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State of California – Natural Resources Agency
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GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor
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Governor's Office of Planning & Research

Oct 29 2020

STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

October 28, 2020

Ken Elwin, City of Merced Public Works Director
City of Merced
1776 Grogan Avenue
Merced, California 95341

Subject: City of Merced Wastewater Collection System Master Plan (Project)
Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR)
SCH No. 2018071019

Dear Mr. Elwin:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) received a DEIR from the City of Merced for the above-referenced Project pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and CEQA Guidelines.[1]

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding those activities involved in the Project that may affect California fish and wildlife. Likewise, CDFW appreciates the opportunity to provide comments regarding those aspects of the Project that CDFW, by law, may be required to carry out or approve through the exercise of its own regulatory authority under Fish and Game Code.

CDFW ROLE

CDFW is California's **Trustee Agency** for fish and wildlife resources and holds those resources in trust by statue for all the people of the State (Fish & G. Code, §§ 711.7, subd. (a) & 1802; Pub. Resources Code, § 21070; CEQA Guidelines § 15386, subd. (a)). CDFW, in its trustee capacity, has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species (*Id.*, § 1802). Similarly, for purposes of CEQA, CDFW is charged by law to provide, as available, biological expertise during public

[1] CEQA is codified in the California Public Resources Code in section 21000 et seq. The "CEQA Guidelines" are found in Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, commencing with section 15000.

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agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect fish and wildlife resources. CDFW is also submitting comments as a **Responsible Agency** under CEQA (Pub. Resources Code, § 21069; CEQA Guidelines, § 15381). CDFW expects that it may need to exercise regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code. As proposed, for example, the Project may be subject to CDFW's lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority (Fish & G. Code, § 1600 et seq.). Likewise, to the extent implementation of the Project as proposed may result in "take" as defined by State law of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) (Fish & G. Code, § 2050 et seq.), related authorization as provided by the Fish and Game Code will be required.

Water Pollution: Pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 5650, it is unlawful to deposit in, permit to pass into, or place where it can pass into "Waters of the State" any substance or material deleterious to fish, plant life, or bird life, including non-native species. It is possible that without appropriate mitigation measures, implementation of the Project could result in pollution of Waters of the State from storm water runoff or construction-related erosion. Potential impacts to the wildlife resources that utilize these watercourses include the following: increased sediment input from road or structure runoff; toxic runoff associated with development activities and implementation; and/or impairment of wildlife movement along riparian corridors. The Regional Water Quality Control Board and United States Army Corps of Engineers also have jurisdiction regarding discharge and pollution to Waters of the State.

Nesting Birds: CDFW has jurisdiction over actions with potential to result in the disturbance or destruction of active nest sites or the unauthorized take of birds. Fish and Game Code sections that protect birds, their eggs and nests include sections 3503 (regarding unlawful take, possession or needless destruction of the nest or eggs of any bird), 3503.5 (regarding the take, possession or destruction of any birds-of-prey or their nests or eggs), and 3513 (regarding unlawful take of any migratory nongame bird).

In this role, CDFW is responsible for providing, as available, biological expertise during public agency environmental review efforts (e.g., CEQA), focusing specifically on Project activities that have the potential to adversely affect fish and wildlife resources. CDFW provides recommendations to identify potential impacts and possible measures to avoid or reduce those impacts.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION SUMMARY

Proponent: City of Merced

Objective: Development of the Wastewater Collection System Master Plan has been an iterative process from 2002 to 2017 to evaluate and assess function, expansion, and

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replacement of the wastewater collection system within the City of Merced to accommodate existing and future development. Wastewater generated within the city is collected in a series of pipelines which the city owns, operates, and maintains. The system includes over 400 miles of gravity sewers which collect wastewater from a majority of residential users, as well as, commercial users, industrial users, and public uses. The Project involves the following types of activities: existing collection system upgrades, new trunk sewer infrastructure (i.e. the proposed northern and southern trunk gravity pipelines), new localized collector infrastructure, existing Wastewater Treatment and Reclamation Facility (WWTRF) expansion, increased WWTRF effluent disposal, and operations and maintenance.

Location: The Project location includes the boundaries of the City of Merced in Merced County.

Timeframe: N/A

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CDFW offers the following comments and recommendations to assist the City of Merced in adequately identifying and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife (biological) resources. Editorial comments or other suggestions may also be included to improve the document.

There are many special-status resources that may be impacted as a result of Project implementation, and these resources may need to be evaluated and addressed prior to any approvals that would allow ground-disturbing activities. CDFW is concerned regarding potential impacts to special-status species including, but not limited to, the State threatened Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), the State endangered and fully protected bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), the State threatened California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*), the State threatened tricolor blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*), the State endangered and federally threatened succulent owl's-clover (*Castilleja campestris var. succulenta*), the State endangered and federally threatened Colusa grass (*Neostapfia colusana*), the State endangered and federally threatened San Joaquin Valley Orcutt grass (*Orcuttia inaequalis*), and the State species of special concern burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*).

I. Environmental Setting and Related Impact

Would the Project have a substantial adverse effect, either directly or through habitat modifications, on any species identified as a candidate, sensitive, or special-status species in local or regional plans, policies, or regulations, or by CDFW or the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)?

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COMMENT 1: Swainson's Hawk (SWHA)

Issue: SWHA have the potential to nest near and forage within the Project site. The proposed Project will involve activities near large trees that may serve as potential nest sites.

Specific impacts: Without appropriate avoidance and minimization measures for SWHA, potential significant impacts that may result from Project activities include: nest abandonment, loss of nest trees, loss of foraging habitat that would reduce nesting success (loss or reduced health or vigor of eggs or young), and direct mortality. Any take of SWHA without appropriate incidental take authorization would be a violation of Fish and Game Code.

Evidence impact is potentially significant: SWHA exhibit high nest-site fidelity year after year and lack of suitable nesting habitat in the San Joaquin Valley limits their local distribution and abundance (CDFW 2016). Approval of the Project will lead to subsequent ground-disturbing activities that involve noise, groundwork, and movement of workers that could affect nests and has the potential to result in nest abandonment, significantly impacting local nesting SWHA.

Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s)
To evaluate potential impacts to SWHA associated with the Project, CDFW recommends conducting the following evaluation of the Project site, incorporating the following mitigation measures into the EIR prepared for this Project, and that these measures be made conditions of approval for the Project.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 1: SWHA Surveys

CDFW agrees with Mitigation Measure BIO-5 of the DEIR, which is consistent with the Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee (SWHA TAC 2000), that surveys shall be conducted within 0.5 miles of all Program activities. The SWHA TAC recommends a 0.5-mile survey distance from the limits of disturbance. The survey protocol includes early season surveys to assist the project proponent in implementing necessary avoidance and minimization measures, and in identifying active nest sites prior to initiating ground-disturbing activities.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 2: SWHA No-disturbance Buffer

If ground-disturbing activities are to take place during the normal bird breeding season (March 1 through September 15), CDFW recommends that additional pre-activity surveys for active nests be conducted by a qualified biologist no more than 10 days prior to the start of Project implementation to ensure that no SWHA have begun nesting activities near the Project site. CDFW recommends a minimum no-disturbance buffer of 0.5-mile be delineated around active nests until the

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breeding season has ended or until a qualified biologist has determined that the birds have fledged and are no longer reliant upon the nest or parental care for survival.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 3: SWHA Take Authorization

CDFW recommends that in the event an active SWHA nest is detected during surveys and a 0.5-mile no-disturbance buffer is not feasible, consultation with CDFW is warranted to discuss how to implement the project and avoid take. If take cannot be avoided, take authorization through the issuance of an Incidental Take Permit (ITP), pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b) is necessary to comply with CESA.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 4: SWHA Nest Trees

CDFW recommends that the removal of known raptor nest trees, even outside of the nesting season, be replaced with an appropriate native tree species planting at a ratio of 3:1 at or near the Project site or in another area that will be protected in perpetuity to reduce impacts resulting from the loss of nesting habitat.

COMMENT 2: California Tiger Salamander (CTS)

Issue: The northern portion of the Project site (i.e. the new northern trunk gravity pipeline) traverses through potential upland CTS habitat and is adjacent to breeding habitat. Given the presence of potential habitat within and near the Project site, ground-disturbing activities have the potential to significantly impact local populations of CTS.

Specific Impacts: Potential ground- and vegetation-disturbing activities associated with Project activities include: collapse of small mammal burrows, inadvertent entrapment, loss of upland refugia, water quality impacts to breeding sites, reduced reproductive success, reduction in health and vigor of eggs and/or young, and direct mortality of individuals.

Evidence impact would be significant: Up to 75% of historic CTS habitat has been lost to urban and agricultural development (Searcy et al. 2013). Loss, degradation, and fragmentation of habitat are the primary threats to CTS in both the Central and San Joaquin valleys. Contaminants and vehicle strikes are also sources of mortality for the species (CDFW 2015a, USFWS 2017). The Project site is within the range of CTS and has suitable habitat (i.e., grasslands interspersed with burrows and vernal pools). CTS have been determined to be physiologically capable of dispersing up to approximately 1.5 miles from seasonally flooded wetlands (Searcy and Shaffer 2011) and have been documented to occur near the Project site (CDFW 2020).

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Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s)

To evaluate potential impacts to CTS, CDFW recommends conducting the following evaluation of the Project site, incorporating the following mitigation measures into the EIR prepared for this Project, and that these measures be made conditions of approval for the Project.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 5: Focused CTS Protocol-level Surveys

CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct protocol-level surveys in accordance with the USFWS "Interim Guidance on Site Assessment and Field Surveys for Determining Presence or a Negative Finding of the California Tiger Salamander" (USFWS 2003) at the appropriate time of year to determine the existence and extent of CTS breeding and refugia habitat. The protocol-level surveys for CTS require more than one survey season and are dependent upon sufficient rainfall to complete. As a result, consultation with CDFW and the USFWS is recommended well in advance of beginning the surveys and prior to any planned vegetation- or ground-disturbing activities. CDFW advises that the protocol-level survey include a 100-foot buffer around the Project area in all areas of wetland and upland habitat that could support CTS. Please be advised that protocol-level survey results are viable for two years after the results are reviewed by CDFW.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 6: CTS Avoidance

If CTS protocol-level surveys as described in the above Mitigation Measure 5 are not conducted, CDFW advises that a minimum 50-foot no-disturbance buffer be delineated around all small mammal burrows in suitable upland refugia habitat within and/or adjacent to the Project site. Further, CDFW recommends potential or known breeding habitat within and/or adjacent to the Project site be delineated with a minimum 250-foot no-disturbance buffer. Both upland burrow and wetland breeding no-disturbance buffers are intended to minimize impacts to CTS habitat and avoid take of individuals. Alternatively, the applicant can assume presence of CTS within the Project site and obtain from CDFW a State ITP in accordance with Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b).

Recommended Mitigation Measure 7: CTS Take Authorization

If through surveys it is determined that CTS are occupying or have the potential to occupy the Project site, consultation with CDFW is warranted to determine if the Project can avoid take. If take cannot be avoided, take authorization would be warranted prior to initiating ground-disturbing activities to comply with CESA. Take authorization would occur through issuance of an ITP by CDFW, pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b). As stated above, in the absence of

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protocol surveys, the applicant can assume presence of CTS within the Project site and obtain an ITP from CDFW.

COMMENT 3: Tricolored blackbird (TRBL)

Issue: TRBL are known to occur in the vicinity of the Project site (CDFW 2020). Review of aerial imagery indicates that the Project site route through agricultural fields that may support nesting TRBL colonies. Flood-irrigated agricultural land, including silage fields, is an increasingly important nesting habitat type for TRBL, particularly in the San Joaquin Valley (Meese, 2014).

Specific impact: Without appropriate avoidance and minimization measures for TRBL, potential significant impacts associated with the Project include nest and/or colony abandonment, reduced reproductive success, and reduced health and vigor of eggs and/or young.

Evidence impact would be significant: As mentioned above, flood-irrigated agricultural land, including silage fields associated with dairies, is an increasingly important nesting habitat type for TRBL, particularly in the San Joaquin Valley (Meese et al. 2014). This potential nesting substrate is present adjacent to the Project area. TRBL aggregate and nest colonially, forming colonies of up to 100,000 nests (Meese et al. 2014). Approximately 86% of the global population is found in the San Joaquin Valley (Kelsey 2008, Weintraub et al. 2016). Increasingly, TRBL are forming larger colonies that contain progressively larger proportions of the species' total population (Kelsey 2008). In 2008, for example, 55% of the species' global population nested in only two colonies, which were located in silage fields (Kelsey 2008). In 2017, approximately 5,800 TRBL were distributed among only two colonies in Fresno County (Meese 2017). Nesting can occur synchronously, with all eggs laid within one week (Orians 1961). For these reasons, depending on timing, disturbance to nesting colonies can cause abandonment, significantly impacting TRBL populations (Meese et al. 2014).

Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s)

To evaluate potential impacts to TRBL, CDFW recommends conducting the following evaluation of the Project site, incorporating the following mitigation measures into the EIR prepared for this Project, and that these measures be made conditions of approval for the Project.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 8: TRBL Surveys

CDFW recommends that construction be timed to avoid the normal bird breeding season (February 1 through September 15). However, if construction must take place during that time, CDFW recommends that a qualified wildlife biologist conduct

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surveys for nesting TRBL no more than 10 days prior to the start of implementation to evaluate presence/absence of TRBL nesting colonies in proximity to Project activities and to evaluate potential Project-related impacts.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 9: TRBL Avoidance

If an active TRBL nesting colony is found during preconstruction surveys, CDFW recommends implementation of a minimum 300-foot no-disturbance buffer in accordance with CDFW's "*Staff Guidance Regarding Avoidance of Impacts to Tricolored Blackbird Breeding Colonies on Agricultural Fields in 2015*" (CDFW 2015b). CDFW advises that this buffer remain in place until the breeding season has ended or until a qualified biologist has determined that nesting has ceased, the birds have fledged, and are no longer reliant upon the colony or parental care for survival. It is important to note that TRBL colonies can expand over time and for this reason the colony should be reassessed to determine the extent of the breeding colony within 10 days of Project initiation.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 10: TRBL Take Avoidance

In the event that a TRBL nesting colony is detected during surveys, consultation with CDFW is warranted to discuss how to implement the project and avoid take, or if avoidance is not feasible, to acquire an ITP, pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b), prior to any ground-disturbing activities.

COMMENT 4: Bald Eagle

Issue: The State endangered and fully protected bald eagle have the potential to nest and/or forage in the vicinity of the Project site (CDFW 2020). Without appropriate mitigation measures, Project activities conducted within occupied territories have the potential to significantly impact this species.

Specific Impacts: Potentially significant impacts that may result from Project activities include nest abandonment, loss of nest trees, and/or loss of foraging habitat that would reduce nesting success (loss or reduced health or vigor of eggs or young), and direct mortality.

Evidence impact would be significant: The Project will involve noise, groundwork, and movement of workers that may occur directly adjacent to large trees and other features that may potentially serve as nest sites.

Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s)
To evaluate potential impacts to this State endangered and fully protected species, CDFW recommends conducting the following evaluation of the Project site,

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incorporating the following mitigation measures into the EIR prepared for this Project, and that these measures be made conditions of approval for the Project.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 11: Bald Eagle Habitat Assessment

CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct a habitat assessment in advance of Project implementation, to determine if the Project site or its vicinity (within 0.5-mile) contains suitable habitat for bald eagle.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 12: Bald Eagle Surveys

CDFW recommends that focused surveys be conducted by experienced biologists at the Project site prior to Project implementation. To avoid impacts to this species, CDFW recommends conducting the surveys in accordance with protocol developed by CDFW (CDFG 2010). If Project activities are to take place during the typical bird breeding season (February 1 through September 15), CDFW recommends that additional pre-activity surveys for active nests be conducted by a qualified biologist no more than 10 days prior to the start of Project activity.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 13: Bald Eagle Avoidance

In the event that this species is found within 0.5-mile of the Project site, implementation of avoidance measures is warranted. CDFW recommends that a qualified wildlife biologist be on-site during all Project-related activities and that a 0.5-mile no-disturbance buffer be implemented. If the 0.5-mile no-disturbance buffer cannot feasibly be implemented, contacting CDFW for assistance with additional avoidance measures is recommended. Fully addressing potential impacts to bald eagle and requiring measurable and enforceable mitigation in the EIR is recommended.

COMMENT 5: State Threatened, Endangered, or Rare Plant Species

Issue: Special-status plants have the potential to occur in the vicinity of the Project site (CDFW 2020). The Project site, including the northern trunk gravity pipeline route, is adjacent habitat that may support special-status plants meeting the definition of rare or endangered under Fish and Game Code sections 1901 and 1907 and CEQA Guidelines section 15380.

Specific impact: Without appropriate avoidance and minimization measures potential impacts to special-status plants include inability to reproduce and direct mortality. Unauthorized take of plant species listed as threatened, endangered, or rare pursuant to CESA or the Native Plant Protection Act is a violation of Fish and Game Code.

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Evidence impact would be significant: Many special-status plants are narrowly distributed endemic species. These species are threatened with habitat loss and habitat fragmentation resulting from development, vehicle and foot traffic, road maintenance, and introduction of non-native plant species (CNPS 2020). Therefore, impacts of the Project have the potential to significantly impact populations of the species mentioned above.

Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s)

To evaluate potential impacts to special-status plants, CDFW recommends conducting the following evaluation of the Project site, incorporating the following mitigation measures into the EIR prepared for this Project, and that these measures be made conditions of approval for the Project.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 14: Special-Status Plant Focused Surveys

CDFW agrees with Mitigation Measure BIO-1 of the DEIR that surveys for special status botanical surveys will follow the "Protocols for Surveying and Evaluating Impacts to Special Status Native Plant Populations and Natural Communities" (CDFW 2018). This protocol, which is intended to maximize detectability, includes identification of reference populations to facilitate the likelihood of field investigations occurring during the appropriate floristic period. In the absence of protocol-level surveys being performed, additional surveys may be necessary.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 15: Special-Status Plant Avoidance

CDFW recommends special-status plant species be avoided whenever possible by delineation and observing a no-disturbance buffer of at least 50 feet from the outer edge of the plant population(s) or specific habitat type(s) required by special-status plant species. If buffers cannot be maintained, then consultation with CDFW is warranted to determine appropriate minimization and mitigation measures for impacts to special-status plant species.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 16: Special-Status Plant Take Authorization

If a State-listed or State rare plant is identified during botanical surveys, consultation with CDFW is warranted to determine if the Project can avoid take. If take cannot be avoided, acquisition of an ITP or a Native Plant Protection Act Incidental Take Permit issued by CDFW Pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b) and/or section 1900 et seq is necessary to comply with CESA and the Native Plant Protection Act.

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COMMENT 6: Burrowing Owl (BUOW)

Issue: BUOW may occur within and/or adjacent to the Project site. BUOW inhabit open grassland containing small mammal burrows, a requisite habitat feature used by BUOW for nesting and cover. Habitat both within and bordering the Project site, supports grassland habitat (CDFW 2020).

Specific impact: Potentially significant direct impacts associated with subsequent activities and development include burrow collapse, inadvertent entrapment, nest abandonment, reduced reproductive success, reduction in health and vigor of eggs and/or young, and direct mortality of individuals.

Evidence impact is potentially significant: BUOW rely on burrow habitat year-round for their survival and reproduction. Habitat loss and degradation are considered the greatest threats to BUOW in California's Central Valley (Gervais et al. 2008). The Project site contain and is bordered by some of the only remaining undeveloped land in the vicinity. Therefore, subsequent ground-disturbing activities associated with Project approval have the potential to significantly impact local BUOW populations. In addition, and as described in CDFW's "Staff Report on Burrowing Owl Mitigation" (CDFG 2012), excluding and/or evicting BUOW from their burrows is considered a potentially significant impact under CEQA.

Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s) (Regarding Environmental Setting and Related Impact)

To evaluate potential impacts to BUOW associated with the Project, CDFW recommends conducting the following evaluation of the Project site, incorporating the following mitigation measures into the EIR prepared for this Project, and that these measures be made conditions of approval for the Project.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 17: BUOW Surveys

CDFW recommends assessing presence/absence of BUOW by having a qualified biologist conduct surveys following the California Burrowing Owl Consortium's "Burrowing Owl Survey Protocol and Mitigation Guidelines" (CBOC 1993) and CDFW's "Staff Report on Burrowing Owl Mitigation" (CDFG 2012). Specifically, CBOC and CDFW's Staff Report suggest three or more surveillance surveys conducted during daylight with each visit occurring at least three weeks apart during the peak breeding season (April 15 to July 15), when BUOW are most detectable.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 18: BUOW Avoidance

CDFW recommends no-disturbance buffers, as outlined in the "Staff Report on Burrowing Owl Mitigation" (CDFG 2012), be implemented prior to and during any

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ground-disturbing activities. Specifically, CDFW's Staff Report recommends that impacts to occupied burrows be avoided in accordance with the following table unless a qualified biologist approved by CDFW verifies through non-invasive methods that either: 1) the birds have not begun egg laying and incubation; or 2) that juveniles from the occupied burrows are foraging independently and are capable of independent survival.

Location	Time of Year	Level of Disturbance		
		Low	Med	High
Nesting sites	April 1-Aug 15	200 m*	500 m	500 m
Nesting sites	Aug 16-Oct 15	200 m	200 m	500 m
Nesting sites	Oct 16-Mar 31	50 m	100 m	500 m

* meters (m)

II. Editorial Comments and/or Suggestions

Federally Listed Species: CDFW recommends consulting with the USFWS on potential impacts to federally listed species including, but not limited to, CTS, succulent owl's-clover, Colusa grass, and San Joaquin Valley Orcutt grass. Take under the Federal Endangered Species Act (FESA) is more broadly defined than CESA; take under FESA also includes significant habitat modification or degradation that could result in death or injury to a listed species by interfering with essential behavioral patterns such as breeding, foraging, or nesting. Consultation with the USFWS in order to comply with FESA is advised well in advance of any ground-disturbing activities.

Lake and Streambed Alteration: The Project traverses through laterals, sloughs, canals, and blue-lined waterways (i.e. Fahrens Creek and Bear Creek). Activities within these features are subject to CDFW's lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority. The Project have the potential to cause deposition of debris, waste, sediment, toxic runoff or other materials into water causing water pollution and degradation of water quality.

CDFW agrees with the DEIR that a Fish and Game Code section 1602 Stream Alteration Agreement will be pursued with CDFW. Project-related activities that have the potential to change the bed, bank, and channel of streams or lakes, including but not requiring alterations to riparian vegetation, are subject to CDFW's regulatory authority pursuant Fish and Game Code section 1600 et seq.. Fish and Game Code section 1600 et seq. requires an entity to notify CDFW prior to commencing any activity that may (a) substantially divert or obstruct the natural flow of any river, stream, or lake; (b) substantially change or use any material from the bed, bank, or channel of any river, stream, or lake (including the removal of riparian vegetation): (c) deposit debris, waste or other materials that could pass into any river, stream, or lake. "Any river, stream, or

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lake" includes those that are ephemeral or intermittent as well as those that are perennial. It is important to note, CDFW is required to comply with CEQA, as a Responsible Agency, when issuing a Lake and Streambed Alteration Agreement (LSAA). If inadequate, or no environmental review, has occurred, for the Project activities that are subject to notification under Fish and Game Code section 1602, CDFW will not be able to issue the Final LSAA until CEQA analysis for the project is complete. This may lead to considerable Project delays. For additional information on notification requirements, please contact our staff in the Lake and Streambed Alteration Program at (559) 243-4593.

Nesting birds: CDFW encourages that Project implementation occur during the bird non-nesting season; however, if ground-disturbing or vegetation-disturbing activities must occur during the breeding season (February through mid-September), the Project applicant is responsible for ensuring that implementation of the Project does not result in violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act or relevant Fish and Game Codes as referenced above.

To evaluate Project-related impacts on nesting birds, CDFW recommends that a qualified wildlife biologist conduct pre-activity surveys for active nests no more than 10 days prior to the start of ground or vegetation disturbance to maximize the probability that nests that could potentially be impacted are detected. CDFW also recommends that surveys cover a sufficient area around the Project sites to identify nests and determine their status. A sufficient area means any area potentially affected by the Project. In addition to direct impacts (i.e. nest destruction), noise, vibration, and movement of workers or equipment could also affect nests. Prior to initiation of construction activities, CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct a survey to establish a behavioral baseline of all identified nests. Once construction begins, CDFW recommends having a qualified biologist continuously monitor nests to detect behavioral changes resulting from the Project. If behavioral changes occur, CDFW recommends halting the work causing that change and consulting with CDFW for additional avoidance and minimization measures.

If continuous monitoring of identified nests by a qualified wildlife biologist is not feasible, CDFW recommends a minimum no-disturbance buffer of 250 feet around active nests of non-listed bird species and a 500-foot no-disturbance buffer around active nests of non-listed raptors. These buffers are advised to remain in place until the breeding season has ended or until a qualified biologist has determined that the birds have fledged and are no longer reliant upon the nest or on-site parental care for survival. Variance from these no-disturbance buffers is possible when there is compelling biological or ecological reason to do so, such as when the construction areas would be concealed from a nest site by topography. CDFW recommends that a qualified wildlife biologist advise and support any variance from these buffers and notify CDFW in advance of implementing a variance.

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ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

CEQA requires that information developed in environmental impact reports and negative declarations be incorporated into a database which may be used to make subsequent or supplemental environmental determinations (Pub. Resources Code, § 21003, subd. (e)). Accordingly, please report any special-status species and natural communities detected during Project surveys to the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDB). The CNDDB field survey form can be found at the following link: https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDB/Submitting-Data. The completed form can be mailed electronically to CNDDB at the following email address: CNDDB@wildlife.ca.gov. The types of information reported to CNDDB can be found at the following link: https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDB/Plants-and-Animals.

FILING FEES

If it is determined that the Project has the potential to impact biological resources, an assessment of filing fees will be necessary. Fees are payable upon filing of the Notice of Determination by the Lead Agency and serve to help defray the cost of environmental review by CDFW. Payment of the fee is required in order for the underlying project approval to be operative, vested, and final (Cal. Code Regs, tit. 14, § 753.5; Fish & Game Code, § 711.4; Pub. Resources Code, § 21089).

CDFW appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Project to assist the City of Merced in identifying and mitigating the Project's impacts on biological resources.

More information on survey and monitoring protocols for sensitive species can be found at CDFW's website (https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Survey-Protocols). If you have any questions, please contact Jim Vang, Environmental Scientist, at the address provided on this letterhead, by telephone at (559) 243-4014 extension 254, or by electronic mail at Jim.Vang@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:
Julie Vance
FA83F09FE08945A...

Julie A. Vance
Regional Manager

cc: California Regional Water Quality Control Board
Central Valley Region
1685 "E" Street
Fresno, California 93706-2020

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United State Army Corps of Engineers
1325 “J” Street, Suite #1350
Sacramento, California 95814-2928

ec: Patricia Cole; Patricia_Cole@fws.gov

Linda Connolly, CDFW

Attachment

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Attachment 1

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MONITORING AND REPORTING PROGRAM (MMRP)

PROJECT: City of Merced Wastewater Collection System Master Plan

SCH No.: 2018071019

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE	STATUS/DATE/INITIALS
Before Disturbing Soil or Vegetation	
Mitigation Measure 1: SWHA Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 3: SWHA Take Authorization	
Mitigation Measure 4: SWHA Nest Trees	
Mitigation Measure 5: Focused CTS Protocol-level Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 7: CTS Take Authorization	
Mitigation Measure 8: TRBL Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 10: TRBL Take Avoidance	
Mitigation Measure 11: Bald Eagle Habitat Assessment	
Mitigation Measure 12: Bald Eagle Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 14: Special-Status Plant Focused Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 16: Special-Status Plant Take Authorization	
Mitigation Measure 17: BUOW Surveys	
During Construction	
Mitigation Measure 2: SWHA No-disturbance Buffer	
Mitigation Measure 6: CTS Avoidance	
Mitigation Measure 9: TRBL Avoidance	
Mitigation Measure 13: Bald Eagle Avoidance	
Mitigation Measure 15: Special-Status Plant Avoidance	
Mitigation Measure 18: BUOW Avoidance	