

INYO/LOS ANGELES STANDING COMMITTEE

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MEMORANDUM

Date: March 24, 2022
To: Inyo/Los Angeles Standing Committee
From: Inyo County and Los Angeles Department of Water and Power staff
Subject: Item 5. Report on feasibility and alternatives for the McNally E/M project.

Background

The McNally Ponds and Native Pasture E/M Project was developed in the 1980s and included as mitigation in the Long Term Water Agreement's 1991 EIR for significant adverse vegetation decreases and changes in Laws due to a combination of factors. The specific areas in Laws that this project was to mitigate were not described in detail. The project description was provided in the Laws/Poleta Area E/M Projects CEQA Initial Study:

Approximately 60 acres of ponds located south of the Lower McNally Canal and west of U.S. Highway 6, will be provided water annually during the waterfowl season September through January. Water will be diverted through existing ditches and headgates from the Lower McNally Canal. (Section 17, T6S, R33E).

Approximately 300 acres of native pasture will be provided water from existing diversion from the Lower McNally Canal within Sections 16 and 35, T6S, R33E, and MDB&M during the growing season April through September.

At its October 15, 2020 meeting, the Standing Committee concurred with the Inyo and LADWP staff recommendation:

Staff recommends that the Technical Group prepare a report to the Standing Committee evaluating the McNally Ponds portion of the E/M project including possible improvements or alternatives to the project.

It is a sound practice to evaluate conditions and habitat potential at existing and alternative locations before determining whether to modify an E/M project or implement mitigation measures at a new location. The Technical Group fulfilled that function and completed a report evaluating the management and ecological conditions of the McNally ponds and an alternate area near Farmer's Pond Environmental Project at its March 17, 2022 meeting. The alternate location is approximately two miles from the McNally ponds (Figure 1). The Farmer's Pond alternative was selected for detailed analysis because: 1) a similar type of project (ponds) could be developed, 2) it is near the original impact described in the 1991 EIR, 3) the Farmer's basins potentially could create more varied and beneficial habitat than the existing project and

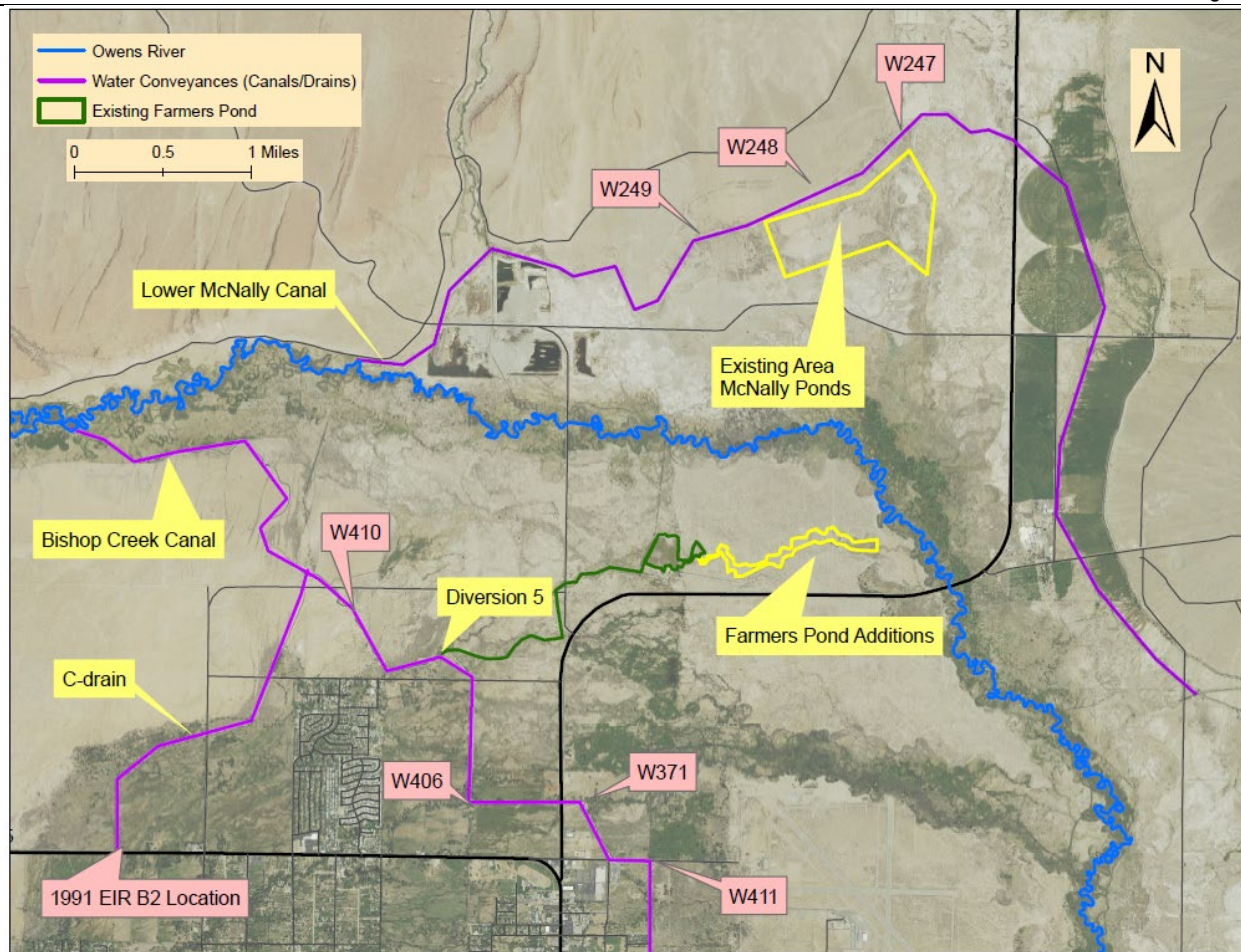


Figure 1: McNally Ponds and Farmer’s Pond locations and associated water delivery infrastructure and pumping wells.

thus be a more effective use of groundwater, 4) the site had existing infrastructure for delivery and ponding of water and thus low potential for site disturbance and cost of construction, and 5) it had potential for a more reliable water supply with less drawdown in areas of sensitive vegetation. Other areas and possible projects that have been proposed since the Water Agreement was adopted were distant from the original impact, were a dissimilar project type, would increase pumping stress in an area where it is not desirable, or were not consistent with the Hillside Decree. Also, no evaluation of the site potential of the lower basins at Farmer’s Pond had been conducted previously.

Inyo and LADWP staff cooperatively designed the methods for the report including the examination of management operations, pumping effects, consistency with existing regulatory and legal requirements, and existing ecological conditions and habitat benefits for the existing project location and alternative. Feasibility of the alternative location was based on: 1) water supply reliability and pumping effects to supply the project, 2) potential habitat, and 3) potential for expansion of weeds.

The pastures that are part of the McNally E/M project were not evaluated by the Technical Group, but the report recognized that discontinuing water supply to the McNally pasture west of Highway 6 could potentially create vegetation and air quality impacts. The report recommended a water supply/irrigation/grazing strategy be developed in cooperation with the leasee to improve conditions in the pasture to ensure the best use of water for forage and habitat.

The report included ecological characterization of both locations using regularly collected Green Book monitoring data, remote sensing, and site surveys for riparian resources and weeds. Based on the relative conditions at the two sites and the potential advantages and limited negative outcomes the Technical Group report concludes that the Farmer's Pond alternative is feasible and potentially preferable in some regards to the existing McNally Ponds. Inyo and LADWP staff differ on the need or desirability of a new well, B-2, from the 1991 EIR to supply the alternate site; Inyo prefers reliance on an existing well and LADWP prefers B-2, both located on the Bishop Cone. Both Bishop Cone wells would result in less drawdown under sensitive vegetation than the wells in the Laws wellfield that supply the McNally Ponds. Based on groundwater modeling, that is true even if the Laws wells were modified to pump less from the shallow aquifer. Weeds will be an ongoing management issue at both sites. The full list of pros and cons were described in the report and summarized in the table below.

It was beyond the scope of the report to develop a project description for a modified McNally Ponds project or recommend replacement of the existing project. It was preferable to present a site analysis and develop any project modifications following consideration by the Standing Committee and public input. Implementation of the existing project in accordance with the Agreement and 1991 EIR project description will continue until a modification is prepared. Any modification of an E/M project must comply with the Agreement and CEQA. Modifications to or replacements for mitigation projects, including the McNally ponds, must provide equal or greater mitigation value than the current project. The Technical Group presents this report to the Standing Committee to assist further consideration of potential improvements or modifications to the McNally project and whether additional investigations or development of management options is desired.

Table 1: Potential benefits and disadvantages of the alternate mitigation project at Farmer’s Pond. Concerns over weeds apply equally at both locations

Potential Benefits	Potential Disadvantages
Increased waterfowl habitat during migration.	Increased costs due to possible invasive species management.
Increased recreation (birding, hunting).	Pumping B2 may affect Type E subirrigated meadows.
It should be possible to supply Farmer’s ponds all but the most extreme dry years.	Additional pumping and surface water management required on the Bishop Cone.
The Standing Committee will not need to address frequent requests to adjust or to not supply water for mitigation.	Reduced infiltration in Laws compared to the original project.
Enhanced recruitment potential for riparian vegetation and increased woodland connectivity and associated species.	Modifying the project requires several steps to comply with the LTWA and CEQA.
Pumping impacts on vegetation in the area of McNally Canal will be avoided.	
The Farmer’s Pond will likely require less water than the original McNally project; therefore overall pumping to supply the project will be reduced.	
Wells on the Bishop Cone are managed according to the Hillside Decree. No additional well exemptions are needed during drought years.	
The W406 pumping option creates the least drawdown and only under irrigated vegetation.	
The Farmer’s Ponds are more accessible to the public.	
Installation well at Site B-2 provides LADWP with operational flexibility to supply water to in-valley uses on Bishop Cone.	