SCREENING FORM FOR LOW-EFFECT HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN DETERMINATIONS

I. Project Information

A. Project name: Big Tujunga Dam Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)

B. Affected species: (1) Santa Ana sucker (*Catostomus santaanae*), (2) Santa Ana speckled dace (*Rhinichthys osculus*), (3) arroyo chub (*Gila orcuttii*), (4) arroyo toad (*Anaxyrus californicus*), (5) western pond turtle (*Actinemys marmorata*) (6) least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*), (7) southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) and (8) yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*).

C. Project size (in stream miles and acres): Big Tujunga Creek, from Fall Creek upstream of Big Tujunga Reservoir, downstream to Hansen Dam (approximately 14 miles; 2,234 acres mapped in the HCP study area [includes Maple Canyon sediment placement site])

D. Brief project description including minimization and mitigation plans:

Purpose and Need:

The purpose of Big Tujunga Dam is to protect life and property (including infrastructure) while conserving as much water as possible through flood control and water conservation releases. Ongoing maintenance is necessary to keep the dam functioning. The reservoir capacity and functioning outlet works also allow for enhancement of downstream habitat to benefit aquatic species through increased releases over the non-storm season (i.e., supplemental releases). Dam operation and maintenance may affect Threatened and Endangered species, as well as other special status species, downstream of the dam or upstream of the reservoir.

The HCP would address a spillway modification and ongoing dam operations and maintenance in its entirety (including both storm season and non-storm season operations) and would provide the basis for issuing an incidental take permit (ITP) to Los Angeles County Public Works (Public Works) and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), in accordance with section 10(a)(1)(B) of the Endangered Species Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*). Permit issuance would address the potential take of Santa Ana sucker, Santa Ana speckled dace, arroyo chub, arroyo toad, western pond turtle, least Bell's vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, and western yellow-billed cuckoo through ongoing operation and maintenance activities and during construction of the spillway modification project.

Project Description:

Big Tujunga Dam has an 82.3-square-mile tributary drainage area. The design capacity of the reservoir behind the dam is 6,240 acre-feet (af). Public Works, on behalf of the Los Angeles County Flood Control District (LACFCD), currently operates Big Tujunga Dam in accordance with the guidelines based on nearly a century of operational experience. A majority of flood control releases are made during the storm season (October 15 to April 15); however, water conservation releases may also be made during the storm season to recharge the groundwater basins. The purpose of flood control operations is to protect life and property (including downstream Tujunga Wash infrastructure) by attenuating potentially destructive storm flows. Decisions about flood control releases are made based upon available reservoir capacity and inflows to the dam. During the non-storm season (April 16 to October 14), a majority of releases are for water conservation purposes; however, flood control operations may occur in association with storm events during this period. The amount of water available for water conservation releases typically depends on the amount of rainfall that occurs during the storm season. Generally, water conservation releases are made in coordination with the availability of downstream spreading grounds to make sure the water is captured and allowed to percolate into local aquifers rather than traveling all the way to the

ocean. Water conservation operations are typically more flexible than flood control operations because they normally occur when no significant storms are forecast and there is a minimal chance that the reservoir capacity will be exceeded, which allows for the timing and rate of release to be adjusted. Conversely, flood control releases generally occur prior to, during, or shortly after a storm event, where the timing and rate of releases are determined based on attenuating flows and providing flood protection. Typically, an average of 4,000 af of storm water flows into and passes through the dam each year based on average daily inflows and outlfows at the dam. The HCP would also include biological monitoring and funding for habitat enhancement projects.

The project also includes maintenance activities that have been occurring since construction of the dam in the 1930s, including inspections and testing, regular small-scale maintenance, and large-scale maintenance activities. Regular small-scale maintenance includes boat launch maintenance; trash booming and removal; repair or repainting of trash racks and penstocks; repair, replacement, or installation of instrumentation and gages; repair of gunite and erosion protection measures; repair of downstream stream gages and channels; access road maintenance; and geotechnical exploration. Large-scale maintenance activities include sediment removal, subsurface grouting, and concrete repair.

Most of the small-scale maintenance activities result in no physical disturbance to areas outside the existing structure and disturbed areas. However, repair of gunite and existing erosion protection measures, downstream stream gages and stream channel, and access road maintenance would result in up to 3.53 acres of permanent impacts and 14.65 acres of temporary impacts to sage scrub, chaparral, and grassland habitats and 2.69 acres of temporary impacts to riparian forest habitat. The large-scale maintenance activities would result in 23.32 acres of permanent impacts to sage scrub, chaparral, grassland and woodland habitat and 6.54 acres of temporary impacts to chaparral, grassland, and riparian habitat. The primary area of permanent impacts would occur at the Maple Canyon Sediment Placement Site. Maple Canyon Sediment Placement Site is an existing sediment placement site that would be cleared of vegetation for placement of additional sediment, but then revegetated. Sediment removal would also involve up to 400 truck trips per workday from the dam area to the sediment placement site, which would occur from about mid-April to mid-October. An administrative road that is open only to Public Works and the U.S. Forest Service is available for travel between the dam and sediment placement site, the distance between the areas is 2.4 miles, and the activity occurs within the Angeles National Forest and not near any residential areas. For the sediment removal project, Public Works will implement measures to reduce or eliminate potential impacts to scenic resources and air quality (Psomas 2021, in prep.)[1], including watering, covering of trucks, and speed limits to control fugitive dust; emission standards; minimizing stockpiling; and removal of the most visible stockpiles first.

Permit Duration: 30 years

The lands covered under the HCP: The HCP study area extends from Fall Creek (upstream of the Reservoir) downstream to Hansen Dam. The action area extends from approximately 2,400 feet upstream of the reservoir downstream along Big Tujunga Creek to the inflow to Hansen Dam; it also includes Maple Canyon sediment placement site.

Species occupation and baseline: Arroyo toad occurs along Big Tujunga Creek upstream of the Reservoir, Santa Ana sucker, Santa Ana speckled dace, and arroyo chub occur along Big Tujunga Creek downstream of the Dam; Santa Ana sucker critical habitat is located downstream of the Dam. Least Bell's vireo currently occurs along Big Tujunga Creek upstream of the Reservoir and along Big Tujunga Creek between Big Tujunga Dam and Hansen Dam. Western pond turtle is known to occur along Big Tujunga Creek both upstream and downstream of the Reservoir and within the Reservoir. Southwestern willow flycatcher and western yellow-billed cuckoo are not currently known to occur in the HCP study area;

[1]Psomas. 2021. Final Draft Revised and Recirculated Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration. Big Tujunga Reservoir Restoration Project. 270 pp.

however, there is suitable habitat for these species in the HCP study area. Southwestern willow flycatcher critical habitat is designated at Hansen Reservoir.

Goals and objectives for covered species:

- Biological Goal 1: Facilitate water releases that are not detrimental to conserving existing covered species occurrences in the action area and that would support an increase in the number of covered species individuals and/or an increase in the distribution of covered species in the action area.

- Biological Goal 2: While providing flood protection and water conservation pursuant to LACFCD's mission, maintain natural stream dynamics (hydrological and sediment transport processes) to the extent reasonably possible downstream of Big Tujunga Dam. Natural stream dynamics would support a mosaic of riparian and riverine habitats (i.e., various successional stages) that would provide habitat value for multiple covered species.

- Biological Goal 3: Avoid and minimize impacts on covered species in the Action Area during maintenance projects.

Land and benefiting management activities (including avoidance, minimization and mitigation measures):

<u>Operation</u>

- Dam releases for the purpose of flood control shall primarily occur during the storm season from October 15 to April 15; however, flood control releases may be conducted at other times of year due to rain events that occur outside the storm season. Based on existing operational guidelines, flood control releases shall be conducted so that outflow is comparable to inflow except where limited by downstream constraints such as the Oro Vista Avenue crossing (currently 500 cubic feet per-second (cfs)). Flood control releases shall not be ramped.

- Dam releases for the purposes of water conservation shall primarily occur during the non-storm season (April 16 to October 14); however, they may be conducted at any time of year based on the ability of the downstream spreading grounds to accommodate groundwater recharge. During the Santa Ana sucker breeding season (March 1 to July 31), non-flood control releases (e.g., water conservation, valve testing, etc.) shall not exceed 250 cfs. Non-flood control operations, other than valve tests, shall "ramp" releases (2) (i.e., step-wise increases and decreases); the maximum step-wise increase/decrease during ramping shall be 100 cfs over four hours.

- When sufficient water is available at the end of the storm season from storage of residual flows, supplemental releases totaling 1,500 af per year shall be made over the course of the non-storm season (i.e., April 16 to October 14) to enhance downstream aquatic habitat (3) The specific timing of the supplemental releases will be determined in consultation with the HCP working group. If the HCP working group cannot come to a consensus, the specific timing will be determined by the USFWS, Public Works, and LADWP. The releases shall be additional to natural recession inflows and normal dam seepage. Releases shall be made either in the form of sustained flows or as pulsed flows, as determined through adaptive management discussions with the HCP working group. During normal to wet years, a minimum of 1,500 af shall be released over the non-storm season. During dry years when water supplies are limited, water shall be managed to provide for the supplemental releases to benefit the Santa Ana sucker during the summer months rather than releasing water earlier in the spring for water conservation; a

[2] If additional analysis determines that it would be better for downstream habitat not to ramp the flows, the operational guidelines would be adjusted through the Adaptive Management process that will be included in this HCP (see Section 7.3).

[3] If additional analysis determines that it would be better for downstream habitat not to conduct supplemental releases, the operational guidelines would be adjusted through the Adaptive Management process that will be included in this HCP (see Section 7.3).

minimum of 361 to 1,083 af shall be released over the non-storm season (or as long as water is available).

- LACFCD (Public Works) shall monitor covered species populations and aquatic and riparian habitat quality as determined through consultation with the HCP working group (i.e., methods and frequency of monitoring). Results of monitoring shall be used to adjust conservation measures and/or recommend habitat enhancement measures. Adaptive management shall be used to adjust conservation measures (within standard Public Works operational parameters) or monitoring (within the HCP budget), as necessary, to achieve the HCP's biological goals.

- LACFCD (Public Works) shall establish an annual budget to carry out potential habitat enhancement measures recommended by the HCP Working Group.

- LACFCD (Public Works) and LADWP shall meet with the USFWS at least once per year to discuss implementation of the HCP.

II. Does the HCP fit the following Department of Interior and Fish and Wildlife Service categorical exclusion criteria?

A. Are the effects of the HCP minor or negligible on federally listed, proposed, or candidate species and their habitats covered under the HCP?

Yes, it is expected that with implementation of avoidance and minimization measures, direct take would be avoided (or minimized) for covered species. The HCP concluded that plan implementation may result in some take (loss) of covered fish fry that may be washed downstream during water conservation releases; however, not all young of the year will be affected. Avoidance and minimization measures are already implemented during operations based on past consultations. Similarly, avoidance and minimization measures are already implemented for infrequent long-term large-scale maintenance projects based on CEQA documentation requirements.

The spillway improvement project would increase the storage capacity behind the dam while maintaining the existing combined spillway capacity. The spillway improvement project would raise the height of the crest of the dam's right abutment spillway by 8 feet to an elevation of 2,298 feet. This modification would increase the reservoir pool area from approximately 86 acres to approximately 93 acres, which would increase the storage capacity of the reservoir by an additional 719 af. It is anticipated that the additional capacity would be utilized only about once every ten years (during ten-year storm events) and would inundate the additional area for approximately two to four weeks. Between ten-year storm events, the reservoir footprint would not increase, and the spillway modifications would not change daily operation of the dam. The inundation would most likely occur outside the active period for arroyo toad and the breeding season for covered riparian birds. The change in reservoir footprint would have no effect on the western pond turtle, which could use inundated reservoir or stream habitat. The inundation would not affect covered fish, which only occur downstream of the dam. The spillway improvement project would allow the holding of additional water and minor additional attenuation of inflows above 3,000 cfs (i.e., 25-year floods). However, it would not change the flow rate below the dam for inflows from 500-3,000 cfs, which would continue to be released at a maximum of 500 cfs. In addition, the minor additional storage would not change the frequency of flooding above the spillway, which would still occur about every 25 years. Due to the minor change to downstream flows from the spillway improvement project, impacts to downstream covered fish will be minor or negligible.

Overall, the HCP monitoring, habitat enhancement projects, and adaptive management along with the HCP's avoidance and minimization measures are expected to benefit covered species.

B. Are the effects of the HCP minor or negligible on all other components of the human environment, including environmental values and environmental resources (e.g. air quality, geology and soils, water quality and quantity, socio-economic, cultural resources,

recreation, visual resources, environmental justice, etc.), after implementation of the minimization and mitigation measures?

Yes, Public Works proposes to continue existing operation and maintenance activities. Thus, there would be little to no change from existing activities. Therefore, the effects of ongoing operations and maintenance would be minor or negligible. Also, based on observed impacts from ongoing operation and maintenance activities, which have been occurring since the 1930s, most maintenance activities would involve no physical disturbance outside the existing dam structure or disturbed areas, and potential effects from larger scale maintenance activities would be avoided or effectively mitigated, as described above.

C. Would the incremental impacts of this HCP, considered together with the impacts of other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions (regardless of what agency or person undertakes such other actions) not result, over time, in a cumulative effects to the human environment (the natural and physical environment) which would be considered significant?

Cumulative projects under consideration may include additional construction or maintenance activities (e.g., road improvements to the Angeles Crest Highway [State Route 2], Big Tujunga Canyon Road, and various other roads throughout this portion of the Angeles National Forest) occurring in the vicinity of Big Tujunga Dam. Southern California Edison's Tehachapi Renewable Transmission Project has already completed constructed through the Angeles National Forest. No other projects upstream of the dam along Big Tujunga Creek have occurred since the previous sediment removal project in the mid-1990s. Because of its location in the Angeles National Forest, limited projects are expected in the vicinity of the dam. In addition, the Angeles National Forest has prepared a land management plan that incorporates avoidance and minimization measures for listed species. Therefore, implementation of the HCP is not expected to result in cumulative effects to environmental resources that would be considered significant.

III. Do any of the exceptions to categorical exclusions (extraordinary circumstances) listed in 43 CFR 46.215 apply to this HCP?

Would implementation of the HCP:

A. Have significant adverse effects on public health or safety?

No, implementation of the HCP would ensure operation and maintenance of the dam, the purpose of which is to protect public health and safety.

B. Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as: historic or cultural resources; park, recreation, or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands (Executive Order 11990) or floodplains (Executive Order 11988); national monuments; migratory birds, eagles, or other ecologically significant or critical resources?

No, ongoing operations and maintenance would not affect unique geographic features or cultural resources in the HCP area and no new development is planned. While sediment removal would include excavation, the disturbance would be to surficial sediments that have been previously disturbed. The project would not excavate to a depth that could likely encounter paleontological resources. Recreation would not be affected by ongoing operation and maintenance (including sediment removal). There are no designated refuges, wilderness areas, or wild and scenic rivers located in the plan area. Continued operation and maintenance of the dam would ensure that water is conserved by moving water in a way to maximize groundwater recharge at the spreading grounds along Big Tujunga Creek downstream of the dam, which would benefit the region's drinking water aquifers. There are no prime farmlands in the plan area. The project would affect "waters of the U.S.," but not wetlands as defined by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). These effects would be negligible as they would be temporary; they would be

limited to the smallest footprint possible to allow maintenance activities; and they would not occur every year. Floodplains would not be affected by ongoing operation and maintenance since these activities do not involve new construction in floodplains. The sediment removal footprint in the reservoir has been reduced to avoid direct impacts to arroyo toad designated critical habitat. Sediment removal would occur in the plunge pool, which is mapped as Santa Ana sucker designated critical habitat; however, Santa Ana sucker are not expected to occur in the plunge pool and have not been found there during focused surveys. Santa Ana sucker occur just downstream of the plunge pool in Big Tujunga Wash, which is outside of the sediment removal disturbance footprint. The only other effects of the HCP on critical habitat would be continued management of flows according to existing operations and need to conduct maintenance activities. There are no resources listed on the Natural Register of Natural Landmarks located in the HCP area that would be affected by continued operation and maintenance.

C. Have highly controversial environmental effects (defined at 43 CFR 46.30), or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources [see NEPA section 102(2)(E)]?

No, the proposed HCP includes ongoing operations and maintenance activities, which have occurred since construction of Big Tujunga Dam in the 1930s. The proposed HCP also includes a Spillway Improvement Project, which is expected to have minor or negligible effects. In addition, the HCP includes monitoring, an adaptive management process for future water releases, and other habitat enhancement to conserve and recover covered species.

D. Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks?

No, operations and maintenance activities have occurred since construction of the dam in the 1930s and are proposed to remain within historical baseline operations, which include previous activities to remove accumulated sediment. As a consequence, the environmental effects of these activities are largely known. In addition, dam operations have been coordinated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and U.S. Forest Service, and detailed monitoring has occurred since 2009. If further monitoring indicates that the HCP is not meeting its biological goals or objectives, changes will be made through the adaptive management process. These changes could include modifying the habitat enhancement and monitoring efforts and alteration of the timing and magnitude of the supplemental releases.

E. Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects?

No, Public Works would continue existing operation and maintenance and would implement standard avoidance and minimization measures already being used to protect covered species.

F. Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects?

No, the cumulative list of projects is limited (see response in section II.C.).

G. Have significant impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing, on the National Register of Historic Places?

No, the dam itself is considered eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places; operation and maintenance would not affect the dam structure. Maintenance would maintain the integrity of the dam structure. The spillway improvement project would not be expected to significantly impact the dam structure with regard to its eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

H. Have adverse effects on listed or proposed species, or have adverse effects on designated critical habitat for these species? Consider the degree or amount of take and the impact of the take on the species. Although take may occur under project implementation, it may be so minor as to result in negligible effects. The same concept applies when considering effects to critical habitat.

No, the amount of take anticipated is limited and would be considered minor or negligible. Overall, HCP implementation would enhance habitat for listed species through implementation of conservation measures. Covered activities include continuing existing operations and maintenance (including sediment removal). The spillway improvement project would occur on the developed structure.

I. Violate a Federal law, or a State, local, or tribal law, or a requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.

No, the HCP would not violate federal, State, local, or tribal laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Public Works will obtain all required permits (e.g., California Department of Fish and Wildlife Streambed Alteration Agreement, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Section 404 Permit, Regional Water Quality Control Board Section 401 Water Quality Certification) before implementing infrequent short-term small-scale or infrequent long-term large-scale maintenance projects and the Spillway Improvement Project.

J. Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations (Executive Order 12898).

No, there will be no impact on low income or minority populations in the area due to implementation of the HCP.

K. Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites (Executive Order 13007).

No, there will not be limitations on access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on the Angeles National Forest or adverse impacts to sacred sites due to implementation of the HCP.

L. Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species (Federal Noxious Weed Control Act and Executive Order 13112).

No, there are currently several non-native species that occur along Big Tujunga Creek. However, maintenance projects would utilize measures to prevent the spread of invasive weeds and remove non-native plants and wildlife during pre-construction surveys. Additionally, habitat enhancement projects may include removal of non-native plants or wildlife. Therefore, the covered activities will not contribute to the continued existence of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species in the permit area.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT

Based on the analysis above, the Big Tujunga Dam HCP qualifies for a categorical exclusion as defined in the USFWS *Habitat Conservation Planning Handbook.* Therefore, this action is categorically excluded from further NEPA documentation as provided by 516 DM 2, Appendix 1 and 516 DM 6, Appendix 1.

Other supporting documents [list]: Habitat Conservation Plan

Concurrence:

_____	_____
Assistant Field Supervisor	Date
_____	_____
Field Supervisor	Date