

1.0 Introduction

The Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC), in cooperation with District 8 of the California Department of Transportation (Department), the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the County of Riverside, the City of San Jacinto, and the City of Hemet have initiated a study² for the improvement of State Route (SR) 79 (Project) in the vicinity of the cities of Hemet and San Jacinto in Riverside County, California. The regional location of this Project is shown in Figure 1. The improvement is proposed to generally occur between Domenigoni Parkway and Gilman Springs Road, a distance of approximately 30 kilometers (km) (19 miles [mi]). The project may extend farther to the south past Domenigoni Parkway depending on the alternative selected to connect back to the existing alignment. The portion of SR 79 proposed for improvement is shown in Figure 2.

The purpose of this report is to document the alternative selection process for the Project. The alternatives selection process is required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) 404 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) when requiring an FHWA action and a Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 404 Individual Permit from the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) for impacts to areas greater than 5 acres under their jurisdiction. Because the Project will require an FHWA action and could exceed the USACE 5-acre impact threshold, the NEPA 404 MOU is being followed. The NEPA 404 MOU and its concurrence process is intended to guide the development of the Project alternatives to meet the alternatives analysis requirements of both NEPA and Section 404 of the CWA.

Guidance to the NEPA 404 MOU (Signatory Agencies, 1994) on the alternatives selection process prepared by the staff of the MOU signatory agencies identifies that:

A reasonable range of options must be considered in the evaluation of alternatives. Alternatives can be eliminated, prior to detailed analysis, if they are not "reasonable" (under NEPA 40 CFR Parts 1500-1508) or if they are not "practicable" (under CWA Section 404). When evaluating alternatives, transportation agencies should give equal consideration to CWA Section 404 and Department of Transportation Act Section 4(f) concerns, and select the alternative that would cause the least overall environmental harm. (Signatory Agencies, 1994) (p.9).

An important distinction to keep in mind when evaluating harm to non-aquatic (i.e.4(f) resources versus harm to waters of the U.S., is that, for the former, the alternatives selection process evaluates reasonable and prudent alternatives based on the "net harm" (after mitigation) of the alternative to 4(f) properties or other environmental resources. In contrast, for almost all section 404 alternatives analyses, the evaluation of practicable alternatives must consider the impact to waters of the U.S. that would result from the alternative before compensatory mitigation (see Memorandum of Agreement [1990] for exceptions to this

² The study is being conducted in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)/404 Integration Process. This process is a joint effort among the FHWA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other transportation and resource agencies to integrate the NEPA and the federal Clean Water Act Section 404(b)1 alternatives analysis process. The commitment by these agencies to coordinate these processes is documented in a Memorandum of Understanding approved on May 1, 1992.

sequence)...Therefore, if an alternative exists where the impacts to non-aquatic resources can be practicably mitigated, this alternative should generally be selected over one that would fill waters of the U.S. (Signatory Agencies, 1994).(p.13)

As part of the alternatives selection process, proposed concept segments will be identified and classified. These concept segments will be screened based on essential criteria and collected to form alignment alternatives. The conclusion of this process will present a set of alignment alternatives selected to be further evaluated in the Project technical reports. At the conclusion of the technical reports, refinements to the alternatives may occur prior to their evaluation in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR) for the proposed Project. These refinements will identify alternatives through the Alignment Review Areas and potential shifts in the alignments to further avoid or minimize environmental impacts without eliminating alternatives. The least environmentally damaging practicable alternative (LEDPA) will be selected from the set of alignment alternatives in the environmental document. These alternatives, as well as those alternatives considered and withdrawn, will be presented in the EIS/EIR in Chapter 2, Project Alternatives.

The following sections of this report will detail the methodology used to identify, classify, and screen concept segments, as well as to formulate Project alternatives (Section 2.0); the results of the evaluation (Section 3.0); and the conclusions of the alternatives selection process (Section 4.0). The Project alternatives selected to be carried forward for further evaluation in the technical studies will be presented and discussed in the report conclusions (Section 4.0).