

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING, IMPACTS, AND MITIGATION

This section of the EIR presents potential environmental impacts of the proposed desalination project. The scope of the analysis and key attributes of the analytical approach are presented below to assist readers in understanding the manner in which the impact analysis was conducted.

Fifteen resource areas identified in the CEQA Environmental Checklist are examined in the sections that follow. For each resource area of concern, the EIR describes the existing setting, the potential for the proposed project to significantly impact the resources, and recommended mitigation measures that could reduce or avoid potentially significant impacts.

Impacts to agricultural resources are not addressed in this EIR because the project areas subject to impacts from the proposed project are mostly developed urban and suburban portions of central and southern Marin County, with the exception of some open space areas. No portions of the project area are in agricultural use or designated by appropriate land use plans for agricultural use. According to the Division of Land Resource Protection's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, no prime farmlands, unique farmlands, or farmlands of statewide importance, exist within the project area. In addition, no lands are zoned for agricultural use or under Williamson Act contracts within the project area.

Definition of Baseline

CEQA Guidelines Section 15125(a) states:

An EIR must include a description of the physical environmental conditions in the vicinity of the project, as they exist at the time the notice of preparation is published, or if no notice of preparation is published, at the time environmental analysis is commenced, from both a local and regional perspective. This environmental setting will normally constitute the baseline physical conditions by which a lead agency determines whether an impact is significant. The description of the environmental setting shall be no longer than is necessary to an understanding of the significant effects of the proposed project and its alternatives.

In this case, MMWD published the Notice of Preparation (NOP) for the project in August 2003. For this reason, the ~~Draft~~ EIR generally adopts as its baseline the environmental setting as it existed at the time MMWD published the NOP. In some instances, MMWD has obtained additional data regarding the environmental setting. For example, MMWD published an *Urban Water Management Plan* in 2006 and updated it in 2007, and this plan contains information on estimated water demand that was obtained after MMWD published the NOP for this project. MMWD does not want to artificially truncate its description of baseline conditions for the project as of August 2003, where MMWD has more recent information regarding baseline conditions. For this reason, when MMWD has relied upon information obtained after August 2003 regarding the environmental setting, MMWD has incorporated that information into its description of the environmental setting. In each such case, the information relied upon by MMWD has been cited in the EIR.

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING, IMPACTS, AND MITIGATION

Definition of Study Area

The extent of the environmental setting area evaluated (the study area) differs among resources depending on the locations where impacts are expected. For example, traffic impacts due to the proposed project are assessed for the regional roadway network, whereas cultural resource impacts are assessed for the project areas subject to direct ground disturbing activities such as the proposed desalination plant site, the Marin Rod & Gun Club pier, the pipeline routes, and the tank sites. The setting sections describe both local resources and regional resources that occur throughout the broader geographic area.

Cumulative Impacts

In addition to the direct impacts associated with the proposed project, the project may contribute to broader cumulative impacts when considered together with other development that may cause related impacts. These cumulative impacts are described in Section 7.4.

Impact Categories

As required by CEQA, an EIR must identify and evaluate the significance of impacts caused by a proposed project. Evaluation of the significance of an impact involves professional judgment that takes into account a variety of factors such as environmental resources, ability for resource recovery, need for mitigation, consistency with conclusions reached for similar projects, and CEQA case law. The following levels of impact significance were used in this analysis:

- **Significant** impacts are those that have been determined to be significant and cannot be mitigated to less than significant. A statement of overriding considerations must be made by MMWD if it approves the project with any significant impacts.
- **Potentially significant** impacts are those that may be significant but can be reduced to less than significant through either changes in the project design or mitigation measures.
- **Less-than-significant** impacts are those that are adverse but are not potentially significant and therefore do not require mitigation.
- **No impact** refers to effects of the project on the environment that are not considered adverse.