SAIC (Science Applications International Corporation), "Results of Focused Coastal California Gnatcatcher Surveys for the Stevenson Ranch Phase V Project Site, Los Angeles, California" (September 3, 2003)

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September 3, 2003

Mr. Rick Farris
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
2493 Portola Road, Suite B
Ventura, California 93003

Re: Results of Focused Coastal California Gnatcatcher Surveys for the Stevenson Ranch Phase V Project Site, Los Angeles, California

Dear Mr. Farris:

This letter/report is prepared in compliance with the conditions of authorized permits issued under Section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Federal Endangered Species Act to Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) biologist Marc Blain (TE001075-1) for the performance of protocol surveys for the coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*). As such, this letter report summarizes the methodology and findings of surveys for this species on the Stevenson Ranch Phase V project site in Los Angeles County, California. SAIC conducted surveys on all potentially suitable habitat on the project site to determine the presence and location or absence of the coastal California gnatcatcher. No coastal California gnatcatchers were detected during the focused surveys.

SITE LOCATION

The Stevenson Ranch Phase V project site is located immediately west of the City of Santa Clarita in an unincorporated portion of northern Los Angeles County (Figure 1, *Regional Location Map*, attached). The site is located approximately 2 miles southwest of the intersection of Interstate 5 and Highway 126 and just north of the existing Stevenson Ranch community. Most of the site can be found on the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Newhall quadrangle, with a small portion extending westward onto the Val Verde quadrangle, as shown in Figure 2, *USGS Topographic Map of the Project Site* (attached).

SITE DESCRIPTION

The property is located on the northeastern flank of the Santa Susana Mountains and includes low but rugged hills composed of sandstone, siltstone, and conglomerates that have been shaped by faulting and erosion. Elevations range from 1,150 to 1,980 feet above sea level. The hills rise steeply, often forming broken cliffs, above relatively dry, alluvium-filled canyons, the largest of which are Potrero, Pico, and Long canyons which are oriented east-west in the southern half and central portions of the property (see Figure 3, *Aerial Photograph of the Proposed Site and Vicinity*, attached). Smaller north-to-westward-draining canyons are present in the northern half of the property. Erosional features such as gullies and landslides, due to both natural and human causes, are prevalent. The property's drainage is to the Santa Clara River, by way of Pico, Potrero, and Long canyons and

unnamed washes draining the north slope of the hills. No parts of the property border the Santa Clara River or its associated riparian habitat.

The property comprises relatively dry uplands and contains no perennial streams, although portions of Pico Creek may contain water into the summer during wet years. The dominant vegetation types are typical of inland valleys of Southern California and consist of chaparral, coastal sage scrub, and oak woodland, with lesser areas of riparian scrub and woodland along drainages. Grassland is not recognized as a separate category but is present primarily as an understory within the coastal scrub and oak woodland habitats.

Until recently, most of the surrounding land was undeveloped. The site and adjoining properties were extensively grazed by cattle for many decades. Evidence of both historic and ongoing petroleum exploration/extraction operations (e.g., pumps, pipes, pads) associated with the Newhall-Potrero and Castaic Junction oil fields exists in a number of areas within the project. Moderate oil field development activities also exist north and west of the project area. Numerous dirt roads, partially paved roads and fire trails cross the project site. Additionally, an existing overhead transmission line (Southern California Edison) transverses the site in a northeasterly/southwesterly direction. As a result of these activities (i.e., grazing, hydrocarbon exploration/extraction, utility maintenance), portions of the project site, including numerous ridgelines and canyon areas, have been previously disturbed with a corresponding loss of vegetation in these areas. During the past few years, residential development associated with earlier phases of Stevenson Ranch and the Westridge project has expanded up to the northern and eastern boundaries of the property..

Both grazing and oilfield activity on the site appear to have been reduced during the late 1990s, and years since 1990 have also seen the end of drought and a return to normal to above-normal rainfall (at least until 1998-99). In addition, the last major fires on the property occurred during 1962 and 1987 (Ultrasystems 1990)[1]. All of these circumstances appear to have contributed to the successional character of the vegetation in many areas and to the vigorous growth of chaparral and sage scrub vegetation, as well as the recruitment of oak saplings, on portions of the site.

VEGETATION

Five distinct vegetation types, some of which can be considered to encompass multiple plant communities or dominance series (Sawyer and Keeler-Wolf 1995)[2] are recognized on the property. These vegetation types, along with unvegetated areas (chiefly roads), are mapped and shown in Figure 4, *Vegetation Map and Survey Areas* (attached). They are distinguished as follows.

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[1] Ultrasystems Environmental Services. 1991. *Stevenson Ranch Phase 5 Specific Plan* – Preliminary Draft EIR.
[2] Sawyer and Keeler-Wolf. 1995. *A Manual of California Vegetation*. California Native Plant Society. Sacramento

Chaparral, consisting of an essentially closed cover of hard-woody shrubs, covers approximately 1,309.2 acres or 74.2 percent of the site. Chaparral tends to dominate on slopes throughout the steeper, central and southern portions of the site and on north-facing slopes and in canyons in the northern part of the site. Chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*) and/or hoary-leaf ceanothus (*Ceanothus crassifolius*) are dominant over much of the site and could be recognized singly or together as a distinct series (Sawyer and Keeler-Wolf 1995). More diverse, mixed chaparral communities occur on north- to west-facing canyon slopes where, along with hoary-leaf ceanothus, locally co-dominant species include holly-leaved redberry (*Rhamnus ilicifolia*), holly-leaved cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*), mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus betuloides*), toyon (*Heteromeles arubutifolia*), scrub oak (*Quercus berberidifolia*), and sugarbush (*Rhus ovata*). On more open south to easterly slopes, California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), chaparral mallow (*Malacothamnus fasciculatus*), and black sage (*Salvia mellifera*), are often co-dominant with chamise. California walnut (*Juglans californica*), chaparral ash (*Fraxinus dipetala*), and elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*) also occur sporadically on the site as part of the chaparral vegetation.

Sage Scrub Vegetation is generally more open and dominated by soft-woody species than chaparral. Sage scrub vegetation on the site is predominantly coastal sage scrub and comprises approximately 287.6 acres or 16.3 percent of the vegetation on the site. Non-native grassland is often present as an understory layer or as part of a mixed grassland-scrub community. Characteristic dominants include California buckwheat, purple sage (*Salvia leucophylla*), California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), laurel sumac (*Malosma laurina*), white sage (*Salvia apiana*), Our Lord's candle (*Yucca whipplei*). Thick-leaf yerba santa (*Eriodictyon crassifolium*), is locally dominant along old roads and formerly disturbed sites. On about 20 acres of the site on sandy alluvium in canyon bottoms, a variant of sage scrub vegetation that may be considered alluvial scrub, a sensitive plant community (Hanes et al. 1989)[3], is characterized by the aforementioned species in varying combinations with Great Basin sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), pine goldenbush (*Ericameria pinifolia*), scalebroom (*Lepidospartum squamatum*), and bush groundsel (*Senecio douglasii*).

Oak Woodland, with an overstory of coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*), and ranging from scattered specimens to closed canopy forests is associated with the major drainages and canyons. Oak woodland occupies approximately 58.7 acres or 3.3 percent of the site and includes areas with chaparral, sage scrub, and grassland understories. Any areas with multiple specimen oak trees (see below) within a few hundred feet of each other are classified as oak woodland here. More isolated oak trees are included as part of the surrounding vegetation type. Poison oak *Toxicodendron diversilobum*) and squawbush (*Rhus trilobata*) are especially common understory species in oak woodland habitats.

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[3] Hanes, T.L., R.D. Friesen, and K. Keane. 1989. *Alluvial Scrub Vegetation in Coastal Southern California*. Pages 187-193 in Abell, D.L., Technical Coordinator. Proceedings of the California Riparian Systems Conference, September 22-24, 1988, Davis, CA. USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Forest and Range Experiment Station.

Riparian Scrub is present on about 10.2 acres or 0.6 percent of the site and occurs primarily along Pico Creek and in the stream channels of a few other drainages on the property, notably in association with dense oak woodland in a side branch of Potrero Canyon in the west-central part of the property. Riparian scrub is dominated by mule fat (*Baccharis salicifolius*), mixed with stands of shrubby arroyo willow (*Salix lasiolepis*) and, in a few cases, isolated sycamores (*Platanus racemosa*) and cottonwoods (*Populus fremontii*).

Cherry Woodland is dominated by holly-leaved cherry and occurs on approximately 7.0 acres or 0.4 percent of the site. This community is associated with dry drainage bottoms in the northern portion of the property. The area mapped in Figure 4 supports exceptionally large holly-leaved cherries. It is considered an outstanding example of a "Mainland Cherry Forest" (Holland 1986)[4] and is one of the "Unique Stands" cited by Sawyer and Keeler-Wolf (1995).

Unvegetated. Unvegetated areas include old well pads, dirt roads and areas that as of spring 2000 had been recently graded or filled. Approximately 92.4 acres of the property (5.2 percent) are unvegetated.

METHODOLOGY

Surveys for the coastal California gnatcatcher were conducted by SAIC biologist Marc Blain (Permit No. TE001075-1) in conformance with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's *Coastal California Gnatcatcher Presence/Absence Survey Guidelines* (July 28, 1997). Accordingly, six surveys were performed during the breeding season within all portions of the project site containing suitable habitat. Each survey was conducted at least one week apart between 6:00 A.M. and 12:00 P.M. Temperatures during surveys ranged between 61 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Weather conditions were suitable for surveys with skies ranging from clear to 100 percent overcast, and winds below Beaufort scale 3.

Due to the limited extent of coastal sage scrub, the area surveyed was refined to a single portion of the site. The determination to survey the designated area was based on past conversations with the USFWS regarding California gnatcatcher surveys in 2001. After a field visit on September 8, 1999, USFWS biologists Rick Farris and Ron Papowski defined an area where suitable habitat was dominant and where surveys for the gnatcatcher would be appropriate. The resulting survey area is shown in Figure 4, *Vegetation Map and Survey Area* (attached), and amounts to 156 acres in two contiguous sections along the northern edge of the property. The area occurs on level to moderately sloping terrain that supports relatively open coastal scrub vegetation dominated by soft-woody species including California sagebrush and California buckwheat. This portion of the site, originally surveyed for gnatcatchers in 2000, was once again used as the survey area to conduct gnatcatcher surveys in 2003.

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[4] Holland, R.F. 1986. Preliminary Description of the Natural Communities of California. The Resources Agency, California Department of Fish and Game. Sacramento.

The survey area was divided into two equal plots of approximately 80 acres each to ensure complete coverage of all suitable habitat during each survey and to ensure that no more than 80 acres was surveyed per permitted biologist per survey. The field investigator slowly walked over the site stopping at appropriate intervals, uttered pishing sounds, and played a tape of recorded coastal California gnatcatcher vocalizations. The tape was played for several seconds at each interval, followed by a brief pause to listen for a response. Surveys were conducted on April 1, 7, 8, 24, May 8, 9, 29, 30, June 18, 19, 25, and 26. All birds observed or otherwise detected were recorded.

RESULTS

No coastal California gnatcatchers were detected on or adjacent to the Stevenson Ranch Phase V project site.

Other sensitive avian species observed on-site include: sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), California special concern species; Coopers hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), California special concern species; southern California rufous-crowned sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps canescens*), Federal special concern species, California special concern species. One individual brown-headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) was observed on-site on one occasion during the course of the surveys. All birds detected on-site are listed in the *Bird Compendium* (attached).

Should you have any questions regarding the methodology or findings in this report, please do not hesitate to contact either of the undersigned at (626) 440-8351 or by email at blainm@saic.com.

Sincerely,
SCIENCE APPLICATIONS INTERNATIONAL CORPORATION

Marc Blain
Senior Biologist

Attachments

BIRD COMPENDIUM

Coastal California Gnatcatcher Survey Report
Stevenson Ranch Phase V Project Site

SCIENTIFIC NAME	COMMON NAME
Anatidae	**Waterfowl**
Anas platyrhynchos	mallard
Cathartidae	**New World Vultures**
Cathartes aura	turkey vulture
Accipitridae	**Hawks**
Accipiter striatus	sharp-shinned hawk
Accipiter cooperii	Cooper's hawk
Buteo lineatus	red-shouldered hawk
Buteo jamaicensis	red-tailed hawk
Falconidae	**Falcons**
Falco sparverius	American kestrel
Odotophoridae	**Quails**
Callipepla californica	California quail
Charadriidae	**Plovers**
Charadrius vociferus	killdeer
Columbidae	**Pigeons and Doves**
Columba livia	rock dove
Zenaida macroura	mourning dove
Apodidae	**Swifts**
Aeronautes saxatalis	white-throated swift
Trochilidae	**Hummingbirds**
Calypte costae	Costa's hummingbird
Calypte anna	Anna's hummingbird
Picidae	**Woodpeckers**
Colaptes auratus	northern flicker
Picoides nuttallii	Nuttall's woodpecker
Tyrannidae	**Tyrant Flycatchers**
Empidonax difficilis	Pacific-slope flycatcher
Sayornis nigricans	black phoebe
Sayornis saya	Say's phoebe
Myiarchus cinerascens	ash-throated flycatcher

SCIENTIFIC NAME	COMMON NAME
Tyrannus verticalis	western kingbird
Corvidae	**Jays and Crows**
Aphelocoma californica	western scrub-jay
Corvus brachyrhynchos	American crow
Corvus corax	common raven
Paridae	**Titmice**
Baeolophus inornatus	oak titmouse
Hirundinidae	**Swallows**
Tachycineta thalassina	violet-green swallow
Stelgidopteryx serripennis	northern rough-winged swallow
Muscicapidae	**Wrentits**
Chamaea fasciata	wrentit
Aegithalidae	**Bushtits**
Psaltriparus minimus	bushtit
Troglodytidae	**Wrens**
Troglodytes aedon	house wren
Thryomanes bewickii	Bewick's wren
Sylvidae	**Old World Warblers, Gnatcatchers**
Polioptila caerulea	blue-gray gnatcatcher
Turdidae	**Thrushes**
Turdus migratorius	American robin
Mimidae	**Thrashers**
Mimus polyglottos	northern mockingbird
Toxostoma redivivum	California thrasher
Ptilogonatidae	**Silky Flycatchers**
Phainopepla nitens	phainopepla
Parulidae	**Wood Warblers**
Vermivora celata	orange-crowned warbler
Vermivora ruficapilla	Nashville warbler
Dendroica coronata	yellow-rumped warbler
Dendroica nigrescens	black-throated gray warbler
Wilsonia pusilla	Wilson's warbler
Geothlypis trichas	common yellowthroat
Thraupidae	**Tanagers**
Piranga ludoviciana	western tanager
Emberizidae	**Emberizids**

SCIENTIFIC NAME	COMMON NAME
Pipilo crissalis	California towhee
Pipilo maculatus	spotted towhee
Aimophila ruficeps canescens	Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow
Chondestes grammacus	lark sparrow
Ammodramus savannarum	grasshopper sparrow
Melospiza melodia	song sparrow
Zonotrichia leucophrys	white-crowned sparrow
Cardinalidae	**Cardinals**
Guiraca caerulea	blue grosbeak
Passerina amoena	lazuli bunting
Icteridae	**Blackbirds**
Sturnella neglecta	western meadowlark
Molothrus ater	brown-headed cowbird
Icterus bullockii	Bullock's oriole
Icterus cucullatus	hooded oriole
Fringillidae	**Finches**
Carpodacus mexicanus	house finch
Carduelis psaltria	lesser goldfinch

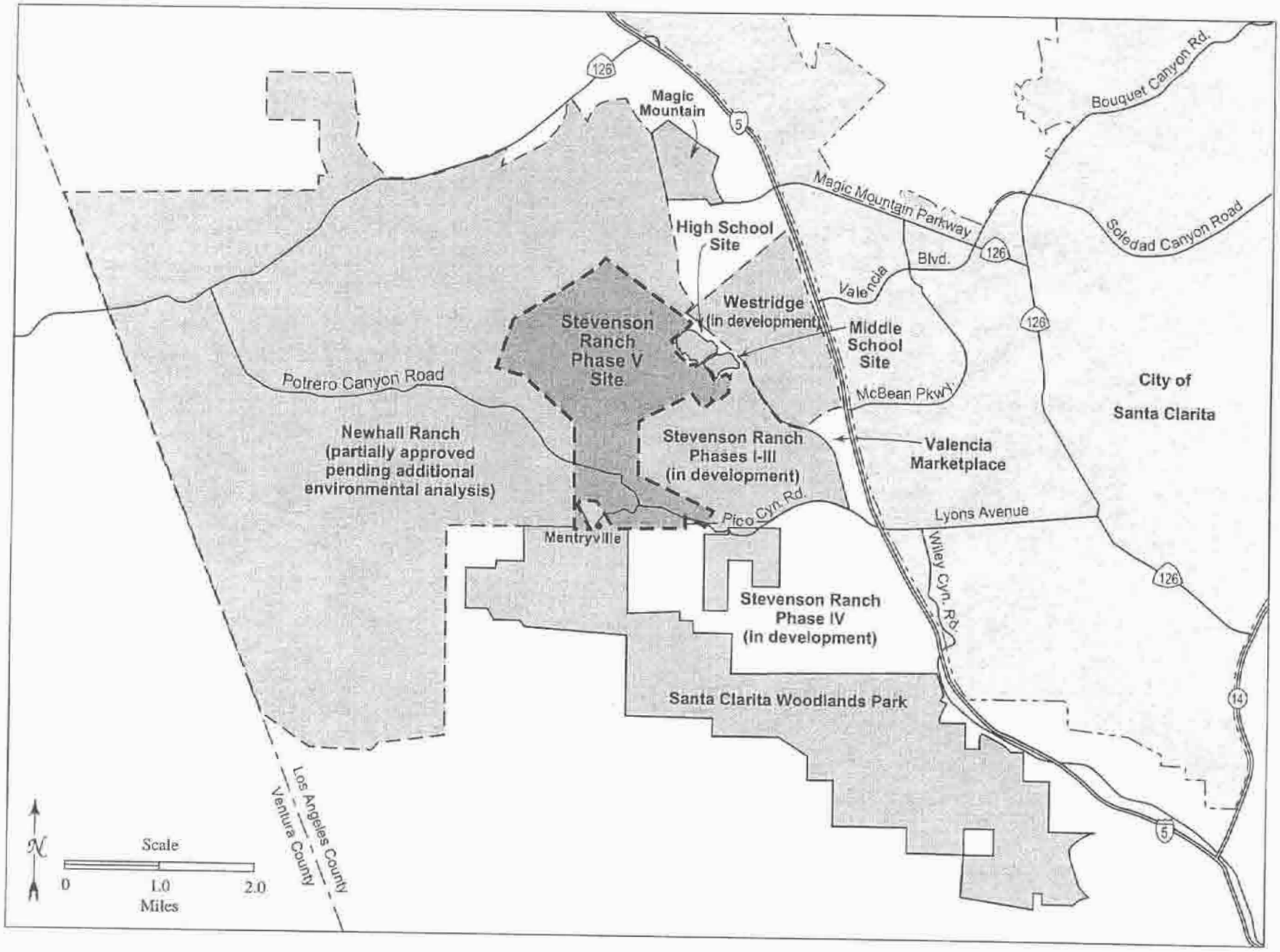


Figure 1. Regional Location Map

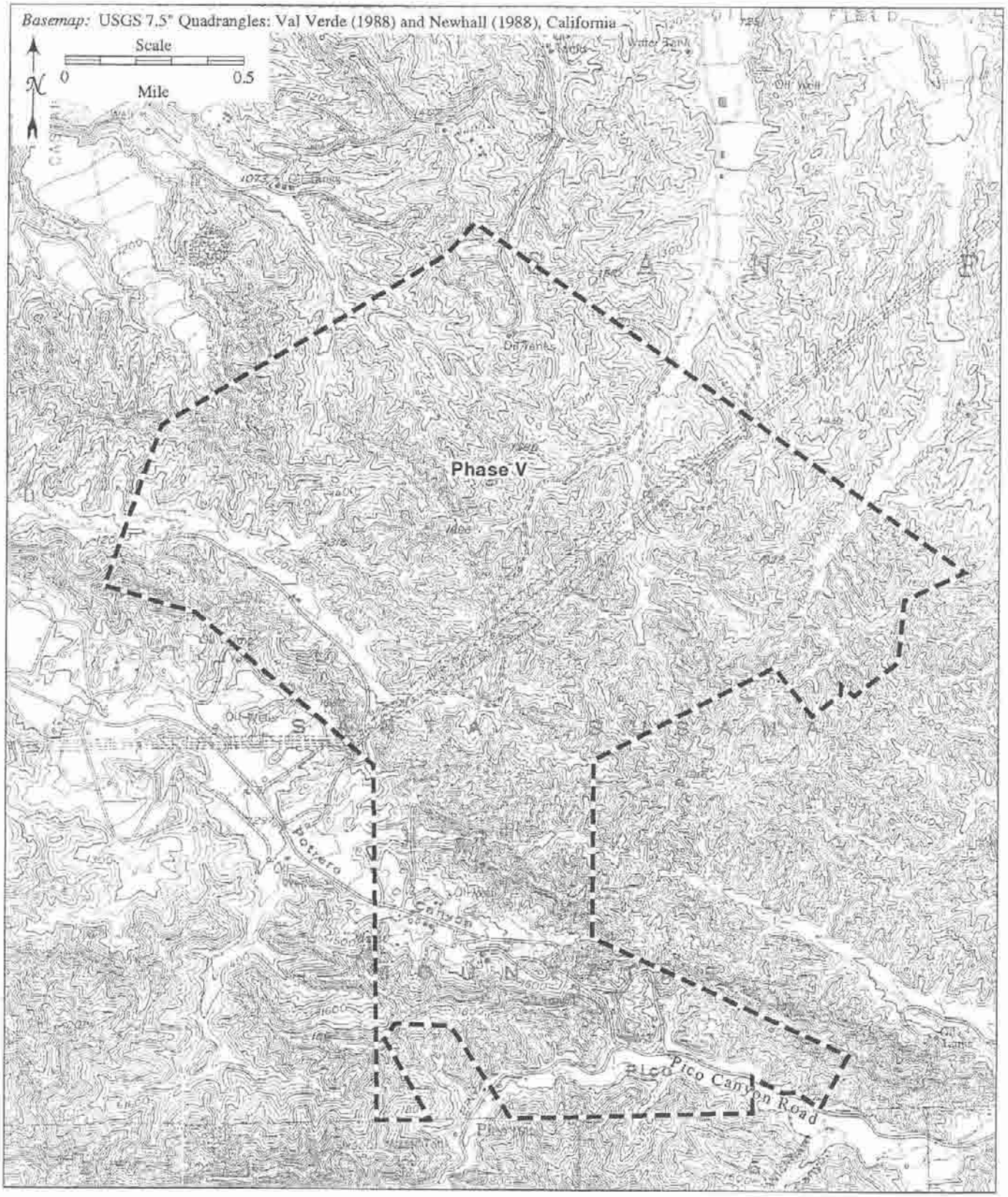
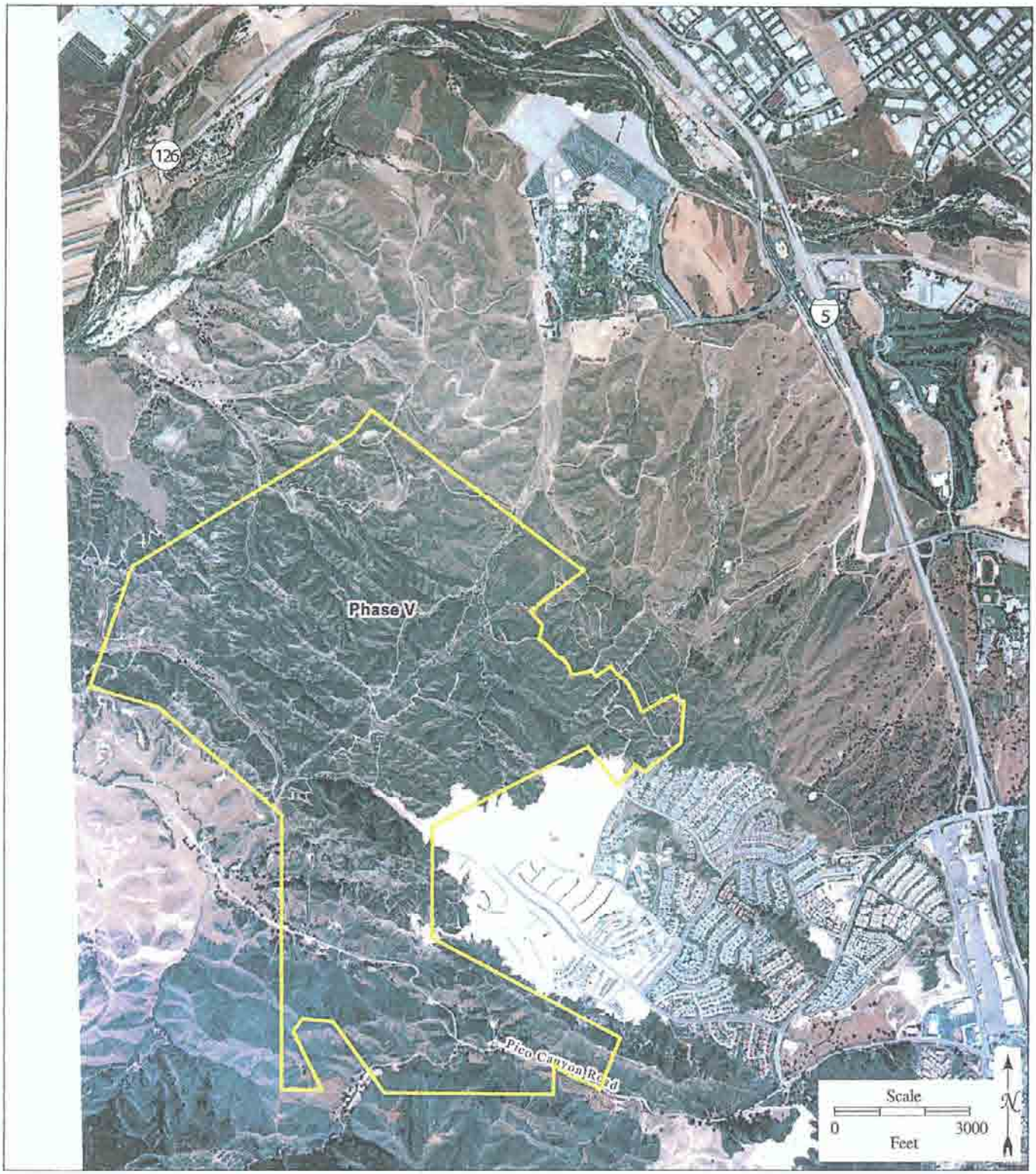


Figure 2. USGS Topographic Map of the Project Site



Date: 1999

Figure 3. Aerial Photograph of the Proposed Site and Vicinity

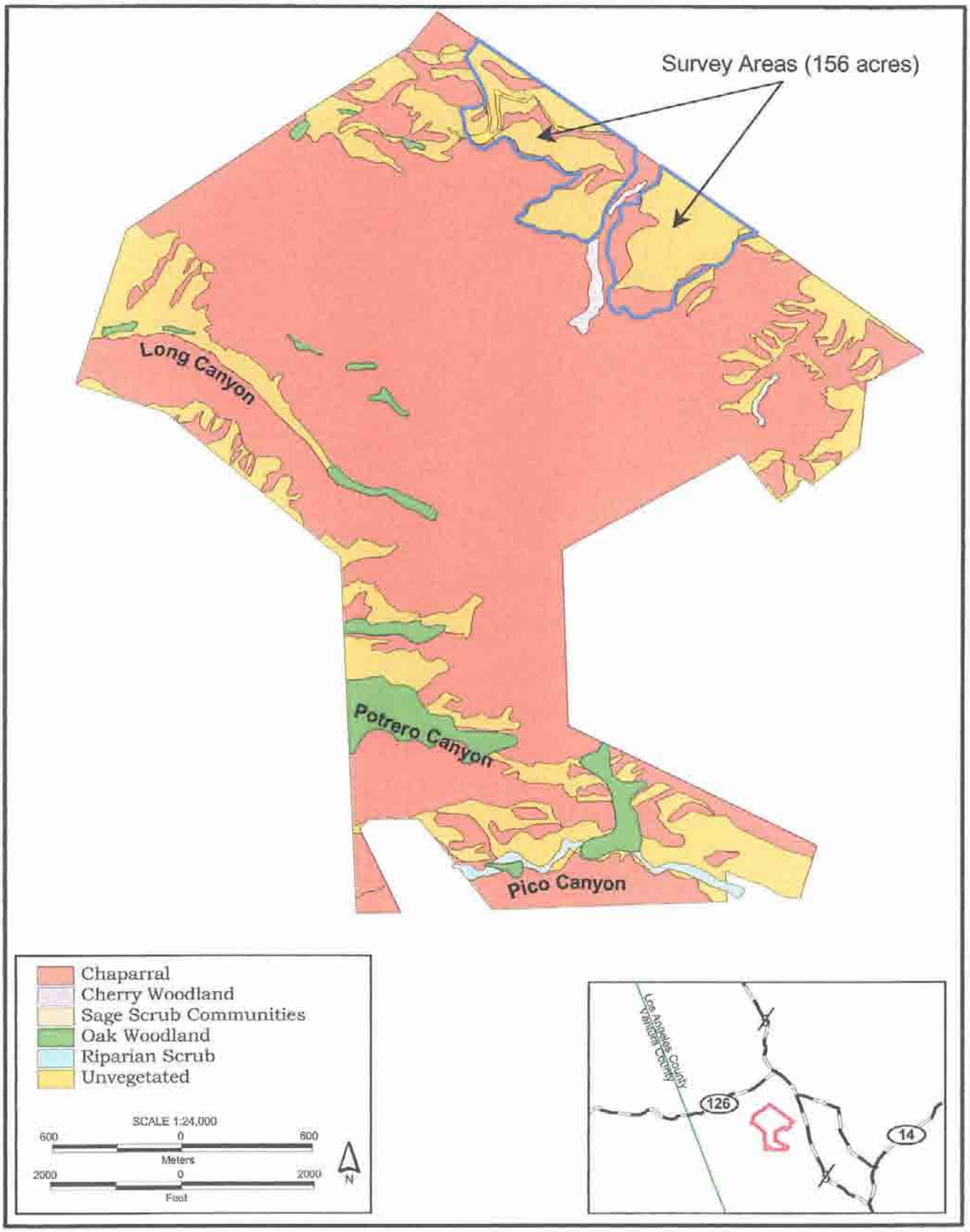


Figure 4. Vegetation Map and Survey Areas