



State of California – Natural Resources Agency
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GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor
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March 4, 2022

Governor's Office of Planning & Research

Mar 04 2022

STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

Mary Beatie
City of Hanford
317 North Douty Street
Hanford, California 93230

**Subject: Vesting Tentative Tract Map 934
Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND)
State Clearinghouse No. 2022020111**

Dear Ms. Beatie:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) received a Mitigated Negative Declaration from the City of Hanford 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. 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

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.

Mary E Beatie
City of Hanford
March 4, 2022
Page 2

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).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION SUMMARY

Proponent: City of Hanford

Objective: Lot Line Adjustments to exclude 2 existing developed residential lots of an average size of 6,402 square feet (sf) (minimum 5,000 sf, maximum 14,761 sf); one 66,536 sf out lot for drainage basin. Existing structures related to Northstar Veterinary Services Clinic in addition to trees and crops would be subject to demolition to accommodate the project

Location: The proposed Project is located in the southeastern area of the city of Hanford, California on the southeast corner of 13th Avenue and Grangeville Boulevard approximately 1.7 miles north of State Route 198. The site consists of four (4) parcels that total approximately 36.48-acres (gross). The site is identified as APNs 009-050-01, 009-050-02, 009-050-03, and 009-050-04 of Kings County and is a portion of Section 27, Township 18 South, Range 21 East, Mount Diablo Base and Meridian.

Timeframe: N/A

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CDFW offers the following comments and recommendations to assist the City of Hanford 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.

There are special-status species that may be present at the Project site in the Project area. These resources may need to be evaluated and addressed prior to any approvals that would allow ground-disturbing activities or land use changes.

Mary E Beatie
City of Hanford
March 4, 2022
Page 3

CDFW is concerned regarding potential impacts to special-status species including, but not limited to, the State threatened Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsonii*), the Federally endangered and State threatened San Joaquin Kit Fox (*Vulpes macrotis mutica*), and the State species of special concern burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*). In order to adequately assess any potential impact to biological resources, focused biological surveys should be conducted by a qualified wildlife biologist during the appropriate survey period(s) in order to determine whether any special-status species may be present within the Project area. Properly conducted biological surveys, and the information assembled from them, are essential to identify any mitigation, minimization, and avoidance measures and/or the need for additional or protocol-level surveys, and to identify any Project-related impacts under CESA and other species of concern.

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 and forage near the Project site. Based on aerial photography, the proposed Project area appears to include large, mature trees that may serve as potential nest sites and agricultural fields that may serve as foraging sites. The MND does not include any quantifiable or enforceable measures to mitigate potential impacts to SWHA.

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 ground-disturbing activities that will 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.

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

Mary E Beatie
City of Hanford
March 4, 2022
Page 4

implementation. 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: No-disturbance Buffer

CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist determine if potential SWHA nesting habitat occurs within 0.5 mile of the Project site. If ground-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. 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 Foraging Habitat

CDFW recommends compensation for the loss of SWHA foraging habitat to reduce impacts to SWHA foraging habitat to less than significant based on CDFW's Staff Report Regarding Mitigation for Impacts to Swainson's Hawks (CDFG, 1994), which recommends that mitigation for habitat loss occur within a minimum distance of 10 miles from known nest sites and the amount of habitat compensation is dependent on nest proximity. In addition to fee title acquisition or conservation easement recorded on property with suitable grassland habitat features, mitigation may occur by the purchase of conservation or suitable agricultural easements. Suitable agricultural easements would include areas limited to production of crops such as alfalfa, dry land and irrigated pasture, and cereal grain crops. Vineyards, orchards, cotton fields, and other dense vegetation do not provide adequate foraging habitat.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 4: SWHA Take Authorization

CDFW recommends that in the event an active SWHA nest is detected during surveys and 0.5-mile 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(b) is necessary to comply with CESA.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 5: SWHA Nest Trees

CDFW recommends that the removal of known raptor nest trees, even outside of the nesting season, be replaced with an appropriate native tree species planting at a ratio of 3:1 at or near the Project site or in another area that will be protected in perpetuity to reduce impacts resulting from the loss of nesting habitat.

Mary E Beatie
City of Hanford
March 4, 2022
Page 5

COMMENT 2: San Joaquin Kit Fox (SJKF)

Issue: SJKF occurrences have been documented within 2 miles of the Project site (CDFW 2022). The MND does not include any quantifiable or enforceable measures to mitigate potential impacts to SJKF. The Project has the potential to temporarily disturb and permanently alter suitable habitat for SJKF and directly impact individuals if present during construction, recharge, and other activities.

SJKF den in a variety of areas such as right-of-ways, agricultural and fallow/ruderal habitat, dry stream channels, and canal levees, and populations can fluctuate over time. SJKF are also capable of occupying urban environments (Cypher and Frost 1999). SJKF may be attracted to Project areas due to the type and level of ground-disturbing activities and the loose, friable soils resulting from intensive ground disturbance. SJKF will forage in fallow and agricultural fields and utilize streams and canals as dispersal corridors. As a result, there is potential for SJKF to occupy all suitable habitat within the City of Hanford and surrounding area.

Specific impact: Without appropriate avoidance and minimization measures for SJKF, potential significant impacts associated with construction include habitat loss, den collapse, inadvertent entrapment, reduced reproductive success, reduction in health and vigor of young, and direct mortality of individuals.

Evidence impact is potentially significant: Habitat loss resulting from land conversion to agricultural, urban, and industrial development is the primary threat to SJKF (Cypher et al. 2013). The Project site within the documented SJKF range and may provide suitable habitat for SJKF. Therefore, subsequent ground-disturbing activities have the potential to significantly impact local SJKF populations.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 6: SJKF Habitat Assessment

For all Project-specific components including construction and land conversion, CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct a habitat assessment in advance of Project implementation, to determine if the Project area or its immediate vicinity contains suitable habitat for SJKF.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 7: SJKF Surveys

CDFW recommends assessing presence/absence of SJKF by having qualified biologists conducting surveys of Project area and a 500-foot buffer of Project areas to detect SJKF and their sign. CDFW also recommends following the USFWS "Standardized recommendations for protection of the San Joaquin kit fox prior to or during ground disturbance" (2011).

Mary E Beatie
City of Hanford
March 4, 2022
Page 6

Recommended Mitigation Measure 8: SJKF Take Authorization

SJKF detection warrants consultation with CDFW to discuss how to avoid take or, if avoidance is not feasible, to acquire an ITP prior to ground-disturbing activities, pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081(b).

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. Based on aerial photography, potential habitat occurs both within and bordering the Project site. The MND does include any quantifiable or enforceable measures to mitigate potential impacts to BUOW.

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 greatest threats to BUOW in California's Central Valley (Gervais et al. 2008). Therefore, subsequent ground-disturbing activities associated with the Project 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 Mitigation Measure 9: BUOW Habitat Assessment

For all Project-specific components including construction and land conversion, CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct a habitat assessment in advance of Project implementation, to determine if the Project area or its immediate vicinity contains suitable habitat for BUOW.

Recommended Mitigation Measure 10: BUOW Surveys

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, if suitable habitat is present at the Project site, 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.

Mary E Beatie
 City of Hanford
 March 4, 2022
 Page 7

Recommended Mitigation Measure 11: 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)

Recommended Mitigation Measure 12: BUOW Passive Relocation and Mitigation

If BUOW are found within these recommended buffers and avoidance is not possible, it is important to note that according to the Staff Report (CDFG 2012), exclusion is not a take avoidance, minimization, or mitigation method and is considered a potentially significant impact under CEQA. However, if necessary, CDFW recommends that burrow exclusion be conducted by qualified biologists and only during the non-breeding season, before breeding behavior is exhibited and after the burrow is confirmed empty through non-invasive methods, such as surveillance. CDFW recommends replacement of occupied burrows with artificial burrows at a ratio of 1 burrow collapsed to 1 artificial burrow constructed (1:1) as mitigation for the potentially significant impact of evicting BUOW. BUOW may attempt to colonize or re-colonize an area that will be impacted; thus, CDFW recommends ongoing surveillance, at a rate that is sufficient to detect BUOW if they return.

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

Mary E Beatie
City of Hanford
March 4, 2022
Page 8

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. 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 area 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 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>.

FILING FEES

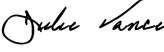
If it is determined that the Project has the potential to impact biological resources, an assessment of filing fees will be necessary. Fees are payable upon filing of the Notice of Determination by the Lead Agency and serve to help defray the cost of environmental review by CDFW. Payment of the fee is 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).

Mary E Beatie
City of Hanford
March 4, 2022
Page 9

CDFW appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Project to assist City of Hanford 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 Jaime Marquez, Environmental Scientist, at the address provided on this letterhead, by telephone at (559) 580-3200, or by electronic mail at Jaime.Marquez@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

FA83F09FE08945A...
Julie A. Vance
Regional Manager

Mary E Beatie
City of Hanford
March 4, 2022
Page 10

LITERATURE CITED

- California Burrowing Owl Consortium. 1993. Burrowing owl survey protocol and mitigation guidelines. April 1993.
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- CDFW. 2022. Biogeographic Information and Observation System (BIOS). <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/BIOS>. Accessed April 20, 2021.
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- Rodewald (Ed.). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York, USA.
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- USFWS. 2011. Standard recommendations for the protection of the San Joaquin kit fox prior to or during ground disturbance. United States Fish and Wildlife Service, January 2011.

Attachment 1

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

**PROJECT: Tract Map 934
SCH No.: 2022020111**

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE	STATUS/DATE/INITIALS
<i>Before Disturbing Soil or Vegetation</i>	
Mitigation Measure 1: SWHA Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 3: SWHA Foraging Habitat	
Mitigation Measure 4: SWHA Take Authorization	
Mitigation Measure 5: SWHA Nest Trees	
Mitigation Measure 6: SJKF Habitat Assessment	
Mitigation Measure 7: SJKF Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 8: SJKF Take Authorization	
Mitigation Measure 9: BUOW Habitat Assessment	
Mitigation Measure 10: BUOW Surveys	
Mitigation Measure 12: BUOW Passive Relocation and Mitigation	
<i>During Construction</i>	
Mitigation Measure 2: No-disturbance buffer	
Mitigation Measure 11: BUOW Avoidance	
Mitigation Measure 6: BUOW Passive Relocation and Mitigation	