



State of California – Natural Resources Agency

DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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March 2, 2022

Brad Johnson
City of Claremont
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Subject: Comments on the Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the La Puerta School Site Specific Plan Project, Los Angeles County, SCH #2022020137

Dear Mr. Johnson:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has reviewed the Notice of Preparation (NOP) of a Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) and associated documentation, La Puerta School Site Specific Plan September 2021 (Plan), from the City of Claremont (City) for the La Puerta School Site Specific Plan Project (Project). 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, 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's 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 & Game Code, §§ 711.7, subdivision (a) & 1802; Public Resources Code, § 21070; California Environmental Quality Act (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 (Public Resources Code, § 21069; CEQA Guidelines, § 15381). CDFW expects that it may need to exercise regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code, including lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority (Fish & Game Code, § 1600 et seq.). Likewise, to the extent implementation of the Project as proposed may result in "take" (see Fish & Game Code, § 2050) of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA; Fish & Game Code, § 2050 et seq.) or the Native Plant Protection Act (NPPA; Fish & Game Code, §1900 et seq.), CDFW recommends the Project proponent obtain appropriate authorization under the Fish and Game Code.

Objective: The Project includes the adoption of a General Plan amendment and zone change and approval of a specific plan. Specifically, the Claremont General Plan land use map would

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be amended to change the land use designation of the approximately 9.7-acre Project site from Public to Residential 6 (residential with a maximum density of 6 units per acre). The City's zoning map would be amended to change the land use designation from Public to Specific Plan. The proposed specific plan would permit development of residential uses consistent with the proposed General Plan designation. According to the Plan, the rezoned Specific Plan would designate permits up to 6 dwelling units per acre. The community will be accessed from Forbes Avenue. There is one point of entry at the southern boundary of the Project. All utilities within the Project site will be underground. Connectivity from Forbes Avenue to the adjacent La Puerta Sports Park will continue by way of Thompson Creek Trail, and additional access is proposed within the neighborhood.

Location: The Project site is located at 2475 Forbes Avenue along the west side of Forbes Avenue. The Project site is generally bounded by Thompson Creek Trail to the north, the rear property lines of homes on Coalinga Court and Dana Court to the south, Forbes Avenue to the east, and La Puerta Sport Park to the west.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CDFW offers the following comments and recommendations to assist the City in adequately identifying and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife (biological) resources.

Specific Comments

- 1) Peregrine Falcon - Fully Protected Species. According to [eBird](#) (2021), there is a record of a peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) sighted directly northwest of the Project site, along Thompson Creek Trail. Peregrine falcon is a species classified as fully protected under CDFW. Direct impacts in the form of habitat loss and indirect impacts in the form of construction noise and ground vibrations may occur and remove potential foraging habitat for this fully protected species. In addition, construction during the breeding season of nesting birds could result in the incidental loss of breeding success or otherwise lead to nest abandonment on site and around the Project vicinity, which may be considered take of a fully protected species. Species designated under Fish and Game code as Fully Protected may not be taken or possessed at any time and no licenses or permits may be issued for their take (Fish & G. Code §§ 3511, 4700, 5050, and 5515). Fully protected status precludes CDFW from authorizing any amount of incidental take or intentional take to meet any project mitigation requirement. Given the legal status of fully protected animals, take avoidance measures should meet very high standards of effectiveness, substantially greater than the measures to minimize take required under Incidental Take Permits.
 - a) CDFW recommends surveying the entire Project site and at least a half mile surrounding the Project vicinity, if feasible. This survey should determine the potential distribution of peregrine falcon and assure that take will be avoided during Project construction activities.
 - b) CDFW recommends the environmental document include measures to preclude take on the Project site during operations and from the increase in temporary traffic and human presence in relation to construction. The environmental document should view the potential take as a result of habitat modification. If a residential development project's modification of occupied habitat causes mortality of individuals, then the

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development project will be considered the cause of the take. Therefore, to avoid take, construction and operation activities should avoid all raptors by a distance of no less than the distance that the specific species are known or expected to travel within their home range, based on telemetry, mark-recapture, or other data.

- 2) SSC - Reptiles. A review of California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDB) indicates an occurrence of southern California legless lizards (*Anniella stebbinsi*), a designated Species of Special Concern (SSC), within two miles of the Project vicinity. Project activities related to residential construction will require ground disturbing activities such as grading and grubbing, which may result in reptile habitat destruction, causing the death or injury of adults, juveniles, eggs, or hatchlings. Moreover, the Project may remove essential foraging and breeding habitat for the species.

CDFW recommends qualified biologists familiar with the reptile species behavior and life history conduct focused surveys to determine the presence/absence of SSC prior to vegetation removal and/or grading. Surveys should be conducted during active season when the reptile species is most likely to be detected.

To further avoid direct mortality, CDFW recommends that a qualified biological monitor be on site during ground and habitat disturbing activities to move out of harm's way special status species (see General Comment #9) that would be injured or killed by grubbing or Project-related grading activities. It should be noted that the temporary relocation of on-site wildlife does not constitute effective mitigation for the purposes of offsetting Project impacts associated with habitat loss.

CDFW has the authority to issue permits for the take or possession of wildlife, including mammals; birds, nests, and eggs; reptiles, amphibians, fish, plants; and invertebrates (Fish & G. Code, §§ 1002, 1002.5, 1003). Effective October 1, 2018, a Scientific Collecting Permit is required to monitor project impacts on wildlife resources, as required by environmental documents, permits, or other legal authorizations; and, to capture, temporarily possess, and relocate wildlife to avoid harm or mortality in connection with otherwise lawful activities (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, § 650). Please visit CDFW's [Scientific Collection Permits](#) webpage for information (CDFWa 2022). Pursuant to the California Code of Regulations, title 14, section 650, the qualified biologist must obtain appropriate handling permits to capture, temporarily possess, and relocate wildlife to avoid harm or mortality in connection with Project construction and activities.

- 3) Nesting Birds. Development of residential homes on the Project site will require removal of trees and vegetation on site and adjacent to Thompson Creek Trail, which could support nesting birds. Project activities occurring during the bird breeding and nesting season could result in the incidental loss of fertile eggs or nestlings, or otherwise lead to nest abandonment.

Sections 3503, 3503.5, and 3513 of the California Fish and Game Code prohibit take of all birds and their active nests including raptors and other migratory nongame birds (as listed under the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act). It is unlawful to take, possess, or needlessly destroy the nest or eggs of any nesting bird. CDFW recommends that measures be taken to fully avoid Project impacts to nesting birds. Proposed Project-related ground-disturbing activities (e.g., mobilizing, staging, drilling, and excavating) and vegetation removal should occur outside of the avian breeding season, which generally runs from February 15 through

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September 15 (as early as January 1 for some raptors) to avoid take of birds, raptors, or their eggs.

- 4) Tree Disease Management Plan. Project activities may include tree removal and new trees as a part of landscaping activities. This may have the potential to spread tree pests and diseases throughout the Project site and into adjacent habitat not currently exposed to these stressors. Pests and diseases include (but not limited to): sudden oak death (*Phytophthora ramorum*), thousand canker fungus (*Geosmithia morbida*), Polyphagous shot hole borer (*Euwallacea* spp.), and goldspotted oak borer (*Agrilus auroguttatus*) (Phytosphere Research 2012; TCD 2020; UCANR 2020; UCIPM 2013). This could result in expediting the loss of native trees and woodlands. CDFW recommends the DEIR include an infectious tree disease management plan or a list of preventative measures, developed in consultation with an arborist, to describe how it will be implemented to avoid or reduce the spread of tree insect pests and diseases.

General Comments

- 1) Disclosure. A DEIR should provide an adequate, complete, and detailed disclosure about the effect which a proposed project is likely to have on the environment (Pub. Resources Code, § 20161; CEQA Guidelines, §15151). Adequate disclosure is necessary so CDFW may provide comments on the appropriateness of proposed avoidance, minimization, or mitigation measures, as well as to assess the significance of the specific impact relative to the species (e.g., current range, distribution, population trends, and connectivity).
- 2) Mitigation Measures. Public agencies have a duty under CEQA to prevent significant, avoidable damage to the environment by requiring changes in projects through the use of feasible alternatives or mitigation measures [CEQA Guidelines, §§ 15002(a)(3), 15021]. Pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15126.4, an environmental impact report shall describe feasible measures which could mitigate for impacts below a significant level under CEQA.
 - a) Level of Detail. Mitigation measures must be feasible, effective, implemented, and fully enforceable/imposed by the lead agency through permit conditions, agreements, or other legally binding instruments (Pub. Resources Code, § 21081.6(b); CEQA Guidelines, §§ 15126.4, 15041). A public agency shall provide the measures that are fully enforceable through permit conditions, agreements, or other measures (Pub. Resources Code, § 21081.6). CDFW recommends that the CITY prepare mitigation measures that are specific, detailed (i.e., responsible party, timing, specific actions, location), and clear in order for a measure to be fully enforceable and implemented successfully via a mitigation monitoring and/or reporting program (CEQA Guidelines, § 15097; Pub. Resources Code, § 21081.6). Adequate disclosure is necessary so CDFW may provide comments on the adequacy and feasibility of proposed mitigation measures.
 - b) Disclosure of Impacts. If a proposed mitigation measure would cause one or more significant effects, in addition to impacts caused by the Project as proposed, the environmental document should include a discussion of the effects of proposed mitigation measures [CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.4(a)(1)]. In that regard, the environmental document should provide an adequate, complete, and detailed disclosure about a project's proposed mitigation measure(s). Adequate disclosure is

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necessary so CDFW may assess the potential impacts of proposed mitigation measures.

3) Biological Baseline Assessment and Impact Analysis. CDFW recommends providing a complete assessment and impact analysis of the flora and fauna within and adjacent to the Project area, with emphasis upon identifying endangered, threatened, sensitive, regionally, and locally unique species, and sensitive habitats. Impact analysis will aid in determining any direct, indirect, and cumulative biological impacts, as well as specific mitigation or avoidance measures necessary to offset those impacts, as referred in General Comment #8. CDFW recommends avoiding any sensitive natural communities found on or adjacent to the Project. CDFW also considers impacts to SSC a significant direct and cumulative adverse effect without implementing appropriate avoid and/or mitigation measures. The DEIR should include the following information:

- a) Information on the regional setting that is critical to an assessment of environmental impacts, with special emphasis on resources that are rare or unique to the region [CEQA Guidelines, § 15125(c)]. The DEIR should include measures to fully avoid and otherwise protect Sensitive Natural Communities from Project-related impacts. Project implementation may result in impacts to rare or endangered plants or plant communities that have been recorded adjacent to the Project vicinity. CDFW considers these communities as threatened habitats having both regional and local significance. Plant communities, alliances, and associations with a [state-wide ranking](#) of S1, S2, S3 and S4 should be considered sensitive and declining at the local and regional level (CDFWb 2022);
- b) A thorough, recent, floristic-based assessment of special status plants and natural communities, following CDFW's [Protocols for Surveying and Evaluating Impacts to Special Status Native Plant Populations and Natural Communities](#) (CDFW 2018);
- c) Floristic, alliance- and/or association-based mapping and vegetation impact assessments conducted at the Project site and within the neighboring vicinity. *The Manual of California Vegetation*, second edition, should also be used to inform this mapping and assessment (Sawyer, 2008). Adjoining habitat areas should be included in this assessment where site activities could lead to direct or indirect impacts offsite. Habitat mapping at the alliance level will help establish baseline vegetation conditions;
- d) A complete, recent, assessment of the biological resources associated with each habitat type on site and within adjacent areas that could also be affected by the Project. CDFW's California Natural Diversity Data Base (CNDDDB) in Sacramento should be contacted to obtain current information on any previously reported sensitive species and habitat. CDFW recommends that [CNDDDB Field Survey Forms](#) be completed and submitted to CNDDDB to document survey results (CDFWc 2022);
- e) A complete, recent, assessment of rare, threatened, and endangered, and other sensitive species on site and within the area of potential effect, including California Species of Special Concern and California Fully Protected Species (Fish & Game Code, §§ 3511, 4700, 5050 and 5515). Species to be addressed should include all those which meet the CEQA definition of endangered, rare, or threatened species (CEQA Guidelines, § 15380). Seasonal variations in use of the Project area should

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also be addressed. Focused species-specific surveys, conducted at the appropriate time of year and time of day when the sensitive species are active or otherwise identifiable, are required. Acceptable species-specific survey procedures should be developed in consultation with CDFW and the USFWS; and,

- f) A recent, wildlife and rare plant survey. CDFW generally considers biological field assessments for wildlife to be valid for a one-year period, and assessments for rare plants may be considered valid for a period of up to three years. Some aspects of the proposed Project may warrant periodic updated surveys for certain sensitive taxa, particularly if build out could occur over a protracted time frame, or in phases.
- 4) Jurisdictional Waters. As a Responsible Agency under CEQA, CDFW has authority over activities in streams and/or lakes that will divert or obstruct the natural flow, or change the bed, channel, or bank (including vegetation associated with the stream or lake) of a river or stream or use material from a streambed. For any such activities, the project applicant (or "entity") must provide written notification to CDFW pursuant to Fish and Game Code Section 1600 *et seq.*
- i) CDFW's issuance of a Lake and Streambed Alteration (LSA) Agreement for a project that is subject to CEQA will require CEQA compliance actions by CDFW as a Responsible Agency. As a Responsible Agency, CDFW may consider the environmental document of the local jurisdiction (Lead Agency) for the Project. To minimize additional requirements by CDFW pursuant to section 1600 *et seq.* and/or under CEQA, the environmental document should fully identify the potential impacts to the stream or riparian resources and provide adequate avoidance, mitigation, monitoring, and reporting commitments for issuance of the LSA Agreement. Please visit CDFW's [Lake and Streambed Alteration Program](#) webpage for information about LSA Notification (CDFWd 2022).
 - ii) In the event the Project area may support aquatic, riparian, and wetland habitats; a preliminary delineation of the streams and their associated riparian habitats should be included in the environmental document. The delineation should be conducted pursuant to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) wetland definition adopted by CDFW (Cowardin et al. 1970). Be advised that some wetland and riparian habitats subject to CDFW's authority may extend beyond the jurisdictional limits of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Section 404 permit and Regional Water Quality Control Board Section 401 Certification.
 - iii) In Project areas which may support ephemeral or episodic streams, herbaceous vegetation, woody vegetation, and woodlands also serve to protect the integrity of these resources and help maintain natural sedimentation processes. Therefore, CDFW recommends effective setbacks be established to maintain appropriately sized vegetated buffer areas adjoining ephemeral drainages. The environmental document should provide a justification for the effectiveness of the chosen distance for the setback.
 - iv) Project-related changes in upstream and downstream drainage patterns, runoff, and sedimentation should be included and evaluated in the environmental document.

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- v) As part of the LSA Notification process, CDFW requests a hydrological evaluation of the 100, 50, 25, 10, 5, and 2-year frequency storm event for existing and proposed conditions. CDFW recommends the environmental document evaluate the results and address avoidance, minimization, and/or mitigation measures that may be necessary to reduce potential significant impacts.
- 5) Project Description and Alternatives. To enable CDFW to adequately review and comment on the proposed Project from the standpoint of the protection of plants, fish, and wildlife, we recommend the following information be included in the DEIR:
- a) A complete discussion of the purpose and need for, and description of, the proposed Project, including all staging areas and access routes to the construction and staging areas; and,
 - b) A range of feasible alternatives to Project component location and design features to ensure that alternatives to the proposed Project are fully considered and evaluated. The alternatives should avoid or otherwise minimize direct and indirect impacts to sensitive biological resources and wildlife movement areas.
- 6) Biological Direct, Indirect, and Cumulative Impacts. To provide a thorough discussion of direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts expected to adversely affect biological resources, with specific measures to offset such impacts, the following should be addressed in the DEIR:
- a) A discussion of potential adverse impacts from lighting, noise, human activity, exotic species, and drainage. The latter subject should address Project-related changes on drainage patterns and downstream of the Project site; the volume, velocity, and frequency of existing and post-Project surface flows; polluted runoff; soil erosion and/or sedimentation in streams and water bodies; and, post-Project fate of runoff from the Project site. The discussion should also address the proximity of the extraction activities to the water table, whether dewatering would be necessary and the potential resulting impacts on the habitat (if any) supported by the groundwater. Mitigation measures proposed to alleviate such Project impacts should be included;
 - b) A discussion regarding indirect Project impacts on biological resources, including resources in nearby public lands, open space, adjacent natural habitats, riparian ecosystems, and any designated and/or proposed or existing reserve lands (e.g., preserve lands associated with a Natural Community Conservation Plan (NCCP, Fish & Game Code, § 2800 et. seq.). Impacts on, and maintenance of, wildlife corridor/movement areas, including access to undisturbed habitats in adjacent areas, should be fully evaluated in the DEIR;
 - c) An analysis of impacts from land use designations and zoning located nearby or adjacent to natural areas that may inadvertently contribute to wildlife-human interactions. A discussion of possible conflicts and mitigation measures to reduce these conflicts should be included in the DEIR; and,
 - d) A cumulative effects analysis, as described under CEQA Guidelines section 15130. General and specific plans, as well as past, present, and anticipated future projects,

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should be analyzed relative to their impacts on similar plant communities and wildlife habitats.

- 7) CESA. CDFW considers adverse impacts to a species protected by CESA to be significant without mitigation under CEQA. As to CESA, take of any endangered, threatened, candidate species, or CESA-listed plant species that results from the Project is prohibited, except as authorized by state law (Fish & G. Code §§ 2080, 2085; Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, §786.9). Consequently, if the Project or any Project-related activity during the life of the Project will result in take of a species designated as endangered or threatened, or a candidate for listing under CESA, CDFW recommends that the Project proponent seek appropriate take authorization under CESA prior to implementing the Project. Appropriate authorization from CDFW may include an Incidental Take Permit (ITP) or a consistency determination in certain circumstances, among other options [Fish & Game Code, §§ 2080.1, 2081, subds. (b) and (c)]. Early consultation is encouraged, as significant modification to a Project and mitigation measures may be required in order to obtain a CESA Permit. Revisions to the Fish and Game Code, effective January 1998, may require that CDFW issue a separate CEQA document for the issuance of an ITP unless the Project CEQA document addresses all Project impacts to CESA-listed species and specifies a mitigation monitoring and reporting program that will meet the requirements of an ITP. For these reasons, biological mitigation monitoring and reporting proposals should be of sufficient detail and resolution to satisfy the requirements for a CESA ITP.
- 8) Compensatory Mitigation. The DEIR should include mitigation measures for adverse Project-related impacts to sensitive plants, animals, and habitats. Mitigation measures should emphasize avoidance and reduction of Project impacts. For unavoidable impacts, on-site habitat restoration or enhancement should be discussed in detail. If on-site mitigation is not feasible or would not be biologically viable and therefore not adequately mitigate the loss of biological functions and values, off-site mitigation through habitat creation and/or acquisition and preservation in perpetuity should be addressed. Areas proposed as mitigation lands should be protected in perpetuity with a conservation easement, financial assurance and dedicated to a qualified entity for long-term management and monitoring. Under Government Code section 65967, the lead agency must exercise due diligence in reviewing the qualifications of a governmental entity, special district, or nonprofit organization to effectively manage and steward land, water, or natural resources on mitigation lands it approves.
- 9) Moving out of Harm's Way. The proposed Project may result in impacting habitats on and/or adjacent to the Project site that may support wildlife. To avoid direct mortality, CDFW recommends that a qualified biological monitor approved by CDFW be on-site prior to and during ground and habitat disturbing activities to move out of harm's way special status species or other wildlife of low mobility that would be injured or killed by grubbing or Project-related construction activities. It should be noted that the temporary relocation of on-site wildlife does not constitute effective mitigation for the purposes of offsetting Project impacts associated with habitat loss. If the Project requires species to be removed, disturbed, or otherwise handled, we recommend that the DEIR clearly identify that the designated entity shall obtain all appropriate state and federal permits.

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CONCLUSION

CDFW appreciates the opportunity to comment on the NOP to assist the City in identifying and mitigating Project impacts on biological resources. If you have any questions or comments regarding this letter, please contact Felicia Silva, Environmental Scientist, by email at Felicia.Silva@wildlife.ca.gov or (562) 292-8105.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:



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Victoria Tang signing for

Erinn Wilson-Olgin
Environmental Program Manager I
South Coast Region

ec: CDFW

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