

Chapter 1.

Introduction

This chapter provides a brief overview of the Hamilton wetland restoration project, describes the environmental review requirements that must be met before the project can be approved, identifies the scope of this document, and describes how to use the document.

Overview of the Proposed Project

The Proposal

The Hamilton wetland restoration project site is located within the San Francisco Bay Estuary in the City of Novato, Marin County. The 900-acre site comprises three areas: the Hamilton Army Airfield (HAAF), an approximately 644-acre parcel currently being closed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps); the approximately 20-acre Navy ballfield site; and the California State Lands Commission (SLC) parcel (also known as the Antenna Field), a 250-acre parcel owned by the State of California and administered by the SLC. The impact analysis includes the Navy ballfield as part of the HAAF parcel. A large portion of these areas, which lie between Novato Creek to the north and Long Point to the south, were historically tidal wetlands. The Hamilton ~~wetland conceptual restoration plan~~ Wetlands Conceptual Restoration Plan would return the site to seasonal and tidal wetland conditions and reestablish important ecological functions in the San Francisco Bay Estuary.

This environmental impact report/environmental impact statement (EIR/EIS) presents an evaluation of the impacts associated with restoration of wetlands at HAAF and the adjacent SLC parcel. Other reuse options for the HAAF parcel are not evaluated in this EIR/EIS. These options, including aviation use of HAAF, were evaluated by the Army as part of the environmental documentation on the disposal and reuse of HAAF and by the City of Novato as part of developing the reuse plan for HAAF. As indicated in the final reuse plan for HAAF, the HAAF parcel is designated as open space for wildlife habitat and wetland restoration uses (City of Novato 1996). A description of the relationship of the wetlands restoration project and other projects and plans is included in Chapter 2.

Project Sponsors

The California State Coastal Conservancy (Coastal Conservancy) is the state lead agency for the Hamilton wetland restoration project. The Coastal Conservancy was created by the state legislature for the purpose of developing and sponsoring a wide variety of environmental projects to protect, preserve, and enhance the coastal resources of California's coastline and San Francisco Bay. The Coastal Conservancy is working in cooperation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) (and other agencies, including the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission [BCDC]) to develop plans for the Hamilton wetland restoration project.

Congress will determine whether the proposed project is in the federal interest based on a feasibility study, which is being prepared by the Corps. The feasibility study was authorized in 1997 and is being prepared under a feasibility cost-share agreement with the Coastal Conservancy.

Overview of CEQA and NEPA

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires state and local agencies to estimate and evaluate the environmental implications of their actions and aims to prevent adverse environmental impacts of those actions by requiring those agencies, when feasible, to avoid or reduce significant environmental impacts of their decisions. One tool that is used to estimate and evaluate environmental implications is an EIR. CEQA requires that the lead agency prepare an EIR when the lead agency determines that a project may have a significant effect on the environment.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) involves a process that is similar to the CEQA process but applies only to federal agencies. Under NEPA, federal agencies are authorized and directed to the fullest extent practical to carry out their regulations, policies, and programs according to NEPA's policies of environmental protection. To ensure that these policies are carried out, NEPA requires that every federal agency prepare an EIS for a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment.

When a project is subject to review under both CEQA and NEPA, state and local agencies are encouraged to cooperate with federal agencies in the environmental review process and to prepare a joint environmental document. For the Hamilton wetland restoration project, the state (Coastal Conservancy) and the federal government (the Corps) have determined that the proposed project could significantly affect the environment and have therefore prepared this joint EIR/EIS.

Scope of the EIR/EIS

Definition and Purposes of Scoping

The process of determining the scope, focus, and content of an EIR/EIS is known as scoping. The scoping process assists the lead agencies in determining the substantive issues to be addressed in the EIR/EIS. In summary, the purposes of scoping are to:

- u help identify the range of actions, alternatives, environmental effects, and mitigation measures to be evaluated in depth in the EIR/EIS;
- u bring together interested governmental agencies, project sponsors, and other interested parties to listen to and help resolve concerns; and
- u eliminate from further study those issues that are not important to the decision at hand.

Elements of the Scoping Process

Tools used in scoping include the notice of preparation (NOP) and the notice of intent (NOI) issued for the project, scoping meetings, and early consultation with governmental agencies and the public.

Notice of Preparation and Notice of Intent

Immediately after a local or state lead agency decides that an EIR is required, the lead agency must prepare an NOP soliciting participation in determining the scope of the EIR; the NOP is sent to responsible and trustee agencies and involved federal agencies, the State Clearinghouse, and parties that previously requested notice in writing. Although further distribution is not required, the lead agency should consider sending the NOP to all parties that may be interested in the project, such as adjacent property owners (Pub. Res. Code Section 2310092.2). The Coastal Conservancy prepared and distributed an NOP for this project on March 9, 1998, in compliance with CEQA requirements. Responses to the NOP must be submitted to the lead agency within 30 days of issuance of the NOP.

Similar to an NOP, the NOI is the first formal step in EIS preparation. The NOI must be published in the Federal Register. The NOI for the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Plan EIR/EIS was published in the Federal Register on March 18, 1998. Agency and public comments received by the Coastal Conservancy and the Corps during the scoping process have been assembled in a scoping report (Jones & Stokes Associates 1998).

Scoping Meetings

Although not required by CEQA or NEPA, scoping meetings can improve the effectiveness of the scoping process by acting as another forum for agencies and the public to provide input on the range of issues, alternatives, and mitigation measures that should be included in the EIR/EIS. The Coastal Conservancy and the Corps conducted two scoping meetings, one on March 25, 1998, and the other on March 30, 1998.

Early Consultation

In addition to the NOP/NOI, lead agencies are encouraged to consult directly with responsible and trustee agencies early in the environmental review process to ensure that the EIR/EIS meets the needs of other agencies that will be relying on the document for related discretionary actions (e.g., permits and approvals). For the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Plan EIR/EIS, the lead agencies are consulting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG), the Port of Oakland, local public service and utility providers, and several other agencies.

Scoping Report

The scoping process is thoroughly documented in a scoping report (Jones & Stokes Associates 1998) on file with the Coastal Conservancy and the Corps. It contains copies of the NOP and NOI, written comments, summaries of oral comments, and a description of how those comments were to be addressed in the EIR/EIS.

Topics Addressed in the EIR/EIS

Based on the scoping process for the Hamilton Wetland Restoration Plan EIR/EIS, the following topics were determined to require evaluation to assess potentially significant impacts:

- u geology and soils;
- u surface water hydrology and water quality;
- u tidal hydraulics;
- u public health and safety;
- u biological resources;
- u land use and public utilities;
- u hazardous substances, waste, and site remediation;
- u transportation;
- u air quality;
- u noise; and
- u cultural resources.

Potential effects on aesthetics and population, housing, and employment are not evaluated in this EIR/EIS because these impacts would be obviously less than significant. Specifically, the conversion of an abandoned airstrip and disturbed fields to restored wetlands would likely result in an overall visual enhancement compared with existing conditions. Furthermore, the project would generate no

population or demand for housing and only a minor amount of construction employment. Therefore, these issues are not explored further in the document.

Framework of the EIR/EIS

Following this introduction, the EIR/EIS contains a thorough description of alternatives, including Alternative 1: No Action. Chapters 4 through 14 each contain a setting or affected environment section for a particular resource topic, which is the point from which the discussion of impacts of the alternatives begins. An impact is judged to be *significant* (or *less than significant*) based on whether it meets specific significance criteria, which are professional standards. If an impact is judged to be significant, mitigation measures or ways to reduce or avoid the impact are identified and roles and responsibilities for implementing the mitigation are described. If an impact cannot be avoided or reduced substantially, it is considered a *significant unavoidable* impact of project implementation.

The Next Steps in the Environmental Review Process

This document is a draft EIR/EIS. It is being circulated for 45 days for review and comment by the public, responsible and trustee agencies, and other stakeholders. After the public review period closes on September 28, 1998, a final document will be prepared that responds to substantive comments received. This final document will be used by the lead agencies to decide which alternative is preferred, which mitigation measures to adopt, and whether to approve the project.