

**Notice of Exemption**

**To:**

Office of Planning and Research  
For U.S. Mail:  
P.O. Box 3044  
Sacramento, CA 95812-3044

Street Address:  
1400 Tenth Street  
Sacramento, CA 95814

**From:**

Department of Fish and Wildlife  
715 P St., 17th Floor  
Sacramento, CA 95814



**Project Title:** Wildlife Conscious Certification Program: Enhancing Habitats and Connectivity for Wildlife on Licensed Cannabis Farms

**Project Applicant:** Humboldt State University Sponsored Programs Foundation (HSUSPF)

**Project Location:** APN's: 220- 091-025-000 in southern Humboldt County, 105-101-014- 000 near Petrolia in Humboldt County, 107-091-003 in the Mattole Valley in Humboldt County, and 522-044-028 near Willow Creek in Humboldt County.

**Project Description:** CDFW's Cannabis Restoration Grant Program awarded HSUSPF a grant (Agreement #Q2191204) for the Wildlife Conscious Certification (WCC) Program: Enhancing Habitats and Connectivity for Wildlife on Licensed Cannabis Farms Project (Project). The purpose of the Project is designed to provide an incentive for farmers to voluntarily implement wildlife enhancements to improve the conservation value of licensed cannabis farms. This Project will include the launching of a non-profit, revising and adopting WCC criteria in a consultative and participatory manner, establishing farm inspection and inspector auditing processes, and publicly launching the program with four pilot farms, a social media campaign, and marketing.

**Public Agency Approving Project:** CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

**Person or Public Agency Carrying out Project:** Kacie Flynn, Executive Director, Humboldt State University Sponsored Programs Foundation

**Exempt Status:**

Categorical Exemption. State type and section number: Class 4 and Class 6 (California Code of Regulations, title 14, sections 15304 and 15306)

**Reasons why project is exempt:** This project is limited to the installation of barn owl boxes, bat boxes, songbird boxes, hedgerow plants, bat acoustic detectors, which does not include the removal of healthy, mature trees. Data collection is for basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

**CDFW Contact Person:** Margaret Romo, Senior Environmental Scientist (Specialist), (916) 542-3840

DocuSigned by:  
*Jeremy Valverde*  
Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 1/14/2022  
Jeremy Valverde, Cannabis Program Director

## **ATTACHMENT TO NOTICE OF EXEMPTION**

### **Re: Wildlife Conscious Certification Program: Enhancing Habitats and Connectivity for Wildlife on Licensed Cannabis Farms**

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) developed the Cannabis Restoration Grant Program (CRGP) to support clean up, remediation, and restoration efforts in watersheds affected by cannabis cultivation pursuant to Revenue and Taxation Code Section 34019(f)(2).

Pursuant to Fish and Game Code Section 1501.5(b), CDFW awarded Humboldt State University Sponsored Programs Foundation (HSUSPF) a grant (Agreement #Q2191204) for the execution of the Wildlife Conscious Certification Program: Enhancing Habitats and Connectivity for Wildlife on Licensed Cannabis Farms (Project). The general purpose of the Wildlife Conscious Certification (WCC) Project is to provide an incentive for farmers to voluntarily implement wildlife enhancements to improve the conservation value of licensed cannabis farms. This specific Project will include the launching of a non-profit, revising and adopting WCC criteria in a consultative and participatory manner, establishing farm inspection and inspector auditing processes, and publicly launching the program with four pilot farms, a social media campaign, and marketing.

#### **Categorical Exemptions for Minor Alterations to Land**

CDFW concluded that the Project meets the criteria of the categorical exemption contained in CEQA Guidelines Sections 15304 (Minor Alterations to Land). Therefore, the Project is exempt from the provisions of CEQA under the Class 4 exemption.

The Class 4 exemption applies to minor public or private alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry and agricultural purposes. The general purpose of the Project is to improve wildlife conservation on cannabis farms using scientifically-based management practices, and provide an incentive for farmers to voluntarily implement wildlife enhancements to improve the conservation value of licensed cannabis farms.

The specific Project involves minor alterations and management practices to:

- (1) enhance habitats for a variety of wildlife;
- (2) increase biodiversity;
- (3) increase native habitat connectivity;
- (4) reduce or prevent injury and death to wildlife;
- (5) eliminate rodenticide poisoning and bioaccumulation in wild populations;
- (6) reduce anthropogenic disturbance to wildlife;
- (7) prevent the establishment of exotic or invasive species;
- (8) preserve existing native habitat;

- (9) reduce use of plastics;
- (10) promote water conservation;
- (11) encourage natural carbon sequestration; and
- (12) reduce or prevent disease transmission.

The specific Project involves only small-scale maintenance of land, water, and/or vegetation in the form of wildlife enhancements on four demonstration sites. For example, invasive plant removal and the mounting of small, wildlife-friendly installations such as owl boxes will increase biodiversity and preserve existing native habitat. The Project will not result in the removal of healthy, mature, or scenic trees. Finally, many of the activities encompassed in this Project, such as establishing monitoring procedures and site inspection guidelines, will have negligible or no permanent effects on the environment.

### **Categorical Exemption for Information Collection**

CDFW also determined that the activities associated with this Project fall within the Class 6 categorical exemption, Information Collection, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15306. The exemption applies to basic information collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation actions that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to any environmental resource. These may be strictly for information gathering purposes, or as part of a study leading to an action which a public agency has not yet approved, adopted, or funded.

As an experimental Project designed to improve management and conservation practices for licensed cannabis cultivators, the associated activities are specifically designed to improve natural habitats and are not expected to result in a serious or major disturbance to any environmental resource. Additionally, the monitoring activities associated with the project will aid the grantee organization in researching and collecting data to develop and implement criteria used to certify wildlife-friendly cannabis cultivation.

Monitoring for the Project consists of three activities: (1) developing a monitoring plan for WCC certified farms, (2) conducting pilot monitoring on four demonstration farms, and (3) monitoring metrics of success. Work has already been conducted with subject matter experts to adapt a draft monitoring plan for WCC. The draft plan covers five areas: (a) mammal survey with camera traps, (b) bird surveys using point counts, (c) bird and bat occupancy surveys, (d) plant surveys using relevé plots, macro-plots, or point intercept techniques, and (e) fragmentation and habitat connectivity measures. Additional survey techniques for native pollinators will be added as part of this project. This Project will provide the time and technical expertise to finalize this draft monitoring plan and establish protocols for the newly launched WCC. In addition, collaboration with CDFW's California Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Program will provide opportunity to obtain data on WCC farms that are consistent with broad-scale

monitoring and well-suited for long-term monitoring in comparison to uncultivated, natural habitats.

Using the finalized monitoring plan, this Project will conduct baseline monitoring on all four of the demonstration farms and a control site. These data will be crucial for follow up work, funded by subsequent proposals, to launch a proper before-after-control impact design to assess the impact of wildlife enhancements (in particular) and WCC certification (in general) on cannabis farms over time.

CDFW does not believe reliance on the Class 4 and Class 6 categorical exemptions to approve the project under CEQA is precluded by the exceptions set forth in CEQA Guidelines section 15300.2. CDFW's review and determination was guided by the California Supreme Court's 2015 decision in *Berkeley Hillside Preservation v. City of Berkeley*. Staff reviewed all of the available information in its possession relevant to the issue and does not believe the Project poses any unusual circumstances that would constitute an exception to the cited categorical exemptions. No potentially significant effects on either a project-specific or cumulative basis are expected from this Project. In experimentally researching and managing wildlife-friendly cannabis cultivation techniques on a small scale, the Project is expected to provide benefits to existing environmental resources. Lastly, other location-based exceptions including scenic highways, hazardous waste sites, and proximity to historical resources are not relevant to this Project.