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DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
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Governor's Office of Planning & Research

Mar 11 2021

March 10, 2021

STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

Pam Navares, Planner II
Merced County Department of Community and Economic Development
2222 M Street
Merced, California 95340
Pam.Navares@countyofmerced.com

**Subject: Antonio Azevedo Dairy #4 Expansion Project CUP#20-005 (Project)
Notice of Preparation (NOP)
SCH No.: 2021020149**

Dear Ms. Navares:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) received a NOP from the Merced County Department of Community and Economic Development 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 statute 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 agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect fish and wildlife resources.

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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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.

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: Antonio Azevedo

Objective: The Project proposes to merge the existing heifer facility with the existing dairy operations, and to expand the existing dairy so that the modified dairy would house 2,500 milk cows, 500 dry cows, and 1,000 support stock. This would represent an increase of 2,270 animals from existing numbers. The proposed Project would include construction of supporting buildings and features at the dairy facility, including three new shade barns, a new feed storage area, a new manure storage area, and a new mechanical manure separator. Two new wastewater storage ponds would be constructed, and an existing wastewater pond would be decommissioned. No physical changes to the heifer facility would occur. With construction of the proposed facilities, approximately 26 acres of cropped acreage would be converted to active dairy facilities. The remaining acreage would continue to be cropped with dairy feed crops.

Location: The Project site is located at 1257 West Roosevelt Road, El Nido, California.

Timeframe: N/A.

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COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CDFW offers the following comments and recommendations to assist the Merced County Department of Community and Economic Development 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.

The EIR that will be prepared will determine the likely environmental impacts associated with the Project's expansion. Based upon the information provided, CDFW is concerned regarding potential impacts to special-status species from ground disturbance development activities (e.g. construction of supporting buildings and features, agriculture field conversion to dairy facilities), including but not limited to, the State threatened Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), the State threatened tricolored blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*), 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)?

COMMENT 1: Swainson's Hawk (SWHA)

Issue: SWHA have the potential to nest in the adjacent properties and forage within the Project site. The proposed Project will involve construction activities near the vicinity of large trees that may serve as potential nest sites. The Project's conversion of approximately 26 acres of farmland agriculture into dairy facilities may also result in loss of foraging habitat.

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.

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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

To evaluate potential impacts, CDFW recommends that a qualified wildlife biologist conduct surveys for nesting SWHA following the survey methods developed by the Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee (SWHA TAC, 2000) prior to project implementation. 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- or vegetation-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 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 acquisition 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: Loss of SWHA Foraging Habitat

CDFW recommends compensation for the loss of SWHA foraging habitat as described in CDFW's "Staff Report Regarding Mitigation for Impacts to Swainson's Hawks" (CDFG 1994) to reduce impacts to foraging habitat to less than significant. The Staff Report recommends that mitigation for habitat loss occur within a minimum distance of 10 miles from known nest sites. CDFW has the following recommendations based on the Staff Report:

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- For projects within 1 mile of an active nest tree, a minimum of 1 acre of habitat management (HM) land for each acre of development is advised.
- For projects within 5 miles of an active nest but greater than 1 mile, a minimum of $\frac{3}{4}$ acre of HM land for each acre of development is advised.
- For projects within 10 miles of an active nest tree but greater than 5 miles from an active nest tree, a minimum of $\frac{1}{2}$ acre of HM land for each acre of development is advised.

COMMENT 2: Tricolored Blackbird (TRBL)

Issue: The Project proposes to convert approximately 26 acres of farmland agriculture to dairy facilities. Review of aerial imagery indicates that the Project site has 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: 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 within and adjacent to the Project site. 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.

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Recommended Mitigation Measure 5: TRBL Surveys

CDFW recommends a qualified biologist determine if suitable habitat features are present for TRBL. If suitable habitat features are present, 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 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 6: 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 2015). 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 7: 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 3: Burrowing Owl (BUOW)

Issue: BUOW may occur within and/or adjacent to the Project site. BUOW inhabit open grassland or adjacent canal banks, ROWs, vacant lots, etc. 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.

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

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greatest threats to BUOW in California's Central Valley (Gervais et al. 2008). 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 8: BUOW Surveys

CDFW recommends a qualified biologist determine if burrows that are suitable for BUOW are present on the Project site. If suitable burrows are present, 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, the California Burrowing Owl Consortium (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 9: 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 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)

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II. Editorial Comments and/or Suggestions

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.

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 CNDDDB. The CNDDDB field survey form can be found at the following link: <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDDB/Submitting-Data>. The completed form can be mailed electronically to CNDDDB at the following email address: CNDDDB@wildlife.ca.gov. The types of information reported to CNDDDB can be found at the following link: <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDDB/Plants-and-Animals>.

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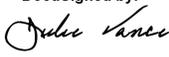
FILING FEES

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 & G. Code, § 711.4; Pub. Resources Code, § 21089).

CDFW appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Project to assist the Merced County Department of Community and Economic Development 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:

FA83F09FE08945A...
Julie A. Vance
Regional Manager

Attachment

ec: Jim Vang
California Department of Fish and Wildlife

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Attachment 1

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

PROJECT: Antonio Azevedo Dairy #4 Expansion Project CUP#20-005

SCH No.: 2021020149

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE	STATUS/DATE/INITIALS
<i>Before Disturbing Soil or Vegetation</i>	
Mitigation Measure 1: SWHA Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 3: SWHA Take Authorization	
Mitigation Measure 4: Loss of SWHA Foraging Habitat	
Mitigation Measure 5: TRBL Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 7: TRBL Take Avoidance	
Mitigation Measure 8: BUOW Surveys	
<i>During Construction</i>	
Mitigation Measure 2: SWHA No-disturbance Buffer	
Mitigation Measure 6: TRBL Avoidance	
Mitigation Measure 9: BUOW Avoidance	