
I. INTRODUCTION

A. MERA PURPOSE, MEMBERS, AND AUTHORITY

The Marin Emergency Radio Authority (MERA) is a joint exercise of powers authority pursuant to a Joint Power Agreement executed in 1998, under authority granted by the California Government Code (Article 1, Section 6500 of Chapter 5, Division 7, Title I). MERA is comprised of 25 public agency members (Table II-1) and its purpose is to plan, finance, implement, manage, own, and operate a multijurisdictional and countywide public safety, public service, and emergency radio system. This system consists of a network of antenna sites that include towers, monopoles, microwave dishes, radio antennas, and interconnected radio equipment.

Table I-1: MERA Member Agencies

Municipal Members	Public Utility and Community Service Districts
City of Belvedere	Inverness Public Utility District
Town of Corte Madera	Marin Community College District
Town of Fairfax	Marin Municipal Water District
City of Larkspur	Marin Transit
City of Mill Valley	Marinwood Community Services District
City of Novato	
Town of Ross	Police and Fire Protection Districts
Town of San Anselmo	Bolinas Fire Protection District
City of San Rafael	Central Marin Police Authority
City of Sausalito	Kentfield Fire Protection District
Town of Tiburon	Novato Fire Protection District
	Ross Valley Fire Department
County of Marin	Southern Marin Fire Protection District
All Departments	Stinson Beach Fire Protection District
	Tiburon Fire Protection District

As a joint exercise of powers authority, MERA received its existing powers from those governments, agencies, and members by which it was created, and under that structure, MERA controls all aspects of development and operation of MERA facilities, even when those facilities are located within another local agency's jurisdictional boundaries (MERA 2018).

B. NEED FOR THE NEXT GENERATION PROJECT

The MERA radio system is vital for emergency countywide communications between police, firefighters, and public works crews. The Marin Humane Society, American Red Cross, US Coast

Guard, California Department of Fish and Game, and some ambulance companies have also been given access to the existing radio system. The emergency communications system is a network of radio antennas and equipment linked with microwave and broadband connections to provide integrated inter-agency voice communications. Recent changes to federal frequency requirements mandated by the *Congressional Jobs Bill HR 3630* require an upgrade of all existing UHF (T-band or 400 MHz) radio communications systems, including MERA, to 700 MHz systems by 2024. The Next Gen System would upgrade the existing system to the new standards, improve MERA's ability to maintain the system, and utilize Project 25 (P25) technology to provide improved public service and emergency radio coverage within the County of Marin. Funding for the Next Gen System is generated by a parcel tax as authorized by Marin County voters in 2014.

Similar to the purpose of the current MERA System, analyzed in the original EIR and certified in 2000, the Next Gen System is MERA's response to the need to upgrade radio communications facilities for Marin County, local municipalities, and public agencies to provide essential emergency communications benefiting residents, businesses, and visitors. The Next Gen System would improve the current system's coverage area and operational reliability to provide regional and wide-area conversations between public safety dispatchers and mobile units throughout most of Marin County. Individual cities and member agencies will continue to share this common backbone for compartmentalized communication links and inter-departmental group communications, while retaining autonomous operations.

C. RELATIONSHIP OF THIS SEIR TO THE ORIGINAL EIR

The subject of this Draft Subsequent Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) is the proposed MERA Next Gen System. The project consists of updating ten existing communications facilities in Sonoma and Marin Counties and adding new communications equipment to eight new sites, all of which have existing infrastructure but have been previously unused by MERA. These modifications are referred to as the MERA Next Generation System (Next Gen System, Next Gen, or proposed project). A detailed description of the proposed project is contained in Section III. Project Description, of this SEIR. Because the project will require approval of discretionary actions by MERA, and State regulatory agencies, it is subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), for which MERA is the designated lead agency. A detailed Initial Study and Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) were prepared for the original *Marin Public Safety and Emergency Communication System* in 1999 and the Final EIR was certified in 2000 (SCH# 1999092073). The 1999 Initial Study was prepared to determine if any portion of the original (current) MERA System would have a significant effect on the environment. This document found that the original project could in fact have a significant effect on the environment, and therefore the 1999 Draft EIR was prepared to detail impacts relating to Aesthetic Resources, Biological Resources, Radio Frequency Hazards, and Land Use Consistency. The Final EIR for the original MERA project was certified in November 2000 and was amended to include the Stewart Point site (commonly referred to as the Martinelli site) in 2006.

These previously completed environmental studies remain valid for the sites and equipment evaluated; however, based on this documentation, it has been determined that the proposed project may have a significant effect on the environment and that a SEIR should be prepared to

build upon the previously certified CEQA documents. This SEIR evaluates the new environmental impacts resulting from the proposed MERA Next Gen project and defines compliance activities needed to address new regulations put into place since the original EIR was certified. Below is a summary of changes in the regulatory requirements since the 1999 documents were written, as well as a review of the topics found not to be significant in the 1999 Initial Study and Draft EIR.

D. REGULATORY REQUIREMENT CHANGES

The primary regulatory changes to CEQA since the certification of the original EIR in 2000 affect the evaluations of Greenhouse Gasses, Tribal Cultural Resources, and in some cases Land Use. Public safety thresholds regarding exposure to Radio Frequency hazards remain the same as those used in the original EIR.

Greenhouse Gasses (GHGs):

Assembly Bill 32 (AB 32) established the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, requiring the State to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to 1990 levels by 2020. Senate Bill 97 (SB 97), adopted in 2007, required the Governor's Office of Planning and Research to develop CEQA guidelines "for the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions or the effects of greenhouse gas emissions," and the Resources Agency certified and adopted these amendments to the guidelines on December 30, 2009.

Tribal Cultural Resources:

In September 2014, the California Legislature passed Assembly Bill (AB) 52, which added provisions to the Public Resources Code (PRC) concerning the evaluation of impacts on tribal cultural resources under CEQA and consultation requirements with California Native American tribes. In particular, AB 52 now requires lead agencies to analyze a project's impacts on tribal cultural resources separately from archaeological resources (PRC Section 21074; 21083.09), and it required the Office of Planning and Research to update Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines by July 1, 2016 to provide sample questions regarding impacts to tribal cultural resources (PRC Section 21083.09).

Updates in Land Use Regulations:

County General Plan Updates- Both Marin and Sonoma Counties have updated their General Plans since the original EIR, in 2007 and 2008, respectively. The Marin Countywide Plan is organized around corridors, and the 2007 update added a fourth corridor, the Baylands Corridor, along with updates to guidelines for the cities, towns, and unincorporated areas of Marin. The Sonoma County General Plan update carries forward the major goals and policies of the 1989 Plan and retains the overall format, with the broad purpose to express policies that will guide decisions on future growth, development, and conservation of resources through 2020. However, as a joint powers authority, MERA is not subject to Marin and Sonoma County regulatory authority and therefore these changes do not affect MERA's Next Gen project.

Municipal Updates in local General Plans- Several municipalities evaluated in the Draft EIR (1999) have since updated their General Plans, including San Rafael, Milly Valley, and Tiburon; however,

as a joint powers authority, MERA is not subject to local regulatory authority and therefore these changes do not affect MERA's Next Gen project.

E. ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS FOUND NOT SIGNIFICANT IN THE 1999 DRAFT EIR

The 1999 Initial Study found that the original MERA System project would have *No Impact*, a *Less Than Significant Impact*, or a *Less than Significant Impact with Mitigation* on the environment in certain topic areas. The 1999 Draft EIR incorporated the analysis of the Initial Study by reference and held that said topic areas would not be further evaluated. These impact areas are as follows:

1. Agricultural Resources
2. Air Quality
3. Cultural Resources
4. Geology/Soils
5. Hydrology/Water Quality
6. Mineral Resources
7. Noise
8. Population/Housing
9. Public Services
10. Recreation
11. Transportation/Circulation
12. Utilities/Service Systems

The above listed topics are therefore outside the scope of this SEIR for the ten previously evaluated, current MERA sites that are proposed to be part of the Next Gen System. The impact areas listed above will, however, be discussed for the eight sites new to MERA and those discussions are found in Section VI.

F. FOCUS OF THIS SEIR

This SEIR evaluates the environmental effects of changes brought about by the Next Gen system as compared to the existing MERA system. The existing MERA system as it operates now is the baseline for this evaluation. From this baseline condition, this SEIR evaluates changes in the physical characteristics, changes in the long-term operations, and changes in the applicable regulatory requirements to determine if there are new impacts that may result from developing the proposed Next Gen project. This analysis also considers the effects of the brief transition period from the original MERA system to the Next Gen System, known as the 'change-over' period, in which both systems will be operational to allow for continued MERA radio operations while testing of the Next Gen system is completed.

G. REPORT ORGANIZATION

This Draft SEIR is organized into eleven sections as follows:

Section I (Introduction): This section provides an introduction and description of the intended uses of the SEIR, an environmental review process history, the changes in the regulatory environment since the original EIR, and the environmental effects found not to be significant.

Section II (Executive Summary): This section identifies the Lead Agency and provides a summary of the project description, areas of known controversy, environmental impacts that would result from implementation of the proposed project, alternatives to the proposed project, issues to be resolved, proposed mitigation measures, and levels of significance for impacts before and after mitigation.

Section III (Project Description): This section includes a detailed description of the proposed project including project location, the existing setting, project characteristics, project objectives, project refinements from the original EIR analysis, and required discretionary actions and other agency approvals.

Section IV (Environmental Impact Analysis): This section provides a description of the thresholds of significance for aesthetics, biological, cultural resources, land use, and radio frequency exposure used to assess the significance of project impacts in this SEIR.

Section V (Existing Conditions and Impacts at Each Site): This section is organized by MERA site, with a discussion of existing conditions and an assessment and discussion of the significance of impacts associated with the proposed project at each site location.

Section VI (CEQA-Required Analysis): This section provides a discussion of the following CEQA-mandated topics: cumulative impacts, unavoidable significant effects, significant irreversible environmental changes, and growth-inducing impacts.

Section VII (Alternatives to the Proposed Project): This section includes an analysis of a reasonable range of alternatives to the proposed project. The range of alternatives selected is based on their ability to feasibly attain most of the basic objectives of the project and that would avoid or substantially lessen any of the significant effects of the project.

Section VIII (Report Preparation): This section presents a list of the lead agency, other agencies, and consultant team members that contributed to the preparation of the Draft SEIR. This section also identifies persons consulted during the preparation of the Draft SEIR.

Section IX (References): All of the sources of information used in the preparation of the Draft SEIR are listed in this section.

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