



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

March 31, 2025

The Honorable Lieutenant General William H. Graham, Jr.
Commanding General and Chief of Engineers
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers
441 G. Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20314

Dear Lieutenant General Graham:

As Members of Congress representing the Santa Ana River Mainstem Project (SARMP), we thank you and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) for your continuing commitment to the critical work on the SARMP, including the Santiago Creek (Creek) component.

We are writing to urge you to expeditiously proceed with the Creek component of the SARMP, which was originally authorized as a flood-risk management project in the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 1996 and is funded by the Balanced Budget Act of 2018 (BBA '18). The Creek component includes the Smith Basin, the Blue Diamond Pit, and the Bond Pit (the Basins) and the Santiago Creek Channel (Channel), the portion of the Creek that runs from the I-5 Freeway to the confluence of the Santa Ana River. It is time to **immediately issue implementation guidance** for both elements of the Creek component so the Corps can finalize the design for the Basins and develop a new plan for the Channel.

Section 1311 of WRDA '24 modifies the language for the Creek component making clear that the Corps should move forward with the project subject to two modifications.¹ Specifically,

¹ Section 1311 of the WRDA '24 reads:

(a) SANTA ANA CREEK , INCLUDING SANTIAGO CREEK

(1) MODIFICATION .—The project for flood control, Santa Ana River Mainstem Project, including Santiago Creek, California, authorized by section 401(a) of the Water Resources Development Act of 1986 (100 Stat. 4113; 101 Stat. 1329–111; 10421 Stat. 4611; 110 Stat. 3713; 121 Stat. 1115), is modified to require the Secretary to treat construction of the Santiago Creek Channel as a separable element of the project.

(2) PROHIBITION .—The Secretary may not construct the Santiago Creek Channel unless such construction minimizes the impacts to existing trees in, or adjacent to, the Santiago Creek Channel.

(3) RULE OF CONSTRUCTION .—Nothing in this subsection shall affect the authorization for other portions of the project described in paragraph (1).⁷

the language **mandates that the Corps develop a new plan for the Channel that “minimizes the impacts to existing trees in or adjacent to the channel” before proceeding with construction and treat the Channel project as separable element from the Basins.** Congress’ intent is unambiguous -- the Corps must proceed with the Basins’ work **independently** from the Channel while drafting a new design for the Channel that is consistent with the language and spirit of WRDA ’24.

As noted by the Corps, and well known to the impacted community, the work on the Creek is essential for flood control purposes. As the Corps’ Draft Supplemental Environmental Assessment/Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration (Draft SEA) makes plain:

[T]he need for the project is due to significant flooding along the Santa Ana River – including Santiago Creek...which has been documented since at least 1897...Unprotected banks along Santiago Creek are subject to erosion which could cause damage to residential and commercial developments along the creek.²

The sandy, gravelly slopes of the Basins are highly susceptible to erosion during storm events. Slope failures could undermine flood control infrastructure, reduce stormwater capture and groundwater recharge, and encroach on adjacent properties. “The existing slopes of the Santiago Recharge Basins require repair to accommodate the 1% AEP water surface elevation. Several locations have been identified along the basins which would require stabilization.”³ Neglecting to move forward with the project expeditiously leaves the community vulnerable and could lead to catastrophic impacts on the community, as noted in the Draft SEA.

Existing conditions at the project site could potentially exacerbate flooding risk in the project vicinity. In the event of a 100-year flood event, the lower portion of the Santiago Creek that feeds into the Santa Ana River mainstem has a potential to overflow and flood portions of the surrounding community. In the event of high flow rates along the project site, existing eroded conditions along the Santiago Creek channel may result in slope failure that could damage adjacent properties and homes.⁴

The current plan for the Creek, which was selected several decades ago, does not reflect current climate conditions or the needs of the community. The plan would drastically and permanently disrupt the area which has thousands of trees in, and adjacent to, the Channel on

(4) DEFINITIONS.—In this subsection:

(A) SANTIAGO CREEK CHANNEL.—The term “Santiago Creek Channel” means the portion of the project for flood control, Santa Ana River Mainstem Project, including Santiago Creek, California, authorized by section 401(a) of the Water Resources Development Act of 1986 (100 Stat. 4113; 101 Stat. 1329–111; 15 104 Stat. 4611; 110 Stat. 3713; 121 Stat. 16 1115), consisting of Santiago Creek downstream of the I-5 Interstate Highway to the confluence with the Santa Ana River.

(B) SEPARABLE ELEMENT.—The term “separable element” has the meaning given such term in section 103 of the Water Resources Development Act of 1986 (33 U.S.C. 2213).

² “Santa Ana River Mainstem Santiago Creek, Orange County, California. Draft Supplemental Environmental Assessment/Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration.” US Army Corps of Engineers, Chicago District. September 2023, page 3.

³ Ibid, 8.

⁴ Ibid, 28.

both public and private lands. The trees not only serve as habitat for countless birds, including Bald Eagles, and other wildlife and they form an indispensable noise barrier against the vehicle traffic from the Freeway. Further, given the lack of green space in the surrounding community, the wooded landscape provides an important outdoor space for these neighborhoods. **That is why it is essential to collaborate with the local sponsor, Orange County Public Works, to develop a new plan for the Channel now while BBA '18 funds remain available.**

In drought-stricken Southern California, where water capture and storage measures are being aggressively pursued, the current proposal for the Channel redirects this much needed water to the Pacific Ocean via the Santa Ana River. However, some of this damage can be mitigated by work at the Basins which play a vital role in groundwater recharge and flood risk reduction, storing over 13,000 acre-feet of stormwater and augmenting water supply for the community. Retaining additional water in the Basins is critical and the project “involves modifications to the Santiago Recharge Basins to allow for greater holding capacity during storm events.”⁵ **The Basins’ work is an appropriate and essential use of BBA’18 funds and the Corps can move forward with the work at the Basins immediately.**

We emphatically urge you to allocate funds immediately to allow the Corps to move forward with the Creek component of SARMP. We look forward to working with you on the implementation of the Creek component, which is essential to protecting our constituents.

If you have any questions, please reach out to Congressman Correa’s office at (202) 225-2965 and Congresswoman Kim’s office at (202) 225-4111.

Sincerely



J. Luis Correa
Member of Congress



Young Kim
Member of Congress

⁵ Ibid, 22.