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9 May 2012

Director David L. Harlow
Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan
California Energy Commission
Dockets Office
MS-4 Docket No. 09-RENEW EO-01
1516 Ninth Street
Sacramento, CA 95814-5512
docket@energy.state.ca.us

Re: Docket Number 09-RENEW EO-1, Draft Scenario Maps, DRECP Meeting April 24 & 25, 2012

Dear Director Harlow,

This letter addresses the recent publication of draft renewable energy zone scenario maps on the DRECP website. In general, I have found that the Western Antelope Valley, where I reside and our groups, Concerned Citizens of the West Antelope Valley (CCWAV) and Friends of Antelope Valley Open Space (FAVOS) are active, has been a place in which the "disturbed land" euphemism is employed by planning departments and large-scale renewable energy industry insiders, advocates, and lobbyists, as a way to designate our valley and other valuable desert lands as a prime targets for utility-scale renewable energy development that destroys open space, habitats and connectivity, agricultural lands, scenic viewshed, and wildlife.

The "disturbed land" that is preferred for siting and fast-track permit processing here, has typically been zoned for agricultural use. Some is still in production, some still grazed by livestock, but much is not, and has had many years to recover. It is noted that as little as five years of recovery produces rabbitbrush, grassland, and wildflower fields capable of supporting a diverse array of foraging and nesting species of birds, reptiles, insects, and mammals. Threats to native grasslands, currently productive agricultural land, and recovering agricultural lands that are still intact (undisturbed for several years), loom largely over the massive scale of soil disturbance necessary to large-scale solar and wind projects. Threats to already preserved land, such as the State of California's Poppy Reserve and Ripley Desert Woodland, Los Angeles County Desert Pines Wildlife Sanctuary, Los Angeles County Significant Ecological Areas, and private conservation lands, crucial in providing transitional habitat and connectivity, is immanent, unless foresight is granted in recognizing these areas' ecological value.

Well recognized "flagship" species of the Western Mojave Desert, such as the Desert Bighorn Sheep and Desert Tortoise, seem to prevail in the written discussion of critical habitat necessary to preserve and promote the genetic health of desert species through habitat connectivity, protection of water sources, etc.; in short, large-scale ecosystem and habitat preservation, and connectivity. Our Western

Antelope Valley has its own flagship species: The California Condor, and in addition, Bald and Golden Eagles, Swainson's Hawk, Burrowing Owl, and numerous other raptors. It also supports a variety of nesting and foraging migratory songbirds and waterfowl, to the extent that the Audubon Society recognizes the Western Antelope Valley as a "Globally Important Bird Area." Audubon has commented on the value of agricultural land as forage, breeding, nesting, and resting areas for migratory fowl. On its website it describes the ornithological value of Antelope Valley:

> The remnant Joshua Tree Woodland in this area supports one of the farthest-west populations of Le Conte's Thrasher in the state (only the San Joaquin Valley group lies beyond). Now existing as a metapopulation fragmented by subdivisions, its future is uncertain. The grassland bird community is most impressive in winter, when large numbers of raptors concentrate in the area. Large flocks of Vesper Sparrows, Horned Lark and Mountain Bluebirds also occur here, widely extirpated elsewhere in the Los Angeles area. The agricultural fields, especially alfalfa, are productive year round. Winter brings Mountain Plover, whose flocks are among the last in southern California. After wet winters, nesting grassland species like Northern Harrier linger well into spring, and occasionally even breed. Swainson's Hawk maintains its southernmost breeding outpost in the state here. As this IBA lies in the path of a major spring migrant route for songbirds, these windbreaks can host hundreds of vireos, thrushes and warblers during April and May. Fields that receive effluent from local water treatment facilities can support hundreds of White-faced Ibis and shorebirds, and these fields support a group of around 200 Long-billed Curlews in fall and winter.

Clearly there is biological richness and value even in agricultural fields that adjoin both completely and relatively undisturbed areas. Los Angeles County Regional Planning's Significant Ecological Area Technical Advisory Committee also recognizes the value of agricultural fields in the area, as it states in SEATAC Procedures and Guidelines 2004:

> Indicators of biological significance, and thus of the need for a [Biological Constraints Analysis], can vary widely depending on the setting and ecological phenomena of concern associated with a parcel. For instance, a large, undisturbed area of native habitat is almost universally acknowledged as biologically significant, due to the intact nature of native associations and ecological functions likely to be found there. Nevertheless, even "degraded" areas, such as fallow agricultural land or invaded (with non-native plant or animal species), but as yet undeveloped land are undoubtedly important habitat for the biota living there. Furthermore, lands such as these may provide ecological functions beyond that of "primary residence" for any particular plant or animal species. Such functions include dispersal corridors, buffer areas and foraging habitat (especially for wide-ranging predators like raptors). The uncertainty with which a parcel can be immediately recognized as "significant" is therefore considerable. . .

This statement is especially important due to the fact that land zoned for agriculture is sought after by renewable energy companies, because, as previously noted, it is considered "disturbed," and thus, assumed less valuable as habitat and does not recognize the Important Bird Area designation or Significant Ecological Area (SEA) as important biologically. We would like the DRECP to consider currently cultivated and fallow agricultural land in the Antelope Valley as valuable for buffer areas, foraging and nesting habitat, and wildlife movement corridors, not just an automatic assumption of low biological value. In fact, the thirty or so projects already proposed for Los Angeles County alone, if approved, seek heavy agriculture designation for commercial utility-scale development that will fence

and eliminate over 19,000 acres of land currently available to wildlife. Some of this land is directly adjacent to the newly proposed San Andreas SEA 21 (expanded from Portal Ridge-Liebre Mountain and Fairmont-Antelope Butte SEAs 57 and 58) and SEA 11(Joshua-Juniper Woodland, formerly SEA 60) which encompasses Portal Ridge-Liebre Mountain areas, the State of California Poppy Reserve, and fragments of remaining Joshua-Juniper Woodland along the southern and western edge of the Antelope Valley, south of the Los Angeles/Kern County Line. Current SEA resource descriptions of these areas are included below:

SEA RESOURCE DESCRIPTION: SEA #58 – Portal Ridge-Liebre Mountain
The SEA is in close proximity to the Mojave Desert, the San Gabriel Mountains, and the Tehachapi Foothills. This position, at the intersection of three major geographical regions has produced the most diverse and unique flora found in the County. The area contains ten distinct plant communities, representing the transition between desert, foothill, and montane environments. The diversity of the area is further enhanced by the presence of many northern species, some of which are rare in the County, reaching their southern limit here. An example is foothill woodland, an uncommon plant community more common in central and northern California that occurs in this area. It is represented often by *Quercus douglasii, Q. lobata*, and gray pine (*Pinus sabiniana*). On the lower slopes are southern oak woodland, valley grassland, and riparian woodland. Despite the commonness of most of the plant communities present, this area is very valuable because it possesses such a concentrated diversity of vegetation types. The SEA is relatively large, and the precise locations of its most unique resources are not known. Foothill woodland habitat should be set apart when encountered, and attention must be given to connectivity with the other habitats.

SEA #57 Fairmont and Antelope Buttes
In general, desert buttes possess increased biotic diversity over surrounding areas. This is due to a high number of niches being created by mixing sandy and rocky habitats. These areas are vital habitat to many wide-ranging species which forage in outlying habitat and use the buttes for nesting, roosting, denning, and refuge. The buttes serve as concentrated wintering grounds for birds of prey with excellent roosting sites surrounded by cultivated fields which support a plentiful food supply of rodents, rabbits, and hares. Raptor habitat of this type is uncommon in Los Angeles County. In addition, they often possess biological resources that are declining in Los Angeles County due to accelerated agricultural and urban development. These buttes are the most westerly habitat of this type in the Mojave Desert. Due to the non-uniform distribution of species and the proximity of these buttes to the San Gabriel Mountains, the species composition on them is likely to be different than that found on other butte habitats in the desert. The unique ecological relationships created by these features are of scientific interest. Major development has not occurred on the buttes.

SEA #60 Joshua-Juniper Woodland
This area supports an excellent example of Joshua tree woodland habitat. Due to accelerated agricultural and urban expansion in the County's desert regions, large dense stands of this habitat are becoming scarce, especially in the Antelope Valley. Joshua tree woodland occurs between 2500-4000 feet, from the extreme western end to the extreme eastern end of the Mojave Desert. The dominant species is the Joshua tree, which reaches heights of 5-12 meters. Other common species include Mojave yucca, sage, box-thorn, and buckwheat.

Ideally, agricultural land, conservation lands, and open space would connect these areas to the valley floor and provide transitional habitat and wildlife movement upslope into grassland, agricultural grazing land, and further upslope onto Portal Ridge. Development Focus Area (DFA) Scenario Map 2 is most favorable in this respect. Wind development on Portal Ridge-Liebre Mountain and the important connection between the Transverse Range, Tehachapi Range and the San Gabriels should be excluded in Development Focus Areas portrayed on Scenario Maps. (See SEA Map attached.)

I would like to suggest that the Historical Range Map of the California Condor, Condor Preservation Act-Lead Bullet Protection Zone Map, and the DRECP Conservation Study Area Map Condor Study Area portion (attached) be used as overlays and their areas excluded from DFAs and Scenario Maps 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Of particular note is the presence of California Condor movement along Portal Ridge from Critical Condor Habitat located on the Tejon Ranch. Interestingly, the Tejon Ranch California Condor Conservation and Management Plan excludes utility-scale wind energy development in its Tejon Mountain Village development area; the Plan states "Because of the potential for raptors, including the California condor, to collide with wind turbines, the installation of such turbines will be prohibited on all residential and commercial lots within Covered Lands" (TRCCCMP pg. 69) It is apparent as Condor populations increase, foraging areas will expand along the Central Transverse Range southeastward, and to Bald Mountain, Liebre Mountain and Portal Ridge to the southwest along the Sierra Pelona Range, as indicated on the attached Condor GPS Locations Maps 2008, 2009.

Scenic corridors have value, in that designated areas of significant mountain, ridgeline, and grassland areas, and wildflower fields preserve habitat from inappropriate commercial and personal uses. Los Angeles County established a Scenic Highways Element to their General Plan in 1974 that seeks to maintain scenic resources that are of value to county residents, local rural residents, and tourists alike. Thousands of visitors to the world-renowned Poppy Reserve come to view the most spectacular wildflower fields in the State. Many fields adjoining consist of fallow agricultural land, grazing land, and grassland surrounding the Reserve, Fairmont and Antelope Buttes, and extending west to Gorman, south of Highway 138. In fact, one of the scenic routes designated in the Plan extends from 110th Street West along Lancaster Road to Highway 138, then along Gorman Post Road. This route is of important scenic value and interest as it affects tourism to not only the Poppy Reserve, but the Western Antelope Valley as well. Additional protection would be added by the DRECP if it excluded DFAs from the originally proposed footprint of the Poppy Reserve provided by the attached map. I assert that the scenic value of areas south of Highway 138, from 110th Street West to Gorman Post Road are of major importance to the well being of the habitats supporting wildlife therein: including Golden Eagle foraging areas on Portal Ridge, Condor foraging areas, a Tri-Colored Blackbird breeding colony and forage area; watersheds, ephemeral streams, vernal pools, and riparian habitat; the economic worth to local and County tourism and State Parks; and the health, welfare, and well-being of its human residents.

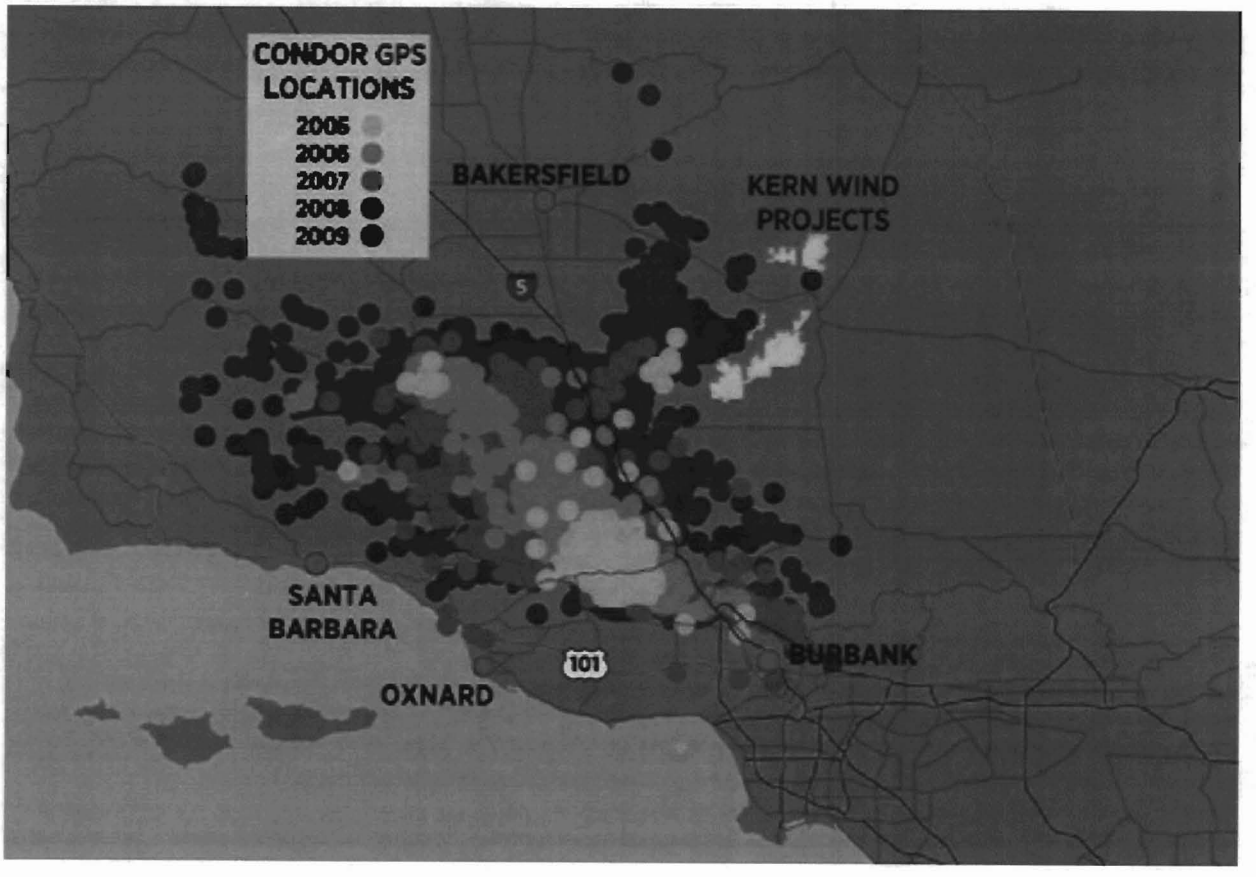
I thank you for the opportunity to comment on the DRECP DFA Scenario Maps. I appreciate your consideration regarding the value of agricultural land and conservation of landscape-scale habitats, connectivity to transitional habitats, protected lands like the Poppy Reserve and Ripley Desert Woodland, Los Angeles County Significant Ecological Areas, Audubon Important Bird Areas, Historical Condor Areas, and scenic roads—all as they relate to the development of utility-scale renewable energy in the Western Antelope Valley.

Sincerely,

Susan Zahnter

Susan Zahnter
Member, Friends of Antelope Valley Open Space
Member, Concerned Citizens of the West Antelope Valley

Maps


CONDOR GPS LOCATIONS
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
BAKERSFIELD
KERN WIND PROJECTS
5
SANTA BARBARA
101
BURBANK
OXNARD

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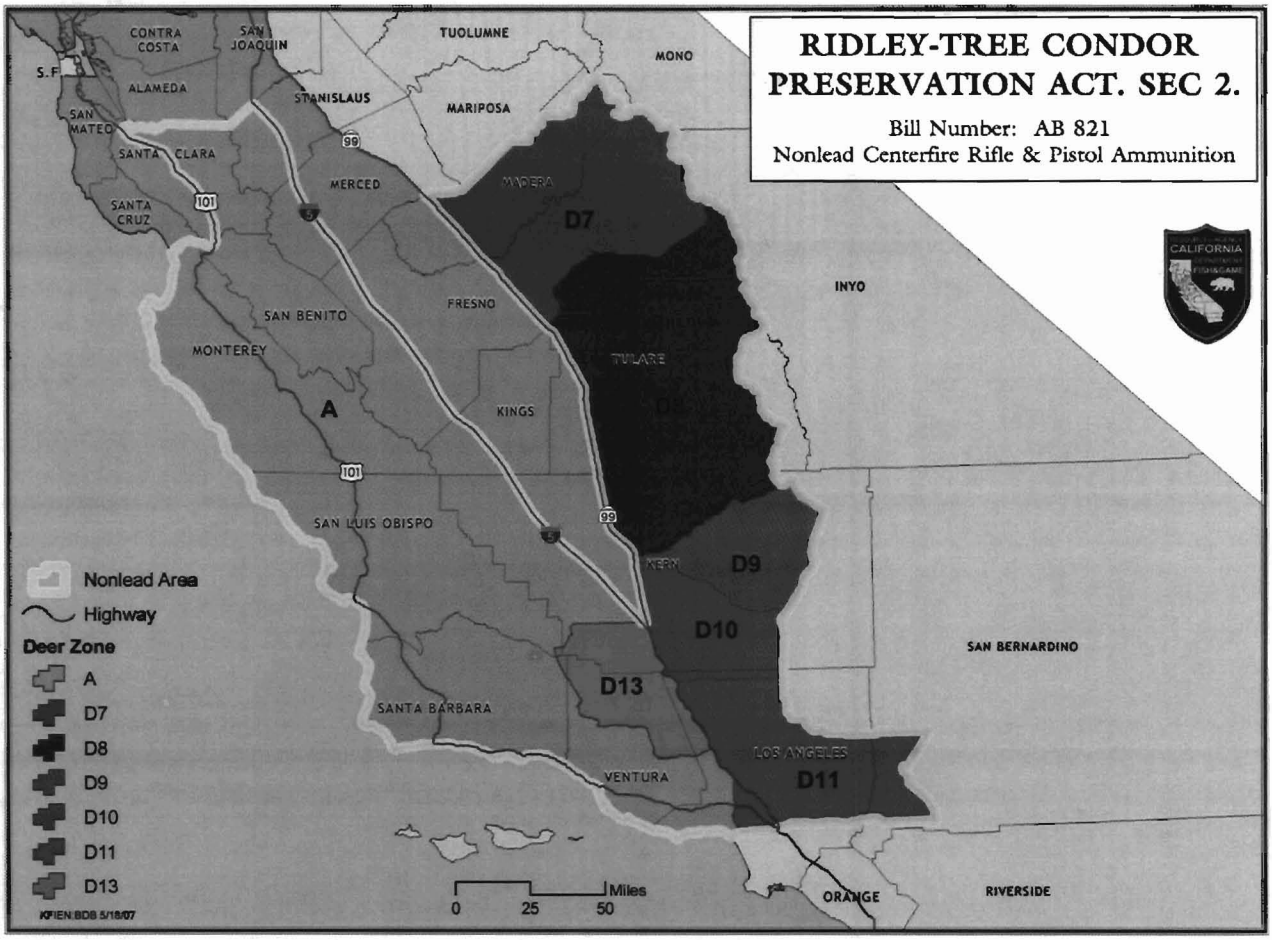
Tejon Ranch California Condor Conservation and Management Plan

Historical Range of the California Condor in California

FIGURE 1


RIDLEY-TREE CONDOR PRESERVATION ACT. SEC 2.
Bill Number: AB 821
Nonlead Centerfire Rifle & Pistol Ammunition
CONTRA COSTA
SAN JOAQUIN
S.F.
ALAMEDA
STANISLAUS
TUOLUMNE
MONO
MARIPOSA
SAN MATEO
SANTA CLARA
MERCED
MADERA
SANTA CRUZ
D7
INYO
FRESNO
SAN BENITO
MONTEREY
TULARE
A
KINGS
SAN LUIS OBISPO
KERN
D9
D10
SAN BERNARDINO
D13
SANTA BARBARA
LOS ANGELES
D11
VENTURA
ORANGE
RIVERSIDE
Nonlead Area
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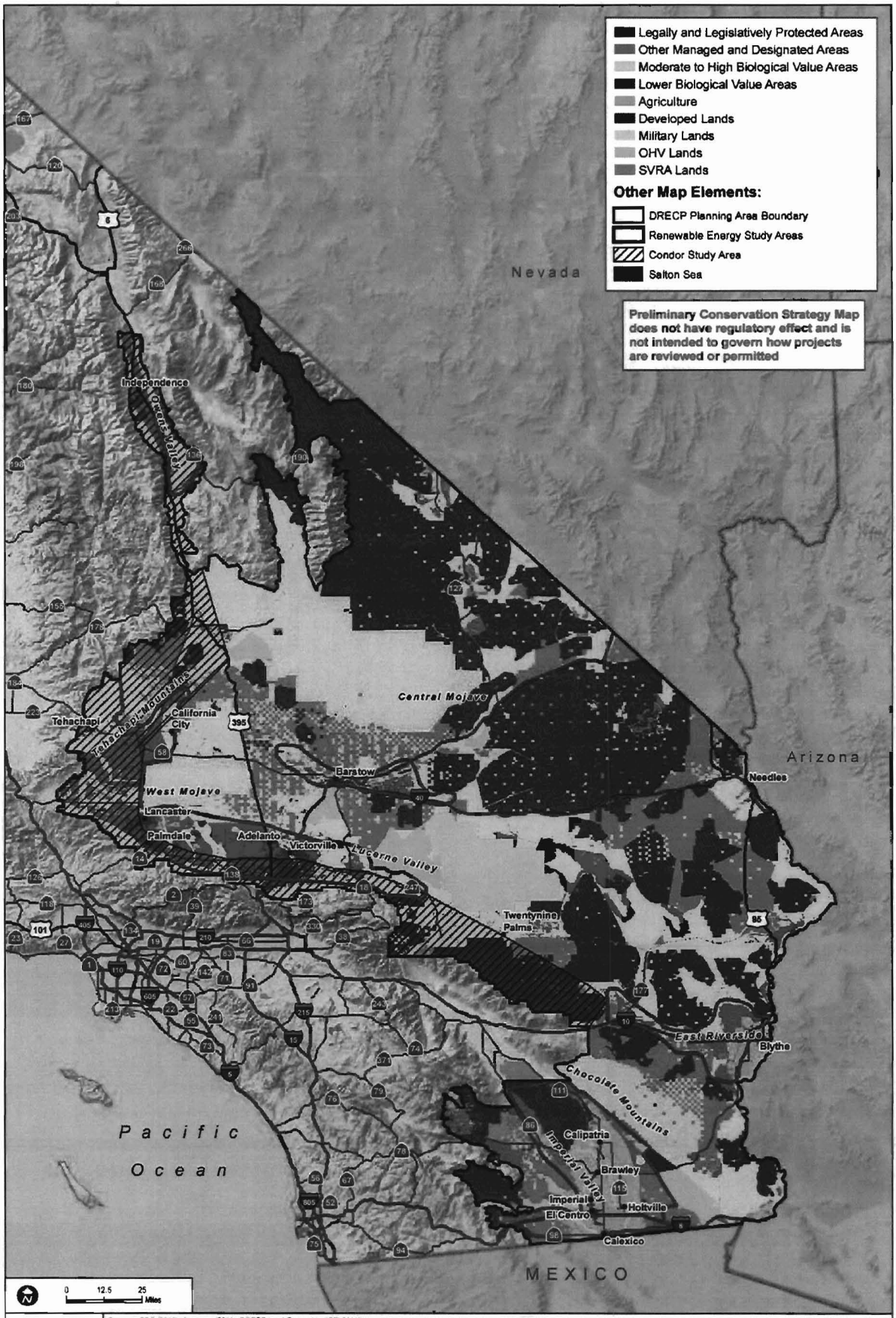


Sources: CEC (2010), Agencies (2011); DRECP Land Ownership; ICF (2011); USGS (2010); DRECP Land Cover (ICF 2011); ESRI (2010)

DUDEK

ICF

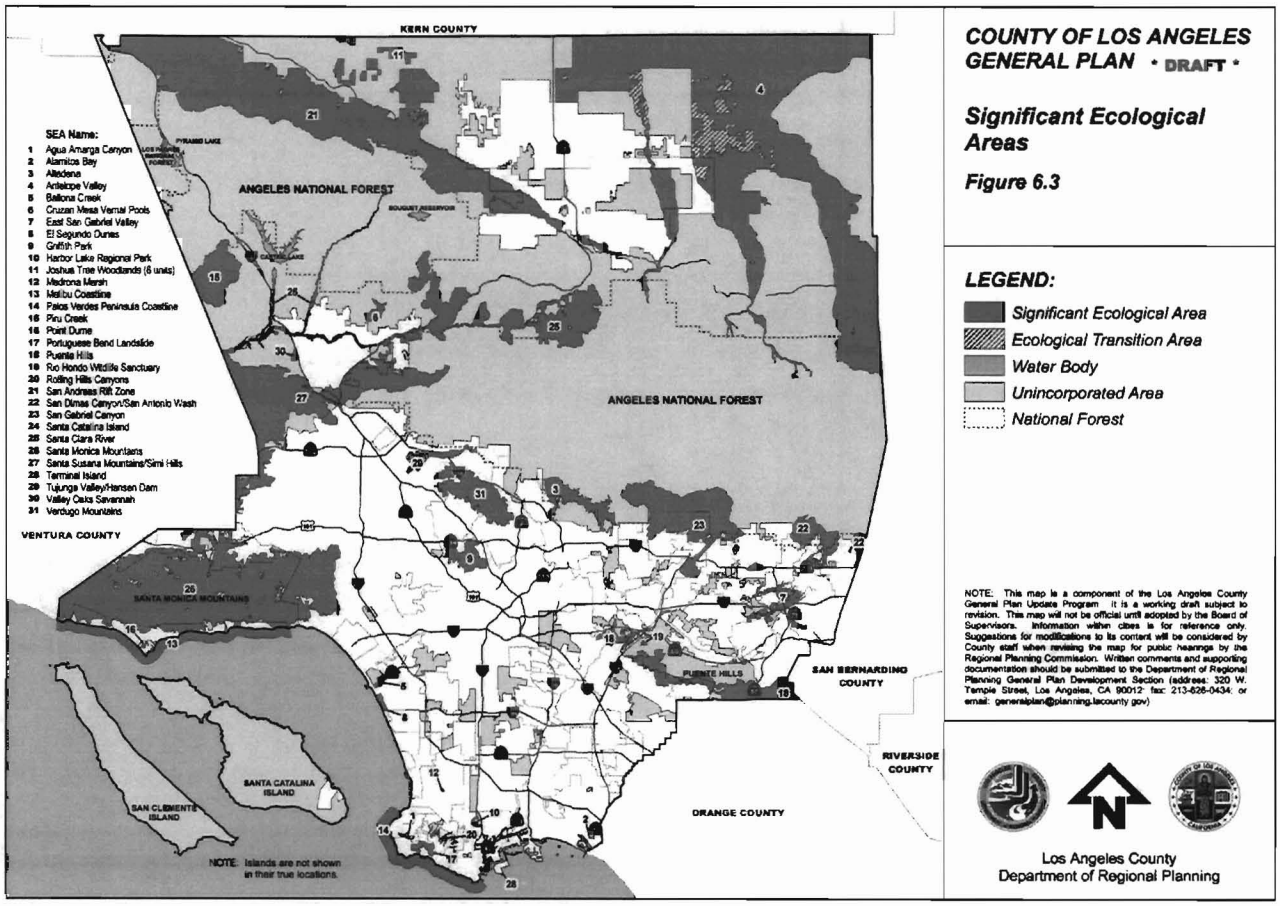
October 26, 2011

FIGURE 2-1

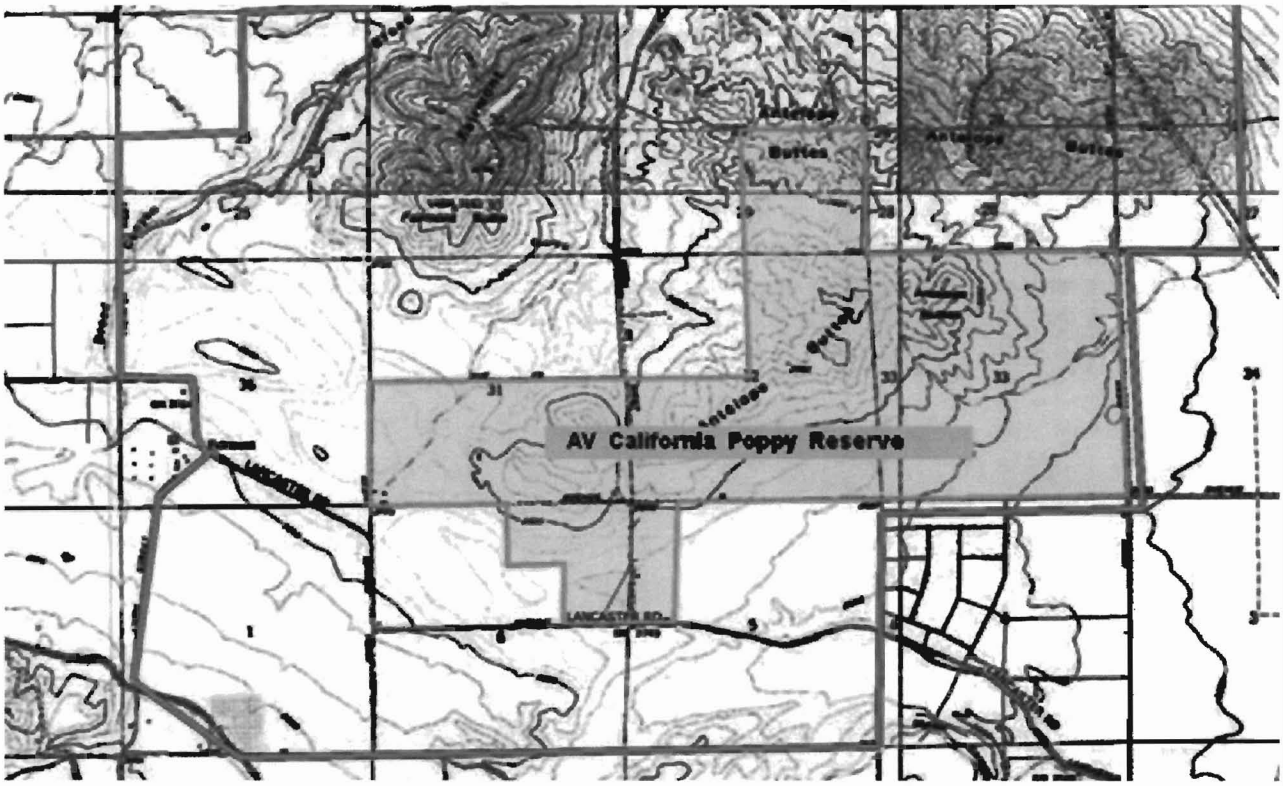
DRECP Preliminary Conservation Strategy Map

DESERT RENEWABLE ENERGY CONSERVATION PLAN

Proposed, expanded SEAs

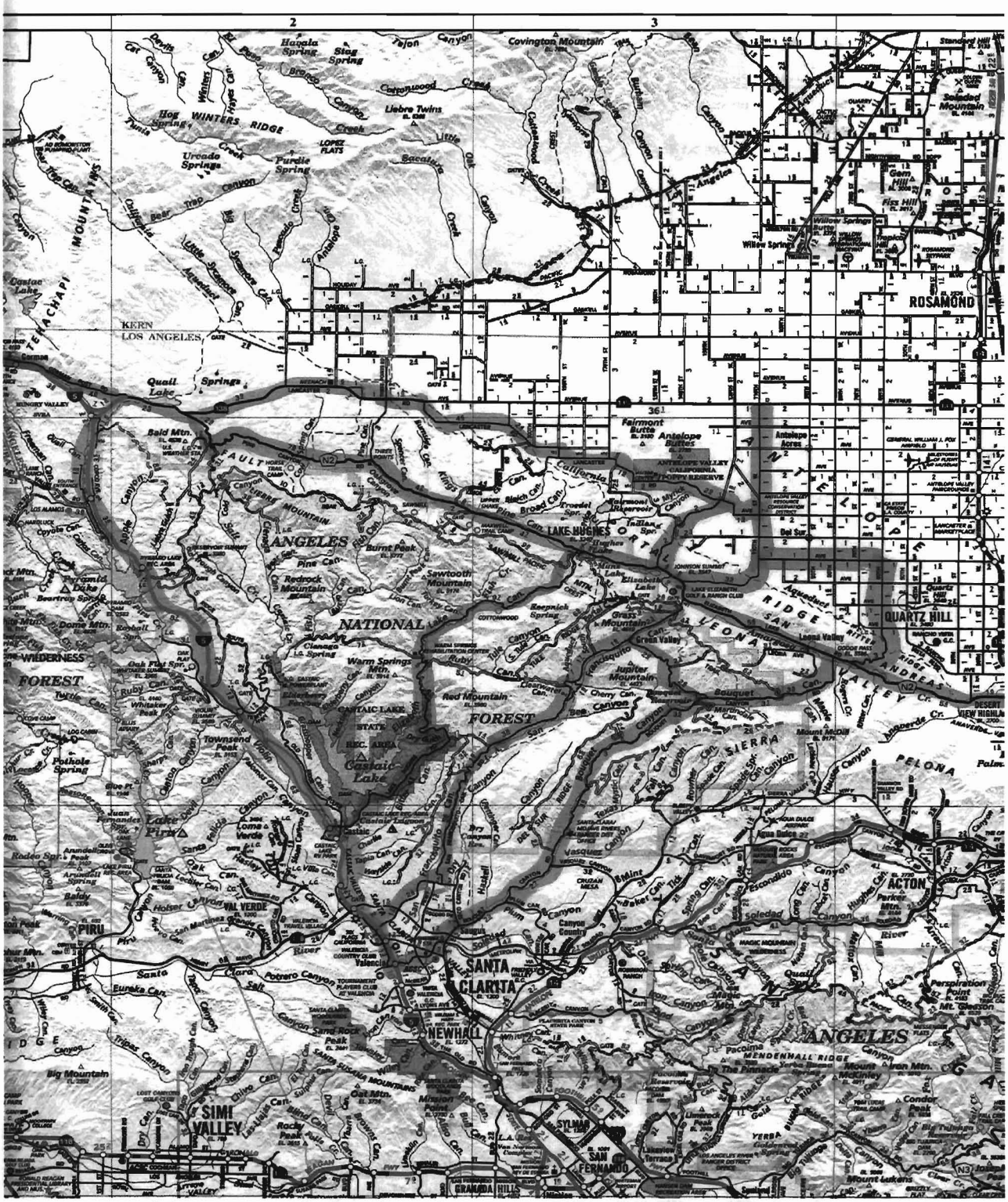


Poppy Reserve—Originally Proposed, and Current Boundaries



Original area--designated wildflower fields important enough for preservation, outlined in green.
Current Poppy Reserve boundary in orange.

Northwestern LA County Scenic Roads



Scenic Roads of the West Antelope Valley--of interest—North of County Road N2, down to Lancaster Road. Listed in the Scenic Highways Element of the Los Angeles County General Plan, Pgs. SH 13, SHA 1, SHA 2, SHA 3.