

### 3. Conclusion

Aspen reviewed the existing environmental conditions in Imperial County to identify the areas that would be most suitable for potential conservation and open space. As noted in the introduction, the importance of the *Conservation and Open Space Element* is that its plans and measures would protect natural resources such as biological and cultural resources, soils, minerals, aesthetics, and open space while allowing reasoned use of these resources. The goal of the Element is to maintain the ecological value of the natural resources for the direct benefit to the public.

In order to complete this goal, the report considered the following resources: aesthetics, biological resources, cultural resources, geology and soils, mineral resources, and open space and recreation. Each resource analysis used mapped data to generate figures identifying sensitive resources that would lend themselves to conservation. Additionally, the authors considered the information provided in the DRECP, which provided insight into locations federal and state governments considered appropriate for development of renewable energy and areas considered appropriate for conservation. The DRECP also identifies locations the BLM considered important to protect for recreational use.

**Aesthetics.** As noted in Section 2, the locations deemed most appropriate for conservation and open space from an aesthetic perspective are the private inholdings outside of the Imperial Valley and any private or County land surrounding the open space under federal and state jurisdiction outside the Imperial Valley. While the Imperial Valley is dedicated primarily to agriculture, it also provides an opportunity for the County to retain the pastoral, rural environment in the Imperial Valley by clustering development near already urbanized or industrialized areas.

**Biological Resources.** The locations deemed most appropriate for conservation and open space from a biological resources perspective are inholdings under County jurisdiction that fall within protected areas such as wilderness areas and DWMAs (see Figure 2.2-4). Other opportunities for conservation and open space include inholdings in designated critical habitat (Figure 2.2-5), priority conservation areas (Figure 2.2-7), and Important Bird Areas (Figure 2.2-8). For many of these resources, the County could identify the inholdings as key conservation and open space targets. However, for Important Bird Areas, the opportunities for conservation are much larger, as the entire Imperial Valley is included in this designation and provides the County with the opportunity to preserve agriculture easements as part of its conservation and open space strategy. The County could work directly with developers and Federal and State wildlife agencies to further identify strategic locations in the Imperial Valley that would provide habitat for avian species.

**Cultural Resources.** Many of the locations identified as having important prehistoric, historic period, and Native American cultural resources are located on land under federal or state jurisdiction. However, the County can identify the inholdings as areas appropriate for conservation and open space, as well as areas on the outskirts of the ancient Lake Cahuilla where cultural resources are more likely to be present.

**Geology and Soils.** There are no constraints related to conservation of open space due to geology and soils. Areas of opportunity for the COSE include areas of unique geologic formations, particularly inholdings under County jurisdiction that fall within areas of federal or state jurisdiction containing unique geologic formations, such as County inholdings on BLM land in the Algodones Dunes.

**Mineral Resources.** In general, mineral resource deposits represent an opportunity rather than a constraint for the protection and conservation of open space. The protection of known deposits of mineral resources includes restrictions on development of incompatible land uses, such as urban

development. These restrictions on incompatible land uses are generally favorable for the protection and preservation of open space. However, active mining and mineral extraction activities may conflict with other likely open space uses, including recreation activities (such as off-road vehicle use and wildlife viewing), protection of biological resources (including sensitive species), and the preservation of scenic vistas.

**Open Space and Recreation.** Many of the areas identified as large opportunities for conservation and open space are on lands under federal or state jurisdiction. However, the County can prioritize identifying the private inholdings in these areas for conservation and open space. Additionally, the County has identified the need to actively work to reopen closed parks, improve and/or expand existing parks, and establish new parks. New and improved parks in the County's urban areas would provide additional urban open space for County residents. As shown on Figure 2.6-1, many of these existing parks are clustered in El Centro, Calexico, Brawley, Seeley, and Holtville. This provides an opportunity to identify new parks in other smaller urban centers such as Westmorland, Niland, and Calipatria.

**Air Quality and Climate Change.** While the challenge of attaining state and federal ambient air quality standards are great due to a scattering of non-point emission sources such as vehicular travel on unpaved roads, farming operations, and fugitive windblown dust over a large geographic area as well as the transport of substantial amounts of pollutant concentrations into the county from the higher urbanized South Coast Air Basin to the northwest and from Mexico to the south, there exists long-term concerted efforts by the Imperial County Air Pollution Control District (ICAPCD), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and other U.S. and Mexican agencies to reduce harmful air pollutants.

**Conclusion.** For all resources, the County has the opportunity to prioritize designating inholdings as conservation and open space. Furthermore, the County can review areas on the border between the Imperial Valley agriculture and open space, and prioritize keeping a buffer as open space. Finally, the County should consider working with developers and farmers to identify the areas in the Imperial Valley that are most important to keep as agriculture easements and avoid development.