

## What Atascadero Owes the Salinas

On August 14, the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club filed comments on the Notice of Preparation for the Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the City of Atascadero's 2045 General Plan Update.



CDFW

General Plan Updates are key opportunities to ensure the health of the local community and ecosystems and mitigate potential environmental impacts beyond city limits.

In our comments, we noted that the General Plan Update is an opportunity to remedy the absence in the city's General Plan of explicitly outlined and enforced land use and conservation policies for the Salinas River and the wildlife and ecosystems of its watershed. Atascadero is the nearest city to the Salinas River headwaters, giving the city a unique responsibility to protect river health and prevent significant impacts on downstream ecosystems and communities all the way to Monterey Bay.

The Salinas watershed is crucial to the environmental, economic, and public health of the City of Atascadero. The river is the primary source of water for the City. Its aquatic and riparian ecosystems are vital for wildlife and residents.

The river is habitat for the South-Central California Coast (SCCC) Steelhead. The upper Salinas headwaters, creeks and feeder streams are designated under the Endangered Species Act as critical habitat for the endangered SCCC steelhead. Portions of the Salinas River are habitat for the endangered red-legged frog and a thriving colony of beaver, recognized as an important contributor to watershed health and groundwater storage.

Primary constituent elements of designated critical habitat for listed steelhead include water quality and quantity, foraging habitat, natural cover including overhanging large wood, and migratory corridors free of obstructions. These elements are beneficial to all of the species in and around the river and its feeder creeks. The Draft EIR should carefully consider impacts and protections for species-dependent habitat in and around the Salinas River, the watershed and creeks.

The Salinas River's health not only benefits ecosystems, wildlife and the community's aquifer, but creates the scenic and recreational area that Atascadero residents cherish. Access to safe and quality spaces in nature plays an important role in public health for both physical and mental health. A balance of access and protection is vital to ensure the integrity and longevity of these ecosystems, as stated in the current General Plan's Land Use, Open Space & Conservation Element ("Any recreational use of the River and creeks shall minimize its impact on the habitat value and open space qualities of the creeks.")

The EIR should note that the California Department of Fish and Wildlife launched California's [Beaver Restoration Program](#) in 2022 to bring beavers back into the landscape through a concerted effort to combine prioritized restoration projects, partnerships with local, federal, and state agencies and Tribes, and updated policies and practices that support beaver management and conservation throughout the State. Upon the program's initiation, Brock Dolman, co-director of the WATER Institute, noted the "many opportunities for beavers to create beneficial habitat, help fight drought, wildfire, and climate change, increase abundance of ecologically and significant plants and animals, and improve water quality and flow."

The EIR should incorporate by reference the publication [Beaver in California: Cultivating a Culture of Stewardship](#), to ensure Atascadero's 2045 General Plan will be consistent with its own [2045 General Plan Update Vision and Guiding Principles](#), under its Guiding Principle for Our Natural Environment: "Consider Atascadero's natural, historic, and cultural landscape and resources when planning for the future."

The [2045 General Plan Existing Conditions Report](#) notes that "illegal off-road use of the Salinas River causes displacement of the riverbed, pollution of the river, and destruction of riparian vegetation" and states that "The creeks have been highly impacted by problems with trash, illegal dumping, off-road vehicle use, and urban pollution that has significantly degraded the quality of the habitat." It is essential to prioritize the safety and health of the river and creek ecosystems, water quality, and our communities using the river and creeks for its legal uses, including walking, riding horses, bird watching and more. As illegal off-road uses are directly degrading these resources and adversely impacting public health and safety, this should be prominently noted in the EIR, along with the need for increased enforcement efforts.

The Salinas and its tributaries should be protected from any increase of sand mining operations. NOAA guidelines for safe sediment removal are not more than 50% of the sediment recruitment calculated over a period of years. Available sand for instream mining of the Salinas and Estrella Rivers are already over-permitted. Removal of gravel in excess of 50% of recruitment can cause undercutting of banks, scouring of the stream bed and erosion. Channelized streams increase water velocity in storm events. The natural geomorphology of a stream greatly reduces flow velocities and spreads the waters over a larger area, providing for increased recharge.

Our comments also urged an analysis of the ratio of Atascadero's park and recreation acreage in light of population projections to establish guidelines for increasing park and recreation facilities. The siting of parks, natural areas and habitat connectivity should be considered and planned for in relation to the goals of the California State 30x30 Plan. The updated General Plan should also include elements coordinating with the SLO Regional Transportation Plan and County Bikeways Plan.

Atascadero will now prepare a draft Environmental Impact Report that should incorporate the views of agencies, organizations and individuals expressed during the comment period. Once the draft is released, there will be another opportunity for public comment before the EIR and the General Plan Update are approved. That outcome will guide the city's planning for the next twenty years.