

County of Inyo WATER COMMISSION

AGENDA ITEM #8: Consideration of Owens River Water Trail Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR)

ACTION ITEM: Possible recommendation to Inyo County Board of Supervisors to certify CEQA

MEETING DATE: February 6, 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Inyo County Water Commission is asked to review the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) for the Owens River Water Trail (ORWT) Project, prepared pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Acting as the County's designated CEQA review body for Water Department projects, the Commission's role is to evaluate whether the FEIR is adequate for decision-making and to forward a recommendation to the Inyo County Board of Supervisors regarding certification of the FEIR and approval of the project.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Supervisorial District: Fifth

Applicant: Inyo County

Landowner: Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) and Inyo County

Location: Open space along the Lower Owens River between Lone Pine Narrow Gauge Road and State Route 136, including adjacent floodplain areas

Community: Lone Pine / Lower Owens River

Project Area: Approximately 402 acres; 6.1 river miles

Project Manager: Larry Freilich, Mitigation Manager

PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

Inyo County proposes to construct the Owens River Water Trail (ORWT), a non-motorized recreation corridor providing managed public access for kayaks, canoes, stand-up paddleboards, and similar watercraft along approximately 6.1 miles of the Lower Owens River. This segment represents roughly 10 percent of the 62-mile rewatered Lower Owens River.

The project includes development of designated launch and take-out locations, access paths, signage, and associated facilities to allow safe river entry and exit while maintaining unimpeded navigation. In-channel work would remove localized vegetation obstructions to establish a continuous, navigable channel. Construction is anticipated to occur in two phases, with in-channel work preceding construction of access facilities.

The project purpose is to establish a non-motorized water trail consistent with the goals of the Lower Owens River Project (LORP) and the preferred Lower Owens River Draft Recreation Use Plan. Project objectives include providing safe and all-abilities access; offering recreational and educational opportunities; minimizing conflicts with ranching and operational uses; protecting cultural resources in coordination with local Tribes; and providing clear guidance to users through signage and site design.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW PROCESS AND COMMISSION ROLE

Pursuant to Inyo County Code Section 15.12.040(B), for projects carried out, approved, permitted, funded, or processed by the Inyo County Water Department, the Inyo County Water Commission serves as the County's CEQA review body in place of the Planning Commission. In this role, the Water Commission reviews environmental documents prepared under CEQA and forwards recommendations to the Inyo County Board of Supervisors.

For this item, the Water Commission is asked to review the Final Environmental Impact Report for the Owens River Water Trail Project and determine whether the document is adequate for decision-making under CEQA. This review, together with the FEIR, public comments, and responses to comments, forms part of the administrative record relied upon by the Board in making its CEQA determinations. The Commission's role is advisory and does not include certification of the FEIR, adoption of CEQA findings, or project approval, which are actions reserved for the Board of Supervisors as the project-approving authority.

The Commission's recommendation will inform the Board's consideration of the FEIR prior to Board action.

SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

The FEIR evaluates potential impacts associated with construction and operation of the Owens River Water Trail, including effects on biological resources, cultural and tribal cultural resources, hydrology and water quality, recreation, access, and other environmental topics. The analysis concludes that the project would result primarily in temporary construction-related impacts and limited long-term operational impacts.

With implementation of the mitigation measures identified in the FEIR and the associated Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP), all potentially significant environmental impacts would be reduced to less than significant levels. The FEIR did not identify any significant and unavoidable impacts. In practical terms, this means the environmental effects of the project were studied, concerns were addressed through design and mitigation, and no unresolved environmental issues remain that would prevent certification of the FEIR.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS

The FEIR evaluates a reasonable range of alternatives, including a No Project Alternative, consistent with CEQA requirements. Alternatives were considered that would reduce or avoid environmental impacts while meeting project objectives. The proposed project was identified as the environmentally superior alternative that best balances recreation access, habitat protection, cultural resource protection, and feasibility.

PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT

A Notice of Availability of the Draft Environmental Impact Report was filed with the Inyo County Clerk and published in the *Inyo Register*. The Draft EIR was circulated for public and agency review through the State Clearinghouse. During the public review period, comments were received from eight agencies, eight organizations, ten individuals, and four Tribal entities.

Chapter 2.0 of the FEIR includes written responses to all substantive comments received. Where appropriate, clarifications and revisions were made to the environmental analysis. The FEIR demonstrates that comments were considered in good faith and addressed in accordance with CEQA.

AB 52 TRIBAL CONSULTATION

In compliance with Assembly Bill 52, the County initiated government-to-government consultation by notifying Tribes that had requested notice pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 21080.3.1. Eight Tribes were notified, and responses were received from the Big Pine Paiute Tribe of the Owens Valley and the Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians. Consultation efforts and consideration of Tribal concerns are documented in the FEIR.

MITIGATION MONITORING AND REPORTING PROGRAM

Chapter 4.0 of the FEIR contains the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program prepared pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 21081.6. The MMRP identifies mitigation measures, assigns responsibility for implementation, and establishes monitoring requirements to ensure mitigation is implemented as part of project approval and construction.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff has reviewed the Final Environmental Impact Report for the Owens River Water Trail Project and finds that it satisfies the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act. The FEIR includes the Draft EIR, the full public and agency review record, responses to all substantive comments, and revisions where appropriate. Taken together, the document reflects the County's independent judgment and provides sufficient information to support informed decision-making.

Based on this review, staff recommends that the Inyo County Water Commission find the FEIR adequate for decision-making and forward a recommendation to the Inyo County Board of Supervisors to certify the FEIR for the Owens River Water Trail Project, subject to the mitigation measures and monitoring requirements identified in the FEIR and associated Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program.
