State of California – Natural Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
Northern Region
601 Locust Street
Redding, CA 96001
www.wildlife.ca.gov

GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor
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December 29, 2021

Lily Toy, Planning Manager
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Development Services Department - Planning Division
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SUBJECT: Review of the Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Airport Road Distribution Center, State Clearinghouse Number 2021110412, City of Redding, Shasta County

Dear Lily Toy:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) has reviewed the Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) for the above-referenced project (Project). As a trustee for the State's fish and wildlife resources, the Department has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and their habitat. As a responsible agency, the Department administers the California Endangered Species Act and other provisions of the Fish and Game Code that conserve the State's fish and wildlife public trust resources. The Department offers the following comments and recommendations on this Project in our role as a trustee and responsible agency pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), California Public Resources Code section 21000 et seq. The Department participates in the regulatory process in its roles as Trustee and Responsible Agency to minimize Project impacts and avoid potential significant environmental impacts by recommending avoidance and minimization measures. These comments are intended to reduce the Projects impacts on public trust resources.

Project Description

The Project as described in the MND is as follows:

> "*The project proposes to develop a warehouse distribution center at 5497 and 5525 Airport Road, on Assessor Parcel Number (APN) 054-200-002 (29.19 acres) and APN 054-210-006 (9.59 acres), east of Airport Road and west of Old Oregon Trail. The two parcels total approximately 38.8 acres. The proposed project also includes an approximate 1.4-acre sewer line corridor extending south of the project site along the future Aviation Drive alignment to an existing tie-in at Shasta View Drive. The proposed distribution facility would contain 250,955 square feet of warehouse space*

> *that includes an administration office and is consistent with both the existing General Plan and zoning designations for the subject parcels. Facility hours of operation would be Monday through Sunday, 24-hours a day with up to 375 onsite employees*."

The Department has the following recommendations and comments as they pertain to biological resources:

Vernal Pool Habitat

Due to the severe declines of wetlands, and especially of vernal pools, the Department considers impacts to wetlands to be significant and has a "no net loss" policy regarding wetland habitat[1]. The Department strongly discourages development in wetlands or conversion of wetlands to uplands; therefore, the Department recommends the Project applicant redesign the Project by shifting it towards the eastern edge of the parcel to avoid impacting the vernal pool.

It is estimated that approximately 90 percent or more of the vernal pool habitat in the Central Valley and in other parts of the state has been lost. More recent studies have documented continuing vernal pool habitat loss in recent decades, with over 13 percent of the remaining Central Valley vernal pool habitat (137,100 acres) being lost from baseline conditions in 1976-1995 to the conditions in 2005. Additional studies are currently underway to determine the amount of habitat lost since 2005 (https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Plants/Vernal-Pools). Vernal pools and vernal pool species are adapted to living with wet winter and spring conditions followed by dry summer and fall conditions and can remain dormant for many years, an adaptation that allows them to survive through periods of drought. Vernal pools have been adversely impacted by many developments in the vicinity of the Redding Airport, leading to cumulative impacts on vernal pool obligate species. It is the opinion of the Department that without appropriate mitigation, further reductions in vernal pool species populations and their habitats may represent a significant effect on the environment as defined in section 15065 (a) and (c) of the CEQA Guidelines.

The Department has additional questions and concerns regarding the description and conclusion regarding the 0.35-acre vernal pool present on the site. The vernal pool is located on the western edge of the Project adjacent to Airport Road. This vernal pool was bisected as a result of construction of Airport Road and has a culvert beneath the roadway that connects the western and eastern halves of the vernal pool. The MND states that trenches have been dug on either side of the road, which allows for draining of the vernal pool. The Project documentation provided by the City of Redding states the culvert is "nearly blocked by sediment and debris" and describes the vernal pool as "highly degraded" because of the trenching and the blocked culvert. Please provide additional documentation

[1] Fish and Game Commission Wetlands Resources Policy (Amended 8/18/05)

regarding the reason that the trenches were excavated, and describe any permits issued authorizing the dewatering of the vernal pool as described in the MND. Finally, notwithstanding the City of Redding's statement that the vernal pool is "highly degraded", the Department would be interested in examining the hydrology and function of the vernal pool with the culvert unblocked. In the Department's experience, maintaining the water flow between the western and eastern halves of the vernal pool could restore much of the vernal pool's functionality. The Department recommends complete avoidance of the vernal pool.

The MND proposes a 1:1 mitigation for impacts to the vernal pool, which is not adequate for the loss of 0.35 acre of vernal pool that may still support listed species or could with a functioning culvert allowing more natural hydrology. The Department recommends mitigating for impacts to the vernal pool to address temporal and functional loss and the significance of this resource given the severe regional and statewide declines of vernal pool habitat by preserving and protecting vernal pools or restoring or creating similar vernal pool habitat.

Western Spadefoot Toad (*Spea hammondii*)

Western spadefoot toad is a Priority 1 California Species of Special Concern, which are taxa that are likely to experience severe future declines and/or extirpation without immediate conservation actions. The Department recommends addressing potential impacts to this species as it may meet the criteria of a rare, threatened, or endangered species pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15380. Therefore, impacts to this species are potentially significant. Focused surveys for this species by a biologist familiar with its life history were not conducted. This species is known to occur less than two miles away and suitable habitat exists onsite. Western spadefoot toads are almost completely terrestrial entering water only to breed. This species does not necessarily breed every year and is dependent upon adequate rainfall in a single season – both the timing and duration are important breeding cues for the western spadefoot toad to break dormancy.

Spadefoot toad surveys call for both daytime and nighttime surveys along with specific weather and seasonality requirements. As there is no official protocol for the spadefoot toad, the Department can work with the City's consultants to come up with a recommended survey methodology based on the western spadefoot toad's life history. The information provided in the Biological Study Report (BSR) dated November 2021, and prepared by ENPLAN, does not state if the surveys were conducted during the day, night, or a combination. If nighttime surveys were conducted, please provide the following weather conditions: temperature of the water, humidity, and air temperature for the surveys conducted on April 15, July 22, August 20, October 18, and November 5, 2021. The BSR further states, "*Although vernal pool habitat is present in the western portion of the study area it is degraded and not suitable habitat for western spadefoot. The western spadefoot was not observed during the field survey and is not expected to be present*." Since this

survey was conducted during a drought, the western spadefoot may have been in underground burrows at that time. The species could also have been finished breeding and would have possibly been found in the mixed oak/foothill pine woodland. The Department believes these surveys were incomplete and inconclusive. The Department recommends that focused surveys are conducted by a qualified biologist familiar with this species' life history requirements following accepted survey methods designed to detect the species. If western spadefoot toad is confirmed to be present, the MND should include avoidance and mitigation measures to reduce potentially significant impacts to less than significant.

Botanical Species

Several listed and/or special-status plant species were identified as potentially occurring within the Project site in vernal pool habitat; however, it was determined that none of these species were expected to occur because the vernal pool habitat on the Project site was so degraded (BSR, Table 3). Although the Department agrees the vernal pool is in a somewhat "degraded" state due to dewatering via the trenches and blocked culvert, there is not enough available data to determine that the vernal pool could not be returned to a functional condition if the culvert is unblocked. Furthermore, the Project area is currently in an extreme drought[2]. The Department recommends that the City of Redding clear out the blocked culvert and allow the restoration of water flow to the eastern half of the vernal pool prior to approving this Project. Focused surveys could then be conducted to determine presence/absence of special-status species.

Mixed Oak Woodland

Within the City of Redding and Shasta County as a whole, oak woodlands continue to be removed without landscape level conservation planning or effective oak woodland mitigation measures, resulting in a continuous regional loss of oak woodlands. Oak woodlands are important to a wide range of wildlife species and support higher levels of biodiversity than virtually any other terrestrial ecosystem in California[3]. Oak woodlands provide habitat for nearly half of the 632 terrestrial vertebrates species found in the state. Acorns are a key resource for deer, squirrels, turkeys, jays, quail, and bear. Standing dead trees provide an important habitat resource for raptors, bats, salamanders, and lizards. Coarse woody tree material lying on the ground, particularly large logs, is a very important wildlife habitat element because they retain moisture in a seasonally dry ecosystem. Over 200 oak trees will be removed by this Project. The MND states, "*The project proposes the planting of approximately 126 trees throughout the site to enhance the*

[2] U.S. Drought Monitor. Accessed on December 22, 2021. (https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/Maps/CompareTwoWeeks.aspx)

[3] CalPIF (California Partners in Flight). 2002. Version 2.0. The oak woodland bird conservation plan: a strategy for protecting and managing oak woodland habitats and associated birds in California (S. Zack, lead author). Point Reyes Bird Observatory, Stinson Beach, CA. http://www.prbo.org/calpif/plans.html.

site's aesthetics and provide additional screening. The utilization of native shrubs would ensure the landscaping is low-maintenance and would conserve water." The Department strongly encourages working around the existing valley oaks (*Quercus lobata*), interior live oak (*Quercus wislizeni*), and blue oak (*Quercus douglasii*) as an alternative to planting new native or non-native trees. The City of Redding should conduct a cumulative effects analysis for loss of oak woodland and any oak woodland not designated for development should be protected via conservation easements or other means that will ensure that the preserved habitat will not be developed in the future. Beginning the process of developing an oak woodland conservation plan, providing connectivity and a robust oak preserve within the City limits would allow conservation and development to continue and for smart conservation planning to occur rather than piecemeal development.

The landscaping plan was not included in the documentation provided. The Department requests to review the plan prior to Project approval to determine if the native plants to be used in the landscaping are appropriate for the region, and to avoid the use of invasive species.

Bats

Trees that contain cavities, crevices and/or exfoliated bark have high potential to be used by various bat species including pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*), a California Species of Special Concern. A thorough survey of the large trees should be conducted by a qualified biologist or arborist familiar with these features to determine if tree features and habitat elements are present within the oak woodland. Trees with features potentially suitable for bat roosting should be clearly marked prior to removal.

If removal or disturbance of trees identified to have roost structure will occur during the bat maternity season, when young are non-volant (March 1 – Aug 31), or during the bat hibernacula (November 1 – March 1), when bats have limited ability to safely relocate roosts, it could result in impacts to bats through direct mortality during the roost removal. Impacts to roosts are usually accompanied by high mortality of bats and could be a significant impact because a single colony could consist of the entire local population. The availability of suitable roosting habitat is considered a limiting factor in almost all bat species. Roost site suitability is often based on a narrow range of suitable temperatures, relative humidity, physical dimensions, etc., and many species exhibit high roost site fidelity. Depending on the impact, if any, to the roosting habitat, additional mitigation may be necessary and could include providing replacement or alternate roost habitat. If necessary, humane evictions should be conducted during seasonal periods of bat activity, which may vary by year, location, or species and must be conducted by or under the supervision of a biologist with specific experience conducting exclusions. Humane exclusions could consist of a two-day tree removal process whereby the

non-habitat trees and understory are removed along with certain tree limbs on the first day and the remainder of the tree on the second day. This two-step process changes the microhabitat of the area causing the bats to vacate the area under their own volition, therefore minimizing mortality and other impacts to bat species.

Mitigation Measures

Mitigation measure BIO-1 states the Project applicant will obtain the necessary resource agency permits prior to issuance of a grading permit. It also states, "*To offset the loss of onsite wetlands, the applicant shall purchase vernal pool creation credits (or other credit types as may be approved by the resource agencies) at a minimum 1:1 ratio at a Corps- or CDFW-approved mitigation bank, or pay in-lieu fees in accordance with the Corps' In-Lieu Fee Program. Proof of purchase of credits or payment of fees shall be provided to the City of Redding prior to fill or disturbance of the onsite wetland*." The Department recommends deleting "or pay in-lieu fees" and instead say (added language in bold), "*To offset the loss of onsite wetlands, the applicant shall purchase vernal pool creation credits (or other credit types as may be approved by the resource agencies) at a minimum* **3***:1 ratio at* **Stillwater Plains Mitigation Bank.**"

Trenching

If trenching will occur as a result of Project activities, trenches should be covered securely, or a ramp should be provided in the trench to prevent wildlife entrapment. If pipes are left out onsite, they should be inspected for animals prior to burying, capping, moving, or filling. The Department recommends a mitigation measure be developed and included in the final environmental document or project approval.

Survey Results

If any special-status species are found during surveys, the Department requests that CNDDB forms be filled out and sent to Sacramento via the link below and a copy of the form be sent to the Regional office at the above address. Instructions for providing data to the CNDDB can be found at: https://wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDB/Submitting-Data.

The Department encourages early consultation on projects such as this one. The early consultation process provides the Lead Agency with a better understanding of the biological resource impacts and allows for the Project footprint to be redesigned at an early stage to conserve fish and wildlife resources.

If you have any questions, please contact Amy Henderson, Senior Environmental Scientist (Specialist), at (530) 598-7194, or by e-mail at r1ceqaredding@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

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