

Los Angeles River Flows Project

Frequently Asked Questions

Background

As municipalities and other agencies pursue changes to their water use and reuse practices to conserve more water, it is important to recognize the role of this water and the potential ecological and recreational effects of diverting treated wastewater effluent and runoff from local river systems. The State Water Resources Control Board and the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, in cooperation with local municipalities (including City of LA Bureau of Sanitation, City of LA Department of Water and Power, LA County Department of Public Works, and LA County Sanitation Districts), have initiated the **Los Angeles River Flows Project (Project)** to evaluate the effects of potential flow reductions on ecological and recreational uses along the Los Angeles River (LA River). The Project, conducted by the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP), the Colorado School of Mines, and the Council for Watershed Health, will provide a science-based approach for assessing flows necessary to sustain beneficial uses. This Project may also serve as a model for assessing similar situations in other river systems that have beneficial uses which rely on effluent flows. The technical work for this Project was initiated in 2018 and is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2020.

What is the purpose of this Project?

The purpose of the Project is to provide a technical evaluation of alternative flow reduction scenarios for the LA River. This Project will support the State Water Board's decision-making under Water Code Section 1211, which considers changes in wastewater utilities' discharge of treated wastewater to streams and rivers.

Is this Project about increasing uses or increasing flow?

This Project is not an attempt to define a set of future uses or specific flow criteria for the LA River. The overall Project question is about how reductions in flow may affect existing or potential future beneficial uses (such as supporting habitat or animals, kayaking, fishing, or other recreational activities), and how they may impact water quality and temperatures. The evaluation is based on a comparison of existing conditions to potential future conditions under various

proposed flow reduction scenarios due to wastewater reuse and stormwater capture.

What area is included in the Project?

The Project includes the mainstem of the LA River (from the DC Tillman treatment plant to the Ocean), plus two LA River tributaries (Rio Hondo and Compton Creeks). The Project focuses solely on areas within the River (i.e., between the banks).

Does this Project include the upper tributaries of the LA River?

The Project's goal is to evaluate ecological and recreational effects in the mainstem of the LA River below existing discharge points. Though the upper tributaries are not included in the Project's results, the upper tributaries of the LA River are included in the Project's hydrologic modeling to more accurately characterize the watershed. The models produced could be used in the upper reaches to support future studies. Additionally, restoration in portions of the upper tributaries will be evaluated as possible offsets to potential impacts along the mainstem of the river.

How is habitat being evaluated?

Six key habitat types that occur along the LA River will be considered (Figure 1: Los Angeles River Watershed habitat types). For each habitat, the Project will focus on representative species that bound the range of flow and temperature tolerances associated with the major habitat types in the LA River. Species were selected as part of a discussion with the Project's technical and stakeholder advisory committees.

Does this Project consider restoration of species or habitats that do not currently occur in the LA River?

This Project considers restoration potential to a limited extent. For example, the technical committee decided to include steelhead as an indicator species for migratory potential, to better understand potential for future restoration. This project is not promoting reintroduction of steelhead or other coldwater fish, as there are other factors (such as substrate) that may limit the potential to support



these species. However, including these parameters helps us better understand how changes to water reclamation plant (WRP) discharges influence flow conditions connected with cold freshwater, migratory, and other existing or potential beneficial uses.

Are fish passage barriers considered in the model?

Yes, the Project is considering fish passage barriers in the models. Though it is not the focus of the modeling, it can be used to inform future studies.

Is water quality included in the Project?

Yes, water quality parameters that have a direct relationship to species, habitats, and recreational uses are included. These include temperature, pH, salinity, and some basic contaminants. Bacteria and nutrients are not currently included in the Project.

What recreational uses are included in the Project?

A recreational use survey was conducted that identified key uses that occur in different portions of the LA River. These include kayaking, fishing, bird watching, walking, and other recreational uses. Additional information will be sought out from subject matter experts to identify the critical flows necessary to support recreational uses, as well as potential impacts to water quality.

Is climate change being considered in the Project?

The Project is focused on potential reductions in flow associated with wastewater reuse or stormwater capture over the next 20 years. During that period of time, and given the highly managed nature of the LA River, it is expected that climate change will have a minimal effect on the uses in the river.

How does this Project relate to the California Environmental Flows Framework?

This Project uses the approach and tools being developed by the California Environmental Flows Framework (CEFF). CEFF is a multi-tiered management framework that provides tools and guidance for developing environmental flow recommendations. The functional flows framework used in CEFF is being applied to the LA River. The results of this Project will inform the work of CEFF. For more information on this effort, please go to <https://ceff.ucdavis.edu/> and

<https://caltrout.org/article/the-california-environmental-flows-framework>.

How is the Project handling groundwater upwelling?

There is groundwater upwelling in Glendale Narrows (averaging 3,000 acre feet/year) and is relatively evenly distributed across the year. Though this project includes groundwater upwelling data as a water source, groundwater management is not within the project scope. Consequently, we have assumed in the models that the volume of groundwater upwelling remains constant through all scenarios. Some management scenarios may show an increased proportion of groundwater contribution if a WRP discharge decreases, but the volume of groundwater discharge would stay the same. This Project is not intended to alter water rights associated with groundwater.

Additional Resources

More information on this Project can be found on the Los Angeles River Flows webpage at:

- https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/larflows.html
- <https://www.sccwrp.org/about/research-areas/ecohydrology/los-angeles-river-flows-project/>



Figure 1 Los Angeles River Watershed habitat types

