



State of California – Natural Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
Central Region
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GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor
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Governor's Office of Planning & Research

June 17 2021

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STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

Thomas Kobayashi, Planner
County of Fresno, Department of Public Works and Planning
2220 Tulare St. 6th Floor
Fresno, California 93721
TKobayashi@FresnoCountyCA.gov

**Subject: Initial Study Application No. 7931 and Variance Application No. 4094
Project (Project)
Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND)
SCH No.: 2021050332**

Dear Mr. Kobayashi:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) received a MND from the County of Fresno, Department of Public Works and Planning for the above-referenced Project pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and CEQA Guidelines.

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 and 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.

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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: Wyatt Dean Fulbright

Objective:

The project proposes to reduce the minimum parcel size in the AE-40 (Exclusive Agricultural, 40-acre minimum parcel size) Zone District to allow creation of an approximately 30.18-acre parcel and an approximately 13.20-acre parcel from two parcels totaling 43.38-acres in land. The parcel is subject to a Williamson Act Contract.

Location:

The project site is located on the south side of State Route (SR) 180 (E. Kings Canyon Road), approximately 3,530 feet east of its nearest intersection with South Frankwood Avenue and approximately 5.94-miles east of the City of Sanger. It is located in a mainly agricultural region with single-family residences pocketed through the area. The Alta Main Canal borders the parcel on the west side, and the Friant-Kern Canal is located to the north, on the other side of SR 180. In addition, there is a seasonal

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stream that runs through the parcel on the east side. (APN No: 333-100-14 and -47. T14S, R23E, Sec 14.)

Timeframe:

None specified.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CDFW offers the following comments and recommendations to assist Fresno County 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 Department is concerned regarding special-status species that may utilize the Project site, and the resources it provides. 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 and federally threatened California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*).

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: California Tiger Salamander (CTS)

Issue: CTS are known to occur in the Project area and its vicinity. One occurrence was observed approximately 1.9-miles to the northeast (CDFW 2021). Review of aerial imagery indicates the presence of several wetland/stream features in the Project's vicinity that have the potential to support breeding CTS. In addition, the Project area or its immediate surroundings appears to be grassland habitat which may support small mammal burrows, a requisite upland habitat feature for CTS.

Specific Impacts: Aerial imagery shows that the proposed Project site has upland habitat which may function as CTS breeding habitat. Potential ground- and vegetation-disturbing activities associated with current or planned future Project activities, including a private well, have the potential to cause collapse of small mammal burrows, inadvertent entrapment, loss of upland refugia, water quality impacts to breeding sites, reduced reproductive success, reduction in health and

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vigor of eggs and/or young, and direct mortality of individuals. In addition, depending on the design of any activity, the Project has the potential to result in creation of barriers to dispersal. Project information states that the property is expected to be used for agricultural production. However, information regarding the Project also includes that the proposed Project is zoned as GRZ (General Residential Zone). This type of zoning is defined as suited for subdivisions and developments.

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 2015, USFWS 2017). The Project site is within the range of CTS and may have suitable habitat (i.e., grasslands interspersed with burrows and vernal pools or similar wetted habitat). 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 2021). Given the presence of suitable habitat within the Project site, ground-disturbing activities have the potential to significantly impact local populations of CTS.

Recommended Potentially Feasible Mitigation Measure(s)

Because potentially suitable habitat for CTS is present throughout the Project site, CDFW recommends conducting the following evaluation of the Project site, incorporating the following mitigation measures into the environmental document prepared for this Project, and that these measures be made conditions of approval for the Project.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 1: 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 in advance of any ground- or vegetation-disturbing activities, including ground preparation for irrigated agriculture or residential development, that result as a change of activities occurring on the Project site. 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

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CTS. Please be advised that protocol-level survey results are viable for two years after the results are reviewed by CDFW.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 2: CTS Avoidance

If CTS protocol-level surveys as described in Mitigation Measure 1 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 Incidental Take Permit (ITP) in accordance with Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b).

Recommended Mitigation Measure 3: 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 protocol surveys, the applicant can assume presence of CTS within the Project site and obtain an ITP from CDFW.

II. Editorial Comments and/or Suggestions

Nesting Birds: CDFW encourages that ground- and vegetation-disturbing activities 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 sections 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 site to identify nests and determine their status. A sufficient area means any area potentially affected by the Project. Prior to initiation of Project activities, CDFW recommends that a qualified

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biologist conduct a survey to establish a behavioral baseline of all identified nests. Once Project activities 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 Project site 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.

Federally Listed Species: CDFW recommends consulting with the USFWS on potential impacts to federally listed species including, but not limited to, California tiger salamander. 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.

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 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 Fresno County Department of Public Works and Planning 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 Kelley Nelson, Environmental Scientist, at the address provided on this letterhead, or by electronic mail at Kelley.Nelson@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

FA83F09FE08945A...
Julie A. Vance
Regional Manager

Attachment

cc: Office of Planning and Research, State Clearinghouse, Sacramento

ec: Patricia Cole (patricia_cole@fws.gov)
United States Fish and Wildlife Service

Linda Connolly
California Department of Fish and Wildlife

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LITERATURE CITED

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Searcy, C.A., E. Gabbai-Saldate, and H.B. Shaffer. 2013. Microhabitat use and migration distance of an endangered grassland amphibian. *Biological Conservation* 158: 80-87. Shaffer, H. B., J. R. Johnson, and I. J. Wang. 2013. Conservation Genetics of California tiger salamanders. Final Report prepared for Central Valley Project Conservation Program, Bureau of Reclamation, Sacramento, California.

USFWS. 2003. Interim Guidance on Site Assessment and Field Surveys for Determining Presence or a Negative Finding of the California Tiger Salamander, October 2003.

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USFWS. 2017. Recovery Plan for the Central California Distinct Population Segment of the California Tiger Salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*). U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 8, Sacramento, California. June 2017.

Attachment 1

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

**PROJECT: Initial Study Application No. 7931 and Variance Application No. 4094
Mitigated Negative Declaration**

SCH No.: 2021050332

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE	STATUS/DATE/INITIALS
<i>Before Disturbing Soil or Vegetation</i>	
Mitigation Measure 1: Focused CTS Protocol-level Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 3: CTS Take Authorization	
<i>During Construction</i>	
Mitigation Measure 2: CTS Avoidance	