

Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project FAQs

BACKGROUND: The Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project is a long-term, science-based plan to repair damaged habitats at Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve (BWER). The project's objectives focus on restoring wetland and other ecological functions within the reserve, maintaining existing levels of flood risk management provided by the Ballona Creek channel and levee system, and providing public access for compatible recreational and educational opportunities that are currently scarce within BWER. The BWER ecosystem is one of the last remaining opportunities for major coastal habitat restoration in Los Angeles County. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) owns BWER.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) must issue permits for the restoration project, thus CDFW and the Corps collaborated on the environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). CDFW and the Corps issued a Notice of Preparation for a NEPA environmental impact statement (EIS) and CEQA Environmental Impact Report (EIR) during the summer of 2012. In September 2017, the two agencies released a joint draft EIR/EIS for public review and comment. CDFW and the Corps received over 8,000 pieces of correspondence containing nearly 3,000 distinct comments on the draft EIR/EIS.

Due to changes in Corps' policy and procedural guidance, finalization of the EIS is delayed until CDFW submits to the Corps, and the Corps approves more detailed engineering designs; a process that could take approximately two and a half years. Considering the lengthy planning process that has occurred to-date, CDFW separated the EIR from the Corps EIS to avoid an additional extended delay for the certification and publication of its final EIR. Learn more at <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Regions/5/Ballona-FEIR>.

Where is the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve?

BWER is an approximate 600-acre open space in the middle of the Los Angeles County coast and halfway along the Santa Monica Bay coastline. It is bordered by the communities of Westchester, Marina del Rey and Playa Vista, and it is approximately five miles north of the LAX Airport and close to Loyola Marymount University. BWER today is a heavily impacted remnant of a much larger wetland complex that stretched from Venice to the Baldwin Hills.

Why is the restoration important?

More than a century of neglect and abuse by humans has left BWER in a highly degraded state. Approximately 3 million cubic yards of marine sediment was dumped into the wetlands to build Marina del Rey harbor and the Ballona Creek Flood Control Channel, separating the creek from its floodplain. In some places the dirt layer is up to 20 feet thick. The loss of the wetlands' historic connections to creeks and the ocean means that many native species no longer thrive there. Repairing the basic structure and function of BWER will bring back and provide additional habitat for native plants, birds and other wildlife, some of which are imperiled and clinging to existence in the region due to loss of habitat. The project will reconnect the land and the sea, so

freshwater stream flows and tidal waters can both support a healthy ecosystem. Rejuvenating these habitats will allow wetland plants to flourish and attract the insects, reptiles, amphibians, fishes, birds and mammals that call wetlands home. A restored BWER will be a refuge for millions of migratory birds and an important nursery area for coastal fish such as halibut and striped mullet. The restoration project also increases public recreational and educational opportunities, which are described below in *"How can members of the public experience Ballona Wetlands once the restoration is completed."*

How has the public been involved so far in restoration planning?

An extensive planning and public process for the restoration began 14 years ago. In 2006, planning commenced with the selection of a Science Advisory Committee composed of local and regional experts. This included seven Science Advisory Committee meetings between 2006 and 2012, 20 public stakeholder meetings between 2004 and 2009, and over 60 presentations to various groups and the public by The Bay Foundation between 2006 and 2013. In addition, four on-site open house meetings occurred between 2010-2013 and two EIR-specific meetings occurred consisting of a scoping meeting in 2012 and a public comment meeting in 2017. In conjunction with these public process opportunities, the BWER staff at CDFW have continued interaction with neighbors, stakeholders, and other public and private entities including attending at least 15 meetings over the past several years to provide information and respond to questions. Also, extensive baseline data were collected from 2010 to 2015 and more continues to be collected to this day.

How can the public stay involved as the process continues?

As described above in the *"Background"* section, more public process remains. The Corps will require approximately two and a half years to complete a final EIS. CDFW will work with the project's consulting engineers to complete the design of the actual project restoration specifics, advancing the current 30 percent design to 60 percent. During that next design phase, CDFW will explore how this restoration project may be further divided into smaller components (*see next question*). In addition, approvals from the California Coastal Commission, Regional Water Quality Control Board and possibly other agencies will be needed. CDFW anticipates opportunities for public engagement over the course of these processes. CDFW will continue its interactions with neighbors, stakeholders, and other public and private entities to provide information and respond to questions.

Why did CDFW add a phasing commitment to the selection of Alternative 1 as the project?

The EIR analyzed a range of restoration alternatives. CDFW selected the most restorative option ("Alternative 1") but made a commitment to execute the project in phases – which will allow for restoration to begin without having the entire sum of funding in place. By utilizing a phased approach, CDFW will also be able to monitor and evaluate smaller phases of restoration. This phasing allows the restoration to pause, or even halt, and evaluate plant and animal resources to ensure appropriate protective actions and implementation of adaptive management.

Does certification of the EIR approve any development as part of the restoration project?

The only development components of the project in the EIR are related to the creation of a boardwalk, as well as new trails and paths. These will increase public access and educational opportunities, which is described in the question below *“How can members of the public experience Ballona Wetlands once the restoration is completed?”*

While previous discussions of the project included development of a visitor center, there have been no further plans to include a formal Visitor Education Center upon the withdrawal of the Annenberg Foundation's involvement in the project in 2014, and the prospect of a visitor center is not analyzed in the EIR. Formal visitor education infrastructure is now focused on interpretive panels at entrances and trails.

The EIR analyzes the possibility of a parking structure and road behind Culver Blvd., but CDFW's certification of the EIR does not approve building a parking garage or the road. CDFW included this analysis at the request of many local businesses and Los Angeles County Department of Beaches and Harbors. CDFW's decision not to include a parking garage and road as part of the restoration project is responsive to input from local non-governmental organizations that opposed such development.

The EIR also considers SoCalGas' decommissioning of many of their active wells and associated infrastructure that currently exist on BWER. Oil development beneath what is now the reserve, as well as much of West Los Angeles, began in the early 20th Century, which predates CDFW's acquisition of BWER in 2003. Decommissioning old oil wells from BWER will reduce habitat fragmentation and eliminate ongoing disturbances within BWER related to operation and maintenance of the wells. SoCalGas is the current owner of the mineral rights beneath BWER and is moving forward with decommissioning many of their active wells and associated infrastructure. The state will not pay to remove any of this infrastructure, nor any of the permitting costs. Recently, this aspect of the project has been portrayed by some as an effort to support gas development – this is not true.

When will CDFW start restoration?

Certifying the EIR is the first step in the regulatory process. Completing the Corps' permitting process could take an estimated two and a half years. Approvals from the Coastal Commission, Regional Water Quality Control Board, and possibly other agencies are required, and the timing of those approvals is dependent upon the permitting agency's process.

What was here before BWER?

Prior to 1825, the Los Angeles River flowed through the Ballona watershed and into the Ballona Lagoon. Following a period of several years of heavy rains and a series of earthquakes, the Los Angeles River outlet moved to its current location near San Pedro. The migration of the Los Angeles River had a significant impact on the form and function of the historic Ballona Wetlands.

After the Los Angeles River shifted to the south, the Ballona Wetlands became a coastal bar-built estuarine system with extensive tidally affected saltmarsh and brackish habitats that transitioned into a more alkaline/freshwater system approximately 1.5 miles inland from the coast. Without the inflow from the Los Angeles River, the wetlands were often closed to the ocean by a sand berm along the beach, causing perching of water within the lagoon wetlands. During wet weather periods when Ballona Creek stream flow discharge was high enough to overflow or scour a channel to the ocean, the Ballona Creek mouth was open to the ocean and experienced tidal influence until the sand berm reformed across the mouth of the creek.

Why was a freshwater alternative not fully analyzed in the EIR?

A freshwater alternative was considered in some detail but not carried forward for full analysis. Restoring BWER to a freshwater system would not be historically accurate (see *previous question*) and would not restore estuarine and associated habitats, a rare and diminished habitat along the Los Angeles coastline. The restoration project will remove levees to facilitate the present-day flow regime of perennial freshwater flows to enter BWER. In addition, the project proposes to improve the hydrological connection between freshwater and tidal influence.

Are there endangered species on site? What are they? Will they be impacted?

BWER currently supports (breeds onsite) three species listed as state and/or federally threatened or endangered:

1. Belding's savannah sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis beldingi*)

State Endangered. Impacts from the project will be approximately one acre of lost occupied habitat (outside of nesting season) with the goal of adding approximately 70 acres of nesting habitat to the reserve (an approximate 70 percent increase).

2. El Segundo blue butterfly (*Euphilotes battoides allyni*)

Federally Endangered. This species has recently started occupying BWER due to volunteer restoration efforts and its population has been growing. Its current habitat will not be negatively impacted by the project.

3. Least Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*)

State and Federally Endangered. This bird species has recently returned to BWER due to the creation of the riparian corridor across the street at Playa Vista. CDFW is working on a small enhancement/restoration project to expand existing willow habitat in this area. Its current habitat will not be negatively impacted by the project. It is the intention of the larger restoration project to further increase this species' habitat within BWER.

There are additional threatened and/or endangered plant and wildlife species that have once existed, are occasional visitors or have the potential to thrive at BWER. These species include, but are not limited to, the Ventura marsh milk-vetch, California least tern and the coastal California gnatcatcher.

Can't the wetlands heal themselves?

If left uncontrolled, invasive plants will continue to outcompete native plant communities, resulting in lower biodiversity and dramatically reduced benefits to the native plant and animal residents. Roughly half of the vegetated areas of the site are currently invasive plants, and they are spreading every year. For example, black mustard, an invasive species increased its area by 360 percent in only six years!

Additionally, sea level rise and climate change would result in tidal waters being cut off from the remaining struggling wetland habitats by around 2050 and portions of the site and Culver Blvd. will be stagnant, flooded ponds, which also creates a risk for surrounding businesses and residences. Without this restoration, sea level rise will overcome the remaining portions of BWER that have functioning wetlands and flood local roads more frequently, more severely, and much sooner. If there's no restoration, future management of existing tide gates to provide some acclimation to sea level rise would be possible temporarily, but, under current conditions the tide gates eventually would have to be closed permanently to avoid flooding in West Area B and behind Culver Blvd. that would result from projected higher sea levels. As a result, the tidal wetland habitats would be cut off from the estuary and would convert to mudflat or subtidal habitat.

Does the project create climate resiliency and respond to sea level rise?

The project is one of the first in the region to fully consider and plan for sea level rise, and closely aligns with the state's strategies and goals to protect biodiversity in the face of climate change and other stressors. The project advances Governor Newsom's October 7, 2020 [Executive Order](#) focused on harnessing California's vast network of natural and working lands to fight climate change and preserve the state's extraordinary biodiversity. It is also one of the first restoration designs to accommodate sea level rise with gently sloping earthen levees that will allow the restored wetland to migrate upslope as sea level rises, which preserves sensitive habitat for future generations. The project creates climate resiliency because it provides decades of additional buffer from sea level rise for existing roads and nearby homes and businesses.

Will opening up the wetlands to urban runoff negatively impact the wetlands or nearby groundwater supply?

No - restoration would increase tidal flushing and circulation, and reduce the settling of additional runoff coming from the watershed during the dry season in the marsh. This will help, not hurt, the wetlands. Any tidal flows introduced as part of the restoration would not infiltrate into any potable groundwater source.

Where will the fill go after it is removed?

The majority of excavated fill will be used to build the new perimeter levees. Some additional fill could be added over parts of Area C and East Area B and re-contoured as upland restoration. The remainder of fill that cannot be balanced onsite will be moved and stored offsite.

How can members of the public experience Ballona Wetlands once the restoration is completed?

A core goal of the project is to create equitable access and allow visitors the chance to experience healthy wetlands and wildlife in a way that provides both educational experiences and maximizes the opportunities for wildlife to thrive. Specifically, the project will add the following benefits: realigning existing bike trails atop newly constructed levees around much of the BWER perimeter, new pedestrian-only trails, a new boardwalk to allow visitors to walk to adjacent wetlands thereby improving bird viewing, and adding two footbridges and a spur trail for pedestrians to better and more safely access BWER.

The EIR analyzes the addition of approximately 2,000 linear feet of elevated boardwalks to allow visitors to walk adjacent to the wetlands and obtain closer habitat views. This boardwalk is intended to increase visitor enjoyment of the BWER, and to provide a feeling of solitude and educational opportunities. It is also proposed to be positioned to have the least environmental effect possible and could be closed at some locations, at management discretion, during environmentally sensitive times of the year.

Most of BWER is currently closed to the public because of its degraded state. Still, through an environmental education program, nearly 10,000 school children annually connect with nature on a small patch of the reserve restored by Friends of Ballona. Approximately half of those children are from Title 1 schools. This restoration project creates more opportunity to connect with nature and ensures BWER will be one of the largest open spaces available to the public, second to Griffith Park.