

SPECIAL AREA MANAGEMENT PLAN (SAMP)

What is the purpose of a SAMP?

The Corps of Engineers, Los Angeles District is conducting a comprehensive aquatic resource plan to achieve a balance between aquatic resource protection and reasonable economic development. SAMPs are designed to be conducted in geographic areas of special sensitivity under intense development pressure. Interagency, public, and stakeholder involvement is an essential part of the SAMP.

There are two main goals of the SAMP process: to establish a watershed-wide aquatic resource reserve program, and to minimize individual and cumulative impacts of future projects in these watersheds. At the end of the SAMP process, there will be areas that will be protected and preserved, as well as areas where future activities would be allowed to occur, provided that they meet specific criteria developed for protection of the watersheds. The SAMP is not a “super permit” and will not accelerate development in the watersheds.

What does the SAMP process consist of?

Under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA), the Corps of Engineers is authorized to regulate discharge of dredge or fill material into waters of the United States. SAMPs are more environmentally sensitive than the traditional project-by-project process; the traditional approach may lead to the cumulative loss of resources over time. The SAMP approach allows the Corps to take into account indirect and cumulative effects on aquatic resources in a way not possible in the project-by-project process. With the SAMP approach, we can analyze potential impacts at the watershed scale in order to identify priority areas for preservation, identify potential restoration areas, and determine the least environmentally damaging locations for proposed projects.

The SAMP consists of identification and characterization of aquatic resources, evaluation of alternatives for proposed impacts to aquatic resources, and identification of an aquatic reserve program within the watersheds. Currently SAMPs are being conducted in Dan Diego Creek, San Juan Creek, and portions of San Mateo Creek Watersheds in Orange County. The planning effort for SAMPs in Orange County began in 1999. The baseline or existing condition studies were fully underway by 2000. The Orange County SAMP is scheduled to occur in three phases taking approximately three years. The Orange County SAMPs have completed Phase I, during which the aquatic resources are identified and characterized. The Corps' Waterways Experiment Station (WES) and the Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory (CRREL), as experts in aquatic resource delineation and wetland functional assessment, have developed a tool to conduct a high precision, planning level delineation (i.e., the identification of aquatic resources) and a landscape level functional assessment (i.e., the characterization

of aquatic resources). This tool was used to assess aquatic resources within one of the largest areas (over 200 square miles). As part of the functional assessment, the Corps assessed the following endpoints: hydrologic integrity, water quality integrity, and habitat integrity. Hydrologic integrity refers to the frequency, magnitude, and location of stream water flow and the interaction of the stream with the floodplains. Water quality integrity refers to the processing of nutrients and sediments within streams. Habitat integrity refers to the quality and quantity of habitat necessary to support functioning riparian systems.

Phase I also includes initiation of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)/Environmental Impact Report (EIR) process for compliance with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Phase I, which consists of the delineation and functional assessment, has been completed for the Orange County SAMPs. A public scoping meeting for the San Juan Creek and portions of San Maeo Creek watersheds was held on May 8, 2001, to solicit public comments on preliminary alternatives and relevant issues that should be considered in the EIS. A scoping meeting for the San Diego Creek is expected to follow shortly. Phase II of the process will include the preparation of the Draft EIS and analysis of project alternatives. Phase III will entail the establishment of an aquatic resource reserve program, as well as Programmatic level permits under Section 404 of the CWA. Future projects may be authorized with the Programmatic level permits if they meet specific criteria designed to avoid and minimize impacts to aquatic resources.

Who is responsible for the SAMP?

The Corps of Engineers is the lead Federal agency for this SAMP, and we are partnering with the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), the lead State agency. Because of our partnership, the inventory of aquatic resources is done to accommodate both Corps and CDFG jurisdictions. In California, the jurisdiction of the CDFG is often larger than that of the Corps. The SAMP process is designed to complement the CDFG's Natural Communities Conservation Planning (NCCP) program, as well as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). The Corps will continue to work with other agencies such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Regional Water Quality Control Board. Thus, the SAMP process is expected to provide better scientific information to improve the decision making process, allow for a comprehensive approach for the management of aquatic resources, provide predictability to the local citizens, and reflect the needs of the communities situated within these watersheds.