the larger program. CWH will have tribal representation on site prior to and during treatment to avoid impacts to cultural and archeological resources and is exploring opportunities to work with the tribe on a tribal Conservation Corps program that is in development.

4. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.

Once removal has occurred upstream, the project outcomes (water, wildfire resilience, and habitat benefits) will have a minimum 15-year useful life, which CWH will strive to extend through monitoring and maintenance. This estimate of the project's useful life is based on findings from other successful regional long-term *Arundo* control programs within the Santa Ana Watershed and the San Luis Rey/Santa Margarita watersheds. Match funding will support maintenance and monitoring beyond this project's timeline.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

As described above, the project will increase wildfire resilience and streamflow, while enhancing riparian habitat. The project will also reduce the likelihood that restored reaches of the Los Angeles River will be impacted by Arundo in the future.

6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.

The project is being implemented in collaboration with numerous partners, including the Bonneville Environmental Foundation, National Forest Foundation, Santa Monica Mountains Resource Conservation District, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, City of Burbank, and the California Conservation Corps. CWH is working with the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians to survey and avoid impacts to cultural resources in the project area. CWH reaches out to residents in the project area to solicit input on concerns about the project and adapt eradication methods to their needs and concerns.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	**$41,500**
Los Angeles Department of Water and Power	$780,370
DWR: Greater Los Angeles County Integrated Regional Watershed Management	$532,277
Project Total	**$1,354,147**

The proposed source of Conservancy funds for this authorization is an appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 84, "Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006," Public Resources Code section 75001 et seq. These funds are allocated to the Conservancy for development, restoration and protection of coastal and San Francisco Bay Area land and water resources. This authorization is consistent with the funding source because the project will remove Arundo donax, an invasive plant whose negative impacts are described above, thereby restoring coastal water and land resources and protecting them by reducing wildfire risk. The proposed project is consistent with

the Conservancy's enabling legislation, as discussed in the "Consistency with Conservancy's enabling legislation" section below.

Proposition 84 also requires that for potential projects that include restoration for the purpose of natural resources protection, the Conservancy give priority to potential projects that meet one or more of the criteria specified in Section 75071, including long-term protection and improvement of the water and biological qualities of watersheds. Consistent with this requirement, the proposed project was prioritized through criteria defined in CWH's 2018 Strategic Implementation Plan, including: 1) the presence of mature riparian forest, especially adjacent to fire-prone shrublands; 2) large sources of Arundo propagules that threaten lower portions of the watershed; and 3) impacts from recent fire or floods that increase the threat of Arundo spread.

Additional funds for the program are provided by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and by the Great Los Angeles County Integrated Regional Water Management (GLAC IRWM) Program. The GLAC IRWM funds derive from the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 (Water Code §§ 79700 et seq., or "Proposition 1"). They have been awarded to the project through the Department of Water Resources' IRWM program, but cannot be utilized until CEQA compliance is complete.

Unless specifically identified as "Required Match," the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the Conservancy to address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction (Section 31113(a)).

Pursuant to Section 31113(b), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to undertake projects that include reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and addressing extreme weather events, sea level rise, flooding, and other coastal hazards that threaten coastal communities, infrastructure, and natural resources.

Pursuant to Section 31113(c), the Conservancy must prioritize grants for projects that maximize public benefits and have one of several purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Consistent with these sections, the proposed project will restore the health and resilience of California natural lands and reduce fire risk to communities. The project will help California's natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires which may ultimately reduce greenhouse gas emissions released from increased wildfires due to climate change.

Consistent with Section 31113(d), the Conservancy shall provide information to the Office of Planning and Research to be considered for inclusion into the clearinghouse for climate adaption information.

The proposed project addresses resources within the Conservancy's jurisdiction by reducing the risks of wildfire that would adversely impact water quality and habitat in a coastal watershed (Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 8, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project the proposed project will implement a project to restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, and natural lands in a manner that reduces fire risk to communities. The project will help California's natural lands to be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The California Vegetation Treatment Program (CalVTP) directs implementation of vegetation treatments within the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's (CAL FIRE's) State Responsibility Area (SRA) to serve as one component of the state's range of actions to reduce wildfire risk, reduce fire suppression efforts and costs, and protect natural resources as well as other assets from wildfire. The California Vegetation Treatment Program Final Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) evaluates the environmental impacts of the CalVTP. The PEIR has been prepared under the direction of the CEQA lead agency, the California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection (Board), in accordance with the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Public Resources Code [PRC] Section 21000 et seq.) and the State CEQA Guidelines. The Board certified the PEIR and approved the CalVTP on December 30, 2019.

Using the Project-specific Analysis (PSA) in reliance on the PEIR, CAL FIRE or other project proponents evaluate each vegetation treatment project intended to implement the CalVTP as a later activity addressed by the PEIR to determine whether the later activity qualifies as within the scope of this PEIR or requires additional environmental documentation or its own independent environmental review.

Pursuant to the Conservancy's obligation as a responsible agency under CEQA, Conservancy staff has reviewed the PEIR and the Project-Specific Analysis and Addendum to the CALVTP PEIR for the Upper Los Angeles River Watershed Arundo donax Eradication Program, dated August 2022.The portions of the Upper Los Angeles River Watershed Arundo donax Eradication Program (Program) that are within the CalVTP treatable landscape is within the scope of the CALVTP and PEIR. Since preparation of the PEIR, no new circumstances have occurred, nor has any new information been identified requiring new analysis or verification. Staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy finds that no additional CEQA documentation beyond this PSA and Addendum to the PEIR is required.

The portions of the Program located outside the CalVTP treatable landscape constitute a change to the project as described in the PEIR but because the landscape conditions of the Program area are similar to the treatable landscape, and the treatment types and activities are the same as those in the CALVTP and PEIR, the project change is not substantial., The inclusion of areas outside the CalVTP treatable landscape will not result in any new or substantially more severe significant impacts. Further, since preparation of the PEIR, no substantial changes in circumstances have occurred, and no new information of substantial importance has been identified. None of the conditions described in State CEQA Guidelines Section 15162 calling for preparation of a subsequent EIR have occurred; therefore, the accompanying PSA-Addendum is adopted to address the project areas outside the geographic extent presented in the PEIR. Potential significant impacts of the project are discussed below.

Air Quality

Impact AQ-1: Generate Emissions of Criteria Air Pollutants and Precursors During Treatment Activities that would exceed California or National Air Quality Standards. Vehicle (e.g., haul truck) and equipment (e.g., chipper) use during project treatment activities would result in emissions of criteria air pollutants and precursors that could exceed California or National Ambient Air Quality Standards thresholds. Because proposed treatment activities include chemical and mechanical methods, rather than prescribed burning, emissions of criteria pollutants are expected to be minor. Feasible mitigation measures aimed at reducing emissions within Mitigation Measure (MM) AQ-1 for the proposed treatments include encouraging carpooling to site and using best available control technology for reducing NOx and PM emissions on equipment. Equipment meeting Tier 4 emission standards and use of renewable fuel will be used if available. Although this significant impact will be mitigated it is not unavoidable.

Cultural Resources

Impact CUL-2: Cause a Substantial Adverse Change in the Significance of Unique Archaeological Resources or Subsurface Historical Resources. Treatment activities would involve the use of hand-held tools, herbicide and, in some instances, a chipper. These treatment activities require no soil disturbance or very shallow soil disturbance. However, it is possible that unique archaeological or subsurface historical resources would be disturbed during treatment activities. The North Central Information Center records search, which covered all Treatment Sites, revealed two archaeological sites and one multicomponent site. The Program includes a survey to be conducted prior to treatment to identify any previously unrecorded archaeological sites; identified archaeological sites would be avoided or treated according to the provisions of SPR CUL-5. For the Proposed Project, SPRs and Mitigation Measure CUL-2 would require every reasonable effort to identify and protect resources. Therefore, this impact would be less than significant with mitigation. Mitigation Measure CUL-2 would also apply to this treatment, which involves halting work and determining appropriate next steps in conjunction with the tribes and with an archaeologist in the event of any inadvertent discovery of unique archaeological resources or subsurface historical resources.

Biological Resources Impacts

Impact BIO-1: Treatment activities, including manual and herbicide treatments, may result in adverse impacts on special-status plant species with the potential to occur in the Treatment Sites. Pre-treatment surveys will be conducted in keeping with SPRs BIO 1 and 7 to determine if potential habitat is present and, if so, if sensitive species are present. If special-status plants listed under ESA or CESA are documented during the protocol level surveys, MM BIO-1a would be implemented to avoid loss of identified special-status plants (i.e., a no-disturbance buffer will be established around the area occupied by the species; the buffer size will be determined by a qualified botanist). If special-status plants not listed under ESA or CESA are identified during protocol level surveys, Mitigation Measure BIO-1b would be implemented, establishing a buffer, and determining if treatment can occur consistent with protection of species and habitat. If any special-status plant is documented and cannot be avoided, Mitigation Measure BIO-1c will be implemented to prepare and implement a Compensatory Mitigation Plan. Impacts to special-status plant species would be less than significant with incorporation of these mitigation measures. Additionally, treatment activities would likely result in the improvement of habitat for special-status plants, as Arundo displaces native species and degrades habitat.

Impact BIO-2: The potential for the proposed treatments to result in direct and indirect impacts on special-status wildlife species was evaluated in the PEIR. Treatment activity and intensity are consistent with the PEIR evaluation as are the resulting potential impacts. SPRs related to wildlife biological resources that are relevant for this project include SPR BIO-1-3, SPR BIO -9 and SPR BIO-10-12. Impacts could occur to several sensitive wildlife species, including least Bell's vireo, yellow warbler, yellow-breasted chat, tricolored blackbird, and California coastal gnatcatcher. Potential impacts will be reduced to a less than significant level by conducting pre-treatment surveys to determine if sensitive species are present. If so, treatment would be conducted outside of nesting season. If needed to further reduce impacts, MM Bio 2a and 2b would be implemented, establishing no-disturbance buffers. If necessary, MM Bio 2c would be implemented to prepare and implement a Compensatory Mitigation Plan to protect and/or restore additional habitat for impacted species. The impact would be less than significant with mitigation.

Impact BIO-3: The potential for the proposed treatments to result in direct and indirect impacts on sensitive habitats including sensitive natural communities (CDFW 2019) was evaluated in the PEIR. Treatment activity and intensity are consistent with those evaluated in the PEIR, as are the resulting potential impacts. Review of available and relevant literature and databases and a field reconnaissance survey of project-specific biological resources were performed according to SPR BIO-1. Based on the database search, seven sensitive riparian communities have the potential to be impacted by treatment activities. SPRs applicable to the proposed treatment are BIO-1, BIO-2, BIO-3, BIO-4, BIO-6, BIO-7, BIO-9, GEO-1, GEO-7, HAZ-5, HAZ-6, HYD-4, and HYD-5. MMs BIO-3a and BIO-3b are also applicable to the proposed treatment. MM BIO-3a involves designing the treatment to enhance sensitive communities, which is feasible because Arundo removal is expected to benefit sensitive riparian communities in the long term by restoring native species and natural hydrology and fire regimes. MM BIO-3b involves preparing and

implementing a Compensatory Mitigation Plan if unavoidable impacts to sensitive communities are greater than significant.

Impact BIO-4: Treatment activities, including manual and herbicide treatments, may result in adverse impacts on wetlands by removing or degrading habitat. The target species of the Program (i.e., Arundo donax) occurs in riparian habitats and as such, these areas cannot be fully avoided. In compliance with MM BIO-4, where riparian habitats include waters under the jurisdiction of the USACE and/or the state (i.e., CDFW and California Water Board), herbicide would be applied by hand and at ground-level, and treatments would occur during low-flow periods. State and federally protected wetlands that are outside of potentially jurisdictional waters (i.e., adjacent wetlands) will be delineated and avoided at all times of the year. The impact would be less than significant with mitigation.

Impact BIO-5: The Program could potentially disturb and degrade nursery sites such as bat maternity roosts, deer fawning areas, or bird rookeries in or near Treatment Sites. SPR's BIO-1 and BIO-10 require identification of nursery sites prior to treatment activities. As was discussed in the PEIR, implementation of these SPR's would minimize these impacts. However, wildlife nursery sites could still be damaged, disturbed or degraded by treatment activities. Impacts would further be reduced to less than significant with implementation of Mitigation Measure BIO-2a (establishing no-disturbance buffers around sensitive wildlife populations), BIO-2c (preparing and implementing a Compensatory Mitigation Plan) and BIO-5 (retaining nursery sites and establishing no-disturbance buffers). This impact is less than significant with mitigation, and within the scope of the PEIR.

Hazardous Materials, Public Health, and Safety

Impact HAZ-3: The proposed treatment consists of removal of Arundo using herbicide and hand-held tools and would not require soil disturbance, so there would be low potential to expose workers, the public, and the environment to hazardous materials if present. Per Mitigation Measure HAZ-3, database searches for hazardous materials sites around the Treatment Sites were conducted (CADTSC 2022, CalEPA 2022, SWRCB 2022). The search results were used to compile a list of hazardous materials sites in proximity to the treatment areas. Because hazardous materials sites were identified in the vicinity of the Treatment Sites, impacts related to hazardous materials exposure would be potentially significant. This is within the scope of the PEIR because the treatment methods and equipment are consistent with activities addressed in the PEIR. No SPRs are applicable to this impact, and no additional mitigation is required. This determination is consistent with the PEIR and would not constitute a substantially more severe impact than what was covered in the PEIR.

Public Services, Utilities and Service Systems

Impact UTIL-2: As part of the proposed treatment, small Arundo stands near roads or structures would be cut, hauled, and chipped. Chipped Arundo biomass may be spread in the stand footprint or over disturbed areas (e.g., road edges) or taken offsite. It is estimated that

approximately five percent of the 80 acres of Arundo biomass would need to be transported offsite for processing (i.e., biomass power plant, wood product processing facility, composting). This is less than 0.002% of the 250,000 acres of vegetation treatments per year covered in the PEIR. The project would incorporate SPR UTIL-1, which requires preparation of an Organic Waste Disposition Plan prior to initiating manual and mechanical treatment activities that would require Arundo biomass to be hauled away to ensure that adequate processing facility capacity exists to accept the treated materials. However, existing processing facilities may not have the capacity to process materials from treatment activities. This impact would be potentially significant and unavoidable. This impact is within the scope of the PEIR because the treatment methods, the amount of organic waste that would be transported offsite, and organic waste disposal procedures are consistent with activities addressed in the PEIR. The inclusion of land associated with Treatment Sites outside the CalVTP treatable landscape constitutes a change to the geographic extent presented in the PEIR. Because waste disposal infrastructure in the vicinity of the Treatment Sites located outside and within the treatable landscape are similar, the potential impacts related to solid waste are also the same, as described above. SPR UTIL-1 is applicable to the proposed treatments. This determination is consistent with the PEIR and would not constitute a substantially more severe impact than what was covered in the PEIR.

Statement of Overriding Considerations

The project's wildfire risk reduction and habitat enhancement benefits significantly outweigh and render acceptable the unavoidable air quality and utilities impacts that may occur during project implementation. The immediate benefit of the project will be to reduce wildfire risk by reducing existing fuel load in treatment areas through Arundo removal. The longer-term benefit of the project will be the increased wildfire resilience and ecological benefits provided by the restoration of native riparian habitat, which is a naturally fire resilient vegetation community type.

By conducting targeted Arundo removal in the Upper Los Angeles River watershed, the project will lower the risk of wildfire events that could ignite and spread to nearby communities, while enhancing habitat and increasing streamflow. The air quality and utilities impacts that would result from such wildfire events are many orders of magnitude larger than the potential impacts associated with project implementation.

Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Determination and file project information with CalFire, as required under the CalVTP program.