U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation
Albuquerque Area Office
Albuquerque, New Mexico

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority
Southwestern Willow Flycatcher Habitat Restoration Project

Manager, Environment Division — Date 3/1/12

Area Manager, Albuquerque, New Mexico — Date 3/1/12

FONSI Number: AAO-12-001

Summary of the Proposed Action

The Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority (ABCWUA) plans to restore habitat for the benefit of the southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*; flycatcher) on a 20-acre section of the Middle Rio Grande (MRG) in Bernalillo County, New Mexico (Figure 1.1). Habitat restoration would entail creating an approximately 10-acre swale that would be dominated by willow (*Salix* sp.). An additional approximately 10-acre buffer area would be planted with native riparian shrubs typical of the surrounding floodplain. The site is on lands that are owned by the City of Albuquerque (City) and managed by the City of Albuquerque Open Space Division (Open Space). The ABCWUA has assembled a project team that includes SWCA Environmental Consultants (SWCA) and Open Space to implement the project (the Proposed Action). The project, when implemented, would contribute to the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Collaborative Program (Collaborative Program) goal of meeting the habitat restoration requirements as stated in Element S of the Reasonable and Prudent Alternatives (RPA) in the March 2003 Biological Opinion (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS] 2003).

The project is anticipated to be implemented between March 1, 2012, and April 15, 2012. Funding for this project comes from the Collaborative Program via the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation). If all of the work constructing the swales or planting is not completed during this period, construction will resume after August 15, 2012, as needed.

Background

The Albuquerque Reach of the Rio Grande is a predominantly sand-bedded channel that has experienced significant channel degradation since the closure of Cochiti Dam. Flood control activities have caused the river to be significantly channelized. The reduced magnitude of peak flows and the presence of non-native phreatophytes have resulted in stabilization of the river planform and disconnection of the channel from its historical floodplain (Mussetter Engineering, Inc. [MEI] 2008). Channel degradation has resulted in a reduced frequency and duration of inundation of bosque lands outside the floodway and the bank-attached and mid-channel bars within the floodway.

The project reach is characterized in *Albuquerque Reach Habitat Analysis and Recommendations Study* (Albuquerque A&R) (SWCA 2010) as having moderate potential for persistent standing water or saturated soils and a high potential to develop dense stands dominated by willow for the benefit of the flycatcher. Groundwater depths may be suitable for supporting native willow vegetation, especially closer to the river channel. However, overbank inundation in this reach, as indicated by FLO-2D modeling, is unlikely to occur at discharges less than 6,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) (SWCA 2010). Therefore, creating suitable flycatcher breeding habitat, which consists of dense willow near standing water, will require using well established restoration techniques such as constructing willow swales, and active vegetative management.

Environmental Impacts and Commitments

The following resources were evaluated in detail in the EA: geomorphology and soils, hydrology, water quality, cultural resources and traditional cultural properties, vegetation and wetland resources, fish and

wildlife, threatened, endangered and special-status species, socioeconomics, visual and aesthetic resources, air quality and noise, net water depletions, environmental justice, and Indian Trust Assets.

Geomorphology and Soils

Under the Proposed Action, approximately 9 acres (3.6 ha) of vegetated wetland swales would be created resulting in a very minor and localized alteration to the floodplain. The created habitat would not affect the river bank and therefore would not change the local geomorphology.

Hydrology

Under the Proposed Action, a small amount of water could seep into the swales, or in the extreme case of overbank flooding (discharges much greater than 6000 cfs), river water would spill onto the floodplain into the created swales. Based on the depth of the swales, a maximum of 9 – 10 acre-feet of water would be stored in the swales resulting from seepage during spring runoff2, an insignificant amount that is not expected to significantly alter the hydrologic conditions of the river on a broader scale.

Water Quality

The Proposed Action would not result in any negative changes to water quality where it currently meets applicable standards for physical constituents, such as surface water temperature, pH, turbidity, DO, SSED, conductivity/TDS, and fecal coliform.

Cultural Resources and Traditional Cultural Properties

No archaeological sites were found during the survey of the proposed project area. However, Reclamation requested that jetty jacks (placed both parallel and perpendicular to the Rio Grande by the USACE throughout the Middle Rio Grande valley in the early 1950s through the 1960s) be designated as isolated features. Under the Proposed Action, jetty jacks within the project area may be disturbed or removed during construction; however the disturbed jetty jack lines would be anchored with a deadman before the project ends to maintain functionality for the remaining jetty jacks. No further management of these isolated features is recommended.

Vegetation and Wetland Resources

Under the Proposed Action, native and non-native vegetation would be disturbed by mechanical means during the implementation of the restoration techniques. However, native riparian plant species would be replanted or established that will reduce invasion from non-natives. Continued management of the site by the City would ensure success of plantings and reduce potential resprouting and encroachment of invasive species.

The Proposed Action would result in any changes to wetland resources. However, following construction, an increased amount of substrate would have the potential to be inundated and/or saturated for variable time periods, which should lead to a net gain in both the area and function of wetlands. Proposed modification to the river bank would not result in significant changes in flooding patterns in the existing floodplain.

Fish and Wildlife

The Proposed Action may produce short-term negative impacts to wildlife in the immediate area of disturbance due to the removal of existing soils and vegetative cover, but long-term results of construction would be of benefit to native riparian wildlife. The construction period is outside the normal breeding season for the flycatcher and most avian species, however if work is planned within the breeding season, surveys would be conducted to determine the presence of any breeding birds.

Amphibians, reptiles, and mammals inhabiting the project site may be temporarily displaced to other areas in the floodplain, and there is a chance of direct mortality of individual reptiles and amphibians or eggs associated with construction during the implementation of the Proposed Action. The long-term benefits of a healthier riparian ecosystem that includes aquatic habitat creation would outweigh the minimal mortality that might occur during the disturbance of such a small area.

Threatened, Endangered, and Special-Status Species

The proposed action is not likely to adversely affect any threatened, endangered or otherwise special-status species. Short-term localized potential effects to flycatchers, Bell's vireos, bald eagles, and cuckoos and associated habitat may be incurred during construction, but habitat enhancement resulting from the establishment of young willow and cottonwood stands would provide long-term benefits by creating potential habitat for these species.

Socioeconomics

The Proposed Action is not expected to adversely affect current economic conditions within the county.

Visual and Aesthetic Resources

Under the Proposed Action, the floodplain modifications may be visible to adjacent homeowners along the river edge or to pedestrians using bridges, trails, and the river edge during project construction. Users of the bridges and trails may be in sight of construction activities, but only for the brief time as they cross the area. However, visual and aesthetic impacts of the proposed project would be brief and limited to a small number of users active during the winter months.

Air Quality and Noise

Under the Proposed Action, noise impacts during heavy equipment use would be short-term, and heavy equipment would be used only during normal business hours to minimize noise disturbance. The surrounding riparian vegetation and elevated road (on the west side) would abate some of the noise generated by the equipment. Under the Proposed Action, construction equipment would temporarily generate fumes and air emissions. The level of air emissions is anticipated to be low and in compliance with local and federal air emission standards.

Net Water Depletions

The proposed restoration work would occur in the upland floodplain and would not be connected to the main river channel. Therefore, no depletion offsets are required.

Environmental Justice

The Proposed Action is in compliance with Executive Order 12898 (FR 1994b), Environmental Justice in Minority and Low-Income Populations.

Indian Trust Assets

No ITAs have been identified within or adjacent to the project area; therefore, no impacts are anticipated from the No Action Alternative or the Proposed Action.

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts are defined as the impacts that result from the incremental impact of an action when added to other spat, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, regardless of what agency or person undertakes such other action. Cumulative impact also can result from individually minor but collectively significant actions taking place or a period of time.

The cumulative effects of the Proposed Action plus the described related projects described in the EA may produce short-term changes in several aspects of the existing hydrology and fluvial geomorphology throughout the Albuquerque Reach.

All treatment and control areas would be monitored for two years to determine the effectiveness of the methods implemented as part of the Proposed Action and the potential hydrologic and geomorphic alterations to the project area. Long-term monitoring (up to 10 years) and adaptive management would be coordinated with the Collaborative Program and incorporate interagency objectives to assess the self-sustaining and successful regenerating ability of restoration treatments.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis presented in the EA, Reclamation finds that there would be no significant impacts associated with the proposed action. Reclamation makes this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Action (NEPA) of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.) and the Council on Environmental Quality implementing regulations (40 CFR 1500). Reclamation has determined that the proposed action does not constitute a major Federal action that would significantly affect the human environment. Therefore, no environmental impact station will be prepared for this proposal.