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August 30, 2016

Ms. Deanna Elliano
Director, City of Hemet Community Development Department
445 East Florida Avenue
Hemet, CA 92543

Subject: Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report
Rancho Diamante Phase II Specific Plan Amendment (SPA 15-001) Project
State Clearinghouse No. 2016081013

Dear Ms. Elliano:

The Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Notice of Preparation (NOP) of a Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the Rancho Diamante Phase II Specific Plan Amendment (SPA 15-001) Project (project) [State Clearinghouse No. 2016081013]. The Department is responding to the NOP as a Trustee Agency for fish and wildlife resources (California Fish and Game Code Sections 711.7 and 1802, and the California Environmental Quality Act [CEQA] Guidelines Section 15386), and as a Responsible Agency regarding any discretionary actions (CEQA Guidelines Section 15381), such as the issuance of a Lake or Streambed Alteration Agreement (California Fish and Game Code Sections 1600 *et seq.*) and/or a California Endangered Species Act (CESA) Permit for Incidental Take of Endangered, Threatened, and/or Candidate species (California Fish and Game Code Sections 2080 and 2080.1).

The proposed project includes a specific plan amendment to the Page Ranch Planned Community Development specific plan originally approved in 1980 as PCD 79-93. The proposed project also includes a general plan amendment to amend the circulation element, and a tentative tract map to subdivide the 245.07 acre project site into 635 single family residential lots. The project is located west of the intersection of Warren Road and Mustang Way in the City of Hemet within Assessor Parcel Numbers (APNs) 465-100-016, -022, 465-110-020, -021, -022, -023, and -027.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and the habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species (i.e., biological resources); and administers the Natural Community Conservation Planning Program (NCCP Program). The Department offers

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the comments and recommendations presented below to assist the City of Hemet (City; the CEQA lead agency) in adequately identifying and/or mitigating the project's significant, or potentially significant, impacts on biological resources. The comments and recommendations are also offered to enable the Department to adequately review and comment on the proposed project with respect to impacts on biological resources and the project's consistency with the Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP). The Department recommends that the forthcoming DEIR address the following:

Assessment of Biological Resources

Section 15125(c) of the CEQA Guidelines states that knowledge of the regional setting of a project is critical to the assessment of environmental impacts and that special emphasis should be placed on environmental resources that are rare or unique to the region. To enable Department staff to adequately review and comment on the project, the DEIR should include a complete assessment of the flora and fauna within and adjacent to the project footprint, with particular emphasis on identifying rare, threatened, endangered, and other sensitive species and their associated habitats. The Department recommends that the DEIR specifically include:

1. An assessment of the various habitat types located within the project footprint, and a map that identifies the location of each habitat type. The Department recommends that floristic, alliance- and/or association based mapping and assessment be completed following *The Manual of California Vegetation*, second edition (Sawyer et al. 2009). Adjoining habitat areas should also be included in this assessment where site activities could lead to direct or indirect impacts offsite. Habitat mapping at the alliance level will help establish baseline vegetation conditions;
2. A general biological inventory of the fish, amphibian, reptile, bird, and mammal species that are present or have the potential to be present within each habitat type onsite and within adjacent areas that could be affected by the project. The Department's California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) in Sacramento should be contacted at (916) 322-2493 or bdb@dfg.ca.gov to obtain current information on any previously reported sensitive species and habitat, including Significant Natural Areas identified under Chapter 12 of the Fish and Game Code, in the vicinity of the proposed project. The Department recommends that CNDDDB Field Survey Forms be completed and submitted to CNDDDB to document survey results. Online forms can be obtained and submitted at:
http://www.dfg.ca.gov/biogeodata/cnddb/submitting_data_to_cnddb.asp

Please note that the Department's CNDDDB is not exhaustive in terms of the data it houses, nor is it an absence database. The Department recommends that it be used as a starting point in gathering information about the *potential presence* of species within the general area of the project site.

3. A complete, *recent* inventory of rare, threatened, endangered, and other sensitive species located within the project footprint and within offsite areas with the potential to be effected, including California Species of Special Concern (CSSC) and California Fully Protected Species (Fish and Game Code § 3511). Species to be addressed should include all those which meet the CEQA definition (CEQA Guidelines § 15380). The inventory should address seasonal variations in use of the project area and should not be limited to resident species. Focused species-specific/MSHCP surveys, completed by a qualified biologist and conducted at the appropriate time of year and time of day when the sensitive species are active or otherwise identifiable, are required. Acceptable species-specific survey procedures should be developed in consultation with the Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, where necessary. Note that the Department generally considers biological field assessments for wildlife to be valid for a one-year period, and assessments for rare plants may be considered valid for a period of up to three years. Some aspects of the proposed project may warrant periodic updated surveys for certain sensitive taxa, particularly if the project is proposed to occur over a protracted time frame, or in phases, or if surveys are completed during periods of drought.
4. A thorough, recent, floristic-based assessment of special status plants and natural communities, following the Department's *Protocols for Surveying and Evaluating Impacts to Special Status Native Plant Populations and Natural Communities* (see <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Plants>);
5. Information on the regional setting that is critical to an assessment of environmental impacts, with special emphasis on resources that are rare or unique to the region (CEQA Guidelines § 15125[c]);

Analysis of Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Impacts to Biological Resources

The DEIR should provide a thorough discussion of the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts expected to adversely affect biological resources as a result of the project. To ensure that project impacts to biological resources are fully analyzed, the following information should be included in the DEIR:

1. A discussion of potential impacts from lighting, noise, human activity, and wildlife-human interactions created by zoning of development projects or other project activities adjacent to natural areas, exotic and/or invasive species, and drainage. The latter subject should address project-related changes on drainage patterns and water quality within, upstream, and downstream of the project site, including: volume, velocity, and frequency of existing and post-project surface flows; polluted runoff; soil erosion and/or sedimentation in streams and water bodies; and post-project fate of runoff from the project site.

2. A discussion of potential indirect project impacts on biological resources, including resources in areas adjacent to the project footprint, such as nearby public lands (e.g. National Forests, State Parks, etc.), open space, adjacent natural habitats, riparian ecosystems, vernal pools, wildlife corridors, and any designated and/or proposed reserve or mitigation lands (e.g., preserved lands associated with a Natural Community Conservation Plan, or other conserved lands).
3. A cumulative effects analysis developed as described under CEQA Guidelines § 15130. Please include all potential direct and indirect project related impacts to riparian areas, wetlands, vernal pools, alluvial fan habitats, wildlife corridors or wildlife movement areas, aquatic habitats, sensitive species and other sensitive habitats, open lands, open space, and adjacent natural habitats in the cumulative effects analysis. General and specific plans, as well as past, present, and anticipated future projects, should be analyzed relative to their impacts on similar plant communities and wildlife habitats.

Mitigation Measures for Project Impacts to Biological Resources

The DEIR should include appropriate and adequate avoidance, minimization, and/or mitigation measures for all direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts that are expected to occur as a result of the construction and long-term operation and maintenance of the project. When proposing measures to avoid, minimize, or mitigate impacts, the Department recommends consideration of the following:

1. *Sensitive Plant Communities*: The Department considers sensitive plant communities to be imperiled habitats having both local and regional significance. Plant communities, alliances, and associations with a statewide ranking of S-1, S-2, S-3, and S-4 should be considered sensitive and declining at the local and regional level. These ranks can be obtained by querying the CNDDDB and are included in *The Manual of California Vegetation* (Sawyer et al. 2009). The DEIR should include measures to fully avoid and otherwise protect sensitive plant communities from project-related direct and indirect impacts.
2. *Mitigation*: The Department considers adverse project-related impacts to sensitive species and habitats to be significant to both local and regional ecosystems, and the DEIR should include mitigation measures for adverse project-related impacts to these resources. Mitigation measures should emphasize avoidance and reduction of project impacts. For unavoidable impacts, onsite habitat restoration and/or enhancement should be evaluated and discussed in detail. If onsite mitigation is not feasible or would not be biologically viable and therefore not adequately mitigate the loss of biological functions and values, offsite mitigation through habitat creation and/or acquisition and preservation in perpetuity should be addressed.

The DEIR should include measures to perpetually protect the targeted habitat values within mitigation areas from direct and indirect adverse impacts in order to meet

mitigation objectives to offset project-induced qualitative and quantitative losses of biological values. Specific issues that should be addressed include restrictions on access, including, but not limited to measures to ensure domestic animals (e.g., cats and dogs) cannot access mitigation areas, and removal procedures to implement if they do; proposed land dedications; long-term monitoring and management programs; control of illegal dumping; water pollution; and increased human intrusion, etc.

3. *Habitat Revegetation/Restoration Plans*: Plans for restoration and revegetation should be prepared by persons with expertise in southern California ecosystems and native plant restoration techniques. Plans should identify the assumptions used to develop the proposed restoration strategy. Each plan should include, at a minimum:
 - (a) the location of restoration sites and assessment of appropriate reference sites;
 - (b) the plant species to be used, sources of local propagules, container sizes, and seeding rates;
 - (c) a schematic depicting the mitigation area;
 - (d) a local seed and cuttings and planting schedule;
 - (e) a description of the irrigation methodology;
 - (f) measures to control exotic vegetation on site;
 - (g) specific success criteria;
 - (h) a detailed monitoring program;
 - (i) contingency measures should the success criteria not be met; and
 - (j) identification of the party responsible for meeting the success criteria and providing for conservation of the mitigation site in perpetuity. Monitoring of restoration areas should extend across a sufficient time frame to ensure that the new habitat is established, self-sustaining, and capable of surviving drought.

The Department recommends that local onsite propagules from the project area and nearby vicinity be collected and used for restoration purposes. Onsite seed collection should be initiated in the near future in order to accumulate sufficient propagule material for subsequent use in future years. Onsite vegetation mapping at the alliance and/or association level should be used to develop appropriate restoration goals and local plant palettes. Reference areas should be identified to help guide restoration efforts. Specific restoration plans should be developed for various project components as appropriate.

Restoration objectives should include protecting special habitat elements or re-creating them in areas affected by the project; examples could include retention of woody material, logs, snags, rocks, and brush piles.

4. *Nesting Birds and Migratory Bird Treaty Act*: Please note that it is the project proponent's responsibility to comply with all applicable laws related to nesting birds and birds of prey. Migratory non-game native bird species are protected by international treaty under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) of 1918, as amended (16 U.S.C. 703 *et seq.*). In addition, sections 3503, 3503.5, and 3513 of the Fish and Game Code (FGC) also afford protective measures as follows: Section 3503 states that it is unlawful to take, possess, or needlessly destroy the nest or eggs of any bird, except as otherwise provided by FGC or any regulation made pursuant thereto; Section 3503.5 states that it is unlawful to take, possess, or

destroy any birds in the orders Falconiformes or Strigiformes (birds-of-prey) or to take, possess, or destroy the nest or eggs of any such bird except as otherwise provided by FGC or any regulation adopted pursuant thereto; and Section 3513 states that it is unlawful to take or possess any migratory nongame bird as designated in the MBTA or any part of such migratory nongame bird except as provided by rules and regulations adopted by the Secretary of the Interior under provisions of the MBTA.

The Department recommends that the DEIR include the results of avian surveys, as well as specific avoidance and minimization measures to ensure that impacts to nesting birds do not occur. Project-specific avoidance and minimization measures may include, but not be limited to: project phasing and timing, monitoring of project-related noise (where applicable), sound walls, and buffers, where appropriate. The DEIR should also include specific avoidance and minimization measures that will be implemented should a nest be located within the project site. If pre-construction surveys are proposed in the DEIR, the Department recommends that they be required no more than three (3) days prior to vegetation clearing or ground disturbance activities, as instances of nesting could be missed if surveys are conducted sooner.

5. *Translocation of Species*: The Department generally does not support the use of relocation, salvage, and/or transplantation as mitigation for impacts to rare, threatened, or endangered species as studies have shown that these efforts are experimental in nature and largely unsuccessful.

California Endangered Species Act

The Department is responsible for ensuring appropriate conservation of fish and wildlife resources including threatened, endangered, and/or candidate plant and animal species, pursuant to the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). The Department recommends that a CESA ITP be obtained if the project has the potential to result in "take" (California Fish and Game Code Section 86 defines "take" as "hunt, pursue, catch, capture, or kill, or attempt to hunt, pursue, catch, capture, or kill") of State-listed CESA species, either through construction or over the life of the project. CESA ITPs are issued to conserve, protect, enhance, and restore State-listed CESA species and their habitats. The Department encourages early consultation, as significant modification to the proposed project and mitigation measures may be necessary to obtain a CESA ITP. Revisions to the California Fish and Game Code, effective January 1998, require that the Department issue a separate CEQA document for the issuance of a CESA ITP unless the Project CEQA document addresses all Project impacts to listed species and specifies a mitigation monitoring and reporting program that will meet the requirements of a CESA permit.

Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan

Within the Inland Deserts Region, the Department issued Natural Community Conservation Plan Approval and Take Authorization for the Western Riverside County MSHCP per Section 2800, *et seq.*, of the California Fish and Game Code on June 22, 2004. The MSHCP establishes a multiple species conservation program to minimize and mitigate habitat loss and provides for the incidental take of covered species in association with activities covered under the permit.

Compliance with approved habitat plans, such as the MSHCP, is discussed in CEQA. Specifically, Section 15125(d) of the CEQA Guidelines requires that the CEQA document discuss any inconsistencies between a proposed Project and applicable general plans and regional plans, including habitat conservation plans and natural community conservation plans. An assessment of the impacts to the MSHCP as a result of this Project is necessary to address CEQA requirements. To obtain additional information regarding the MSHCP please go to: <http://rctlma.org/epd/WR-MSHCP>.

The proposed Project occurs within the MSHCP area and is subject to the provisions and policies of the MSHCP. In order to be considered a covered activity, Permittees must demonstrate that proposed actions are consistent with the MSHCP and its associated Implementing Agreement. The City of Hemet is the Lead Agency and is signatory to the Implementing Agreement of the MSHCP. The project is located in the Hemet Vernal Pool Areas West Subunit (SU2) and the Hemet Vernal Pool Areas East Subunit (SU4) of the San Jacinto Valley Area Plan. Portions of the project occur within MSHCP Criteria Cells 3892 and 4007. Because the proposed project is located with MSHCP Criteria Cells, it is subject to the Joint Project Review (JPR) process through the Regional Conservation Authority. In addition, MSHCP policies and procedures that apply to the proposed project include the Protection of Species Associated with Riparian/Riverine Areas and Vernal Pools (MSHCP section 6.1.2), Protection of Narrow Endemic Plant Species (MSHCP section 6.1.3), and Additional Survey Needs and Procedures for burrowing owl and Criteria Area Species (MSHCP section 6.3.2).

The DEIR needs to address how the proposed project will affect the policies and procedures of the MSHCP. Therefore, all surveys required by the MSHCP policies and procedures listed above to determine consistency with the MSHCP should be conducted and results included in the DEIR so that the Department can adequately assess whether the project will impact the MSHCP.

Lake and Streambed Alteration Program

For any activity that will divert or obstruct the natural flow, or change the bed, channel, or bank (which may include associated riparian resources) of a river or stream or use material from a streambed, the project applicant (or "entity") is required to provide written notification to the Department pursuant to Section 1602 of the Fish and Game Code. Please note that streams include all those that flow at least episodically, including ephemeral streams, desert washes, and watercourses with subsurface flow. Based on

the notification and supporting information, the Department determines if the proposed project activities may substantially adversely affect existing fish and wildlife resources and whether a Lake and Streambed Alteration (LSA) Agreement is required.

The Department's issuance of an LSA Agreement is a "project" subject to CEQA (see Pub. Resources Code 21065). Therefore, to facilitate issuance of an LSA Agreement, if necessary, the DEIR should fully identify the potential impacts to the lake, stream, or riparian resources, and provide adequate avoidance, mitigation, and monitoring and reporting commitments. Early consultation with the Department is recommended, since modification of the proposed project may be required to avoid or reduce impacts to fish and wildlife resources. To obtain a Lake or Streambed Alteration notification package, please go to <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/LSA/Forms>.

Further Coordination

The Department appreciates the opportunity to comment on the NOP of a DEIR for the Rancho Diamante Phase II Specific Plan Amendment Project (SCH No. 2016081013) and recommends that the City of Murrieta address the Department's comments and concerns in the forthcoming DEIR. If you should have any questions pertaining to the comments provided in this letter, please contact Joanna Gibson at (909) 987-7449 or at Joanna.gibson@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,


Leslie MacNair
Regional Manager

Literature Cited

Sawyer, J. O., T. Keeler-Wolf, and J. M. Evens. 2009. A manual of California Vegetation, 2nd ed. California Native Plant Society Press, Sacramento, California.
<http://vegetation.cnps.org/>