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Governor's Office of Planning & Research

February 27, 2023

FEB 27 2023

STATE CLEARING HOUSE

Anna Prowant
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Resource Management Division
County of San Diego, Department of Parks and Recreation
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CountyParksCEQA@sdcounty.ca.gov

Subject: Comments on the Recirculation of the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Alpine Park Project, SCH #2021030196

Dear Anna Prowant:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) received a Notice of Availability of the Recirculated Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) from the County of San Diego (County) Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) for the Alpine Park Project (Project) pursuant the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and CEQA Guidelines.¹

Thank you for an opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding the activities involved in the Alpine Park Project that may affect California fish and wildlife. Likewise, we appreciate 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 the 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, subdivision (a) & 1802; Pub. Resources Code, § 21070; CEQA Guidelines, § 15386, subdivision (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 state fish and wildlife resources.

CDFW is also submitting comments as a **Responsible Agency** under CEQA (Pub. Resources Code, § 21069; CEQA Guidelines, § 15381). CDFW may need to exercise regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code, including lake and streambed alteration regulatory

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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authority (Fish & G. Code, § 1600 et seq.). Likewise, to the extent implementation of the Project as proposed may result in “take” (see Fish & G. Code, § 2050) of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA; Fish & G. Code, § 2050 et seq.) or the Native Plant Protection Act (NPPA; Fish & G. Code, §1900 et seq.), CDFW recommends the Project proponent obtain appropriate authorization under the Fish and Game Code.

CDFW also administers the Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) program, a California regional habitat conservation planning program. The County participates in the NCCP program by implementing its approved Subarea Plan (SAP) under the San Diego Subregional Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSCP). The Project site is located within the boundaries of the County’s approved MSCP SAP covering southwestern San Diego County. Noteworthy is that the Wright’s Field area was added to the Pre-Approved Mitigation Area (PAMA) of the County’s MSCP SAP due to its very high biological resource values. More specifically, the heavy clay soils, extensive network of native grasslands with scattered vernal pools, and the presence of a number of highly sensitive plant and animal species make Wright’s Field a unique area within the MSCP subregion. Also noteworthy is that although the MSCP is permitted under both the California NCCP and federal Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) programs, the MSCP did not provide take coverage for the Quino checkerspot butterfly (*Euphydryas editha quino*; Quino), a federal endangered species that has been identified onsite. Impacts to Quino are therefore being addressed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) under a separate HCP. Quino was also previously petitioned to the Fish and Game Commission for listing as a State endangered species; however, no decision has been made by the Commission at this point in time.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND SUMMARY

Proponent: San Diego County Department of Parks and Recreation

Objective: The Project site is in the area covered by the Alpine Community plan. The Project site is currently zoned as Limited Agricultural Use (A70) and Open Space (S80). The site is subject to the General Plan Rural Lands Regional Category, with an Open Space-Conservation land use designation in the western portion of the property and a Semi-Rural Residential land use designation in the eastern portion. The Project site encompasses 96.6 acres of undeveloped land. Twenty-five acres will be developed and turned into an active park and the remaining 71.6 acres that will not be developed will be designated as open space and managed as part of the MSCP Preserve. The 71.6 acres that will not be developed will be called the Alpine Park Preserve (Preserve) and monitored and managed by the County. This management will include maintenance of one mile of existing trails and closure of informal use trails. An HCP addressing impacts to Quino checkerspot butterfly will include restoration and habitat enhancement for the species.

The DEIR is being recirculated by the County based on revisions and modifications made to certain chapters or portions of the document. The recirculated sections include changes to Section 4.4, Biological Resources; Section 4.9, Hazards and Hazardous Materials; Section 4.20, Wildfire; Chapter 6, Alternatives; and associated technical appendices.

Location: The Project site is in eastern San Diego County, one mile south of Interstate 8, and approximately one mile south of the center of the town of Alpine. Alpine is an unincorporated community in the eastern portion of the County and is approximately 25 miles east of downtown

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San Diego. The Project site is north of South Grade Road, east of Tavern Road, and adjacent to the Backcountry Land Trust's (BCLT) Wright's Field Preserve. Residential and rural communities surround the 96.6-acre site.

Timeframe: There is no official start date, but Project construction will take 16 months to complete.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CDFW offers the following comments and recommendations to assist the County in adequately identifying and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct, and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife (biological) resources. CDFW's comments are also intended to assist the County Parks Department to ensure the project meets the conditions of the County MSCP SAP.

CDFW appreciates the ongoing communication regarding the project, as well as the opportunity to provide input during the monthly coordination meetings with the County. We also appreciate the County addressing our previous comments that were made in our November 15, 2021, letter, specifically our comments regarding western spadefoot (*Spea hammondi*) mitigation measures. The following comments address new impacts that were included in the Recirculated Biological Resources section.

1. Additional Fire Fuel Reduction Zone in the Proposed Preserve: During a monthly coordination meeting (August 11, 2022), the County discussed that fire fuel clearance is proposed within 100 feet of the volunteer parking pad in the northern portion of the active park. This new fuel reduction area would encroach into the proposed Alpine Park Preserve. Per the Fire and Emergency Operational Assessment (FEOA), the location of the pad would result in the need for a Zone A and Zone B fire fuel modification zone. Zone A (30 feet) includes clearing of vegetation and would result in "landscape replacement". Zone B (100 feet) includes clearing vegetation at least 75 percent to reduce the fire line intensity, which would be achieved by removing shrubs by a minimum of 50 percent, and grass/herb fuels by a minimum of 80 percent. During that meeting, the Wildlife Agencies (jointly, CDFW and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)) expressed concern that fuel modification would occur within the Preserve, impacting native habitat, and asked the County to consider moving the volunteer pad/dwelling to a central location within the park boundaries.

Section 7.2 of the Biological Resources Report (BRR) states that the County re-designed the site plan in the fall 2022 to move the volunteer parking pad from its previous location which was 12 feet from the edge of the proposed Preserve. CDFW appreciates the Recirculated DEIR including our concerns and taking the Wildlife Agencies' recommendation to move the volunteer parking pad/dwelling to the interior of the Project footprint to avoid any fuel medication within the Preserve. CDFW also recommends that a detailed Fuel Modification Plan (FMP) be included in the final Resource Management Plan (RMP).

2. Native Grassland Mitigation: CDFW appreciates the efforts by the County to mitigate the impacts to native grassland with 17.48 acres of onsite preservation, 4.84 acres of restoration, as well as mitigating offsite with 7.41 acres of restoration of non-native

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grassland on Wright's Field Preserve. As stated in the BRR, all restoration will be conducted in accordance with the Habitat and Restoration and Enhancement Plan (HREP) to be approved by the Wildlife Agencies. The HREP will include success criteria, and if success criteria and restoration goals are not met, the County will implement adaptive management measures approved by the Wildlife Agencies. As mentioned in our meetings (May 12, 2022 and June 9, 2022), if success criteria/restoration goals are not met, the County should mitigate for the impacts to native grassland with in-kind vegetation. CDFW would not likely agree to out-of-kind mitigation for the offsite restoration on Wright's Field and if the restoration were to fail, the County would need to coordinate with the Wildlife Agencies on next steps going forward.

ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

CEQA requires that information developed in environmental impact reports and negative declarations be incorporated into a data base 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 (CNDDDB). The CNDDDB field survey form can be found at the following link:

<https://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: http://www.dfg.ca.gov/biogeodata/cnddb/plants_and_animals.asp.

FILING FEES

The Project, as proposed, would have an impact on fish and/or wildlife, and assessment of filing fees is 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.)

CONCLUSION

CDFW appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Recirculated DEIR to assist the San Diego County Department of Parks and Recreation in identifying and mitigating Project impacts on biological resources and for consistency with the MSCP.

Questions regarding this letter or further coordination should be directed to Emily Gray, Environmental Scientist, at Emily.Gray@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

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David Mayer
Environmental Program Manager
South Coast Region

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References

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). 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.

California Office of Planning and Research. 2009 or current version. CEQA: California Environmental Quality Act. Statutes and Guidelines, § 21081.6 and CEQA Guidelines, § 15097, §15126.4(2)

California Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2020. California Natural Diversity Database. Accessed at: <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDB>.

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<https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/pds/mscp/sc/docsmaps.html#docs>

County of San Diego. 1998. San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program, Plan. Final MSCP Program Plan, August 1998.