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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA RAPID TRANSIT DISTRICT
METRO RAIL PROJECT

TASK 18 BAF, BAH, BAJ, AND BAL OUTPUTS

BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES

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INTRODUCTION

This report describes existing biological conditions and assesses potential environmental impacts to biological resources along specific portions of the Metro Rail Project transit corridors. The express purpose of the analysis is to assess possible impacts to significant biological resources which, for purposes of this report, include state and federal designated rare, threatened, or endangered species of wildlife, any locally designated sensitive habitats or ecological areas, and any species of vegetation or wildlife under a "protected" status by various local or state laws or statutes.

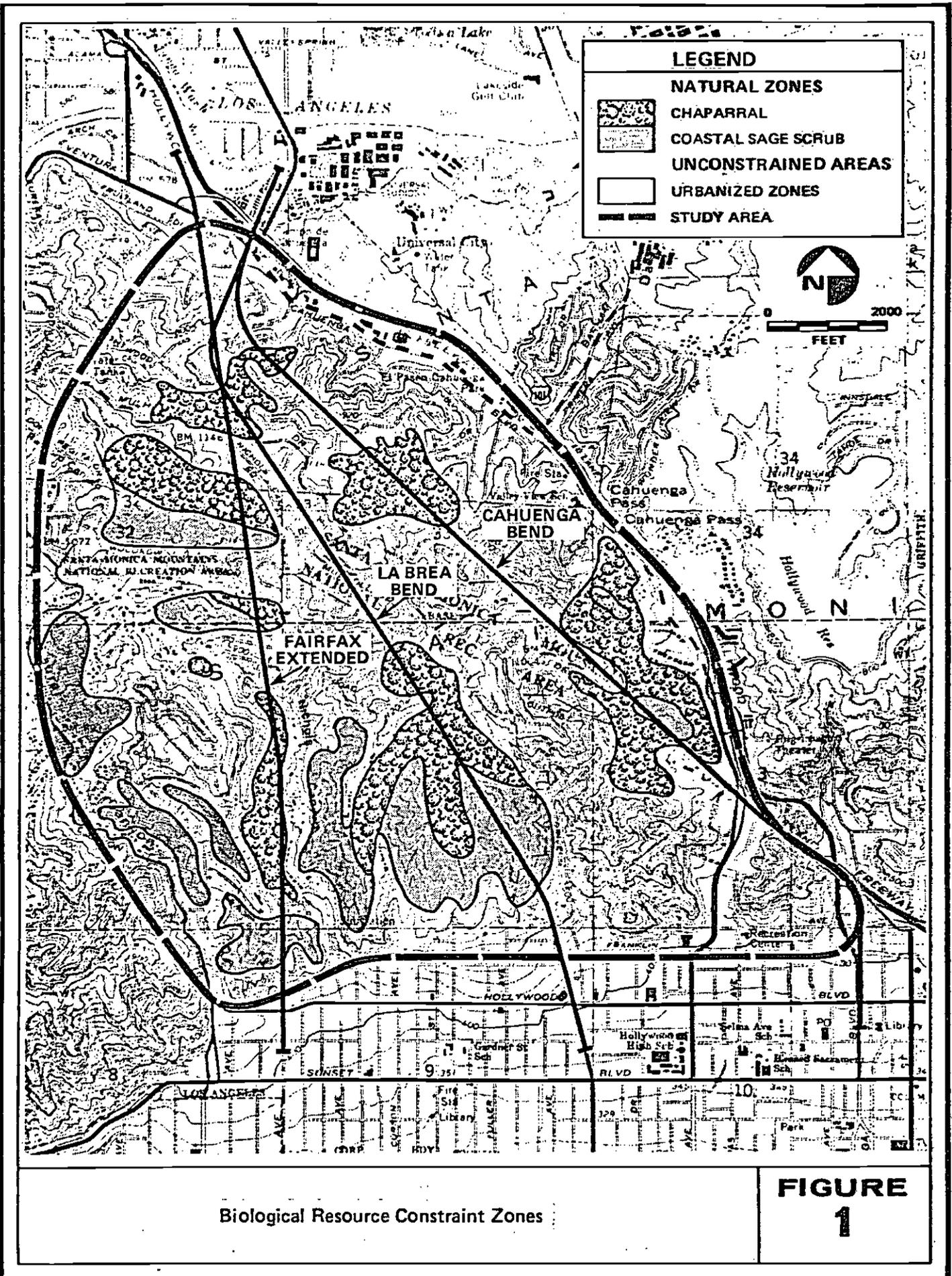
The majority of the proposed and alternative transit corridors pass through a highly urbanized environment. Also, the majority of the project is a subway configuration with surface station access in an urbanized environment. Wildlife and vegetative resources within urban areas consist of species introduced by man as well as those native species that have adapted to the predominantly built environment. No significant biological resources occur within these sections. The notable exceptions are the portions of alternative corridors which traverse the Santa Monica Mountains near Cahuenga Pass. Though all alternatives are in a subway configuration through the Santa Monica Mountains, it is possible that habitat alteration could occur from appurtenant structures which disturb the ground surface. Structures such as vent shafts, utility stations, tunnel portals (for aerial alternatives in the North Hollywood segment) and construction staging areas have this potential. Thus, the analysis of biological resources has been focused on an assessment of project impacts on habitats in the Santa Monica Mountains portions only (study area) and does not treat biological resources occurring within the general Los Angeles urbanized area.

The analysis approach included research of previous biological documentation for the Metro Rail project (UMTA, 1980), as well as numerous other sources including the Los Angeles City Planning Department (1978) and the Santa Monica Mountains Comprehensive Planning Commission (1979). Research was assisted by a field survey overview, although each alternative corridor was not comprehensively surveyed.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The surficial alternative alignments through the Santa Monica Mountains study area cross a mixture of low density residential and natural open space. The natural open space includes steep chaparral and coastal sage scrub covered slopes. These areas are generally depicted on Figure 1 and are referred to as natural zones. Low density residential generally occurs throughout the study area, but is most prevalent along the Highway 101 corridor and on the North Hollywood Hills. These areas are depicted on Figure 1 and are referred to as urbanized zones.

The chaparral covered slopes are present on the ridge tops and the more easterly and north-facing slopes. The chaparral present is generally referred to as mixed chaparral (Thorne, 1976). This vegetative type is composed of a dense combination of medium to large shrubs. It is best developed on the north-facing slopes in the study area north of Mulholland Drive and on the east-facing slope of Nichols Canyon. It is composed of toyon (Heteromeles arbutifolia), scrub oak (Quercus dumosa), lemondeberry (Rhus integrifolia), laurel sumac (Rhus laurina), ceanothus (Ceanothus spp.), mountain-mahogany (Cercocarpus betuloides), and chaparral honeysuckle (Lonicera subspicata)



var. johnstonii). Coast live oaks (Quercus agrifolia) are present sparingly in the study area and oak woodland habitat is not well-developed in any natural area.

Coastal sage scrub vegetation occupies the more arid south- and west-facing slopes in the study area. This habitat, sometimes referred to as impoverished chaparral, is composed of low scrubs such as California sagebrush (Artemisia californica), California buckwheat (Eriogonum fasciculatum), laurel sumac (Rhus laurina), and sage (Salvia spp.). Many of the plants associated with this habitat are drought-deciduous and the vegetation, like chaparral, is highly fire prone.

No truly natural riparian habitats are present in the study area. Urban runoff and drainage modifications have contributed to the development of a small extent of riparian and wetland habitats in Nichols Canyon. A few arroyo willows and some cattail marsh about a couple of retention basins in the lower aspect of Nichols Canyon account for the wetland habitats present.

Wildlife in the vicinity of project corridors is expected to be consistent with what one would expect to naturally occur throughout the Santa Monica Mountains. Populations of larger species such as deer have undoubtedly been reduced if not eliminated from the urbanized portions of the Hollywood Hills. The coyote has, however, persevered and is expected to be relatively common in the remaining natural areas (Gill and Bonnett, 1973). Species adapted to rugged shrublands would be expected in the area along with an admixture of urban-adapted species. Due to the general lack of more open and grassy habitats in the study area, raptors are not expected to be particularly common.

No federal or state-listed rare, endangered or threatened plant or animal species are expected to occur in the study area (USFWS, 1979, 1980; CDFG, 1980, 1981). The California Native Plant Society (CNPS, 1980, 1981) lists a number of declining species of interest which may potentially occur in the project area. These species are listed in Table 1. Some additional declining CNPS-listed species are recorded from the general region of the project area (i.e., further west in the Santa Monica Mountains or to the east in the nearby San Gabriel Mountains), but those species are not considered for the project area because of habitat preference.

Declining breeding bird species in California have been listed by Remsen (1979) and the Audubon Blue List for 1982 (Tate and Tate, 1982) lists birds in the United States which are showing signs of population declines in all or a major portion of their range and species which are considered local problem species. Both of these lists contain species which are either obligatory riparian or marsh species or which exhibit a marked preference for these habitats. Modified man-created riparian and marsh habitats are present in Nichols Canyon but the areal extent of these habitats is very limited and they are not expected to represent significant habitat for associated declining species. The Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (Polioptila melanura californica) is listed by both Remsen (1979) and Tate and Tate (1982). This species is considered a local problem species for southern California by the latter authors. This species prefers coastal sage scrub habitat (Atwood, 1980). Low scrub in the project area may be considered potential habitat for this species. Low scrub habitat in the project area may also be inhabited by the coast horned lizard (Phrynosoma coronatum). The coast horned lizard is a candidate to U.S. Fish and Wildlife and California Department of Fish and Game species which is considered declining in California (Bury, 1971) due to the dwindling low scrub and open chaparral habitats. No other noteworthy declining bird, mammal or reptile (Bury, 1971) species are considered pertinent to the project area.

Table 1

POTENTIAL HIGH INTEREST
CALIFORNIA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY LISTED SPECIES
OCCURRING WITHIN THE PROJECT AREA

CNPS List 1 - Presumed Extinct

Helianthus nuttallii ssp. parishii

Los Angeles Sunflower

Herbaceous perennial recorded from wet ground at elevations of 1000 to 1500 feet. Last known collection date 1937.

CNPS List 2 - Rare and Endangered

Astragalus brauntonii

Brauton's Milk-vetch

Species is a stout perennial to be looked for on recent burns and in disturbed soils such as along firebreaks.

Dudleya multicaulis

Many-stemmed Dudleya

Perennial herb found in dry stony places. Has been recorded for hills above Hollywood.

CNPS List 3 - Rare but not Engangered

Baccharis plummerae

Plummer's Baccharis

Low shrub found in shaded canyons usually near coast but as far inland as Cahuenga Pass.

Brickellia nevinii

Nevin's Brickellia

Densely branched shrub recorded in scattered colonies in chaparral or coastal sage scrub on roadside banks. Scattered specimens observed along roadside bank where Alternative 3 crosses Mulholland Drive.

Polygala cornuta ssp. fishiae

Fish's Milkwort

Shrub found in shady rocky canyons in chaparral or dense oak woodland. Nichols Canyon could be considered low potential habitat for this species.

Source: CNPS (1980, 1981) and Raven and Thompson (1966).

Portions of the study area in the Santa Monica Mountains is included within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (Department of Interior, 1982). No natural areas designated as sensitive, vital or representative within the Santa Monica Mountains are identified within the study area (California Natural Areas Coordinating Council, 1975; England and Nelson, 1976).

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Vegetation

As currently proposed, the Metro Rail Project will pass through the Santa Monica Mountains in a subway configuration and will generally not create impacts to natural biological communities. Tentative subway alignments through the mountains are shown on Figure 1. A possible aerial configuration in North Hollywood would require a tunnel portal and aerial structures through a portion of the North Hollywood hills. However, these hillsides are urbanized and project construction would have minimal impact to natural vegetation. Therefore, substantial impact to native plant communities is not anticipated.

If vents or other facilities are proposed within the mountain areas, there is a potential that small areas (less than 1 acre) may be disturbed in a few locations. This could result in loss of native vegetation with the total accumulated loss probably less than 10 acres. There is a potential that a significant impact could occur if these vent areas are located in natural zones (Figure 1) and disturb sensitive plant species (as listed in Table 1).

Wildlife

Because of a limited amount of native vegetation at most will be disturbed, no significant impact to wildlife habitats are anticipated. Construction of vents may result in short-term impacts associated with noise, and human presence. Since areas affected are small and the disturbances are of short duration, no significant impacts are anticipated. No impacts to state or federally listed rare, threatened, or endangered wildlife species are anticipated.

No Project/Minimum Operable Segment Alternatives

Neither of these alternatives will affect the Santa Monica Mountains study area and thus will not result in significant adverse biological impacts.

MITIGATION OPTIONS

To the extent practicable, sensitive resources should be avoided and habitat alteration minimized. This can be accomplished by limiting surface disturbance in the mountains to areas designated as urbanized zones on Figure 1. Also, surface facilities in the mountains if necessary should utilize existing roads rather than create new access roads. If vents or other facilities are absolutely necessary within the natural zones of the Santa Monica Mountains, biological review of detailed plans should be undertaken

and site-specific surveys conducted as necessary to confirm the absence of CNPS rare or endangered plants. The responsibility for implementing these mitigation options rests with SCRTD and the effectiveness is considered high.

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