TRAVELERS STATION

Preliminary Biological Assessment

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RE: TRAVELLER'S STATION PRELIMINARY WILDLIFE BIOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

Geary:

A preliminary wildlife biological assessment was conducted for the Traveler's Station project site, located off of Searle Road, at the intersection of State Route 101 and Highway 129 (Chittenden Road). The purpose of the assessment is to address comments from San Benito County Planning regarding the Initial Study prepared for the project.

METHODS

A cursory-level site assessment of the project site was performed on 12 November 2021. The property was traversed on foot and photographed. Habitat characteristics observed were recorded in a field notebook. In addition to the site visit, Google Earth images also were accessed to document historical changes of habitat conditions. No focused surveys were performed for this assessment.

A preliminary literature search was conducted to identify special-status species that have the potential to occur in the project site vicinity. The primary sources for this search included: California Natural Diversity Data Base (CNDDB) (CDFG 2021); California Amphibian and Reptile Species of Special Concern (Thomson *et al* 2016); California Bird Species of Special Concern (Shuford and Gardali 2008); *Draft* Mammalian Species of Special Concern in California (Bolster 1998); and the eBird database (https://ebird.org).

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The vegetation on the project site has gone through successional changes over the past twenty years, based on interpretation of Google Earth images. From 1993 – 2004, the site was managed to maintain what appears to be grassland habitat. From 2004 – 2008, management seemingly was less intensive and scrub vegetation (presumably coyote brush) became established on the project site, increasing in density through 2018. Since 2018, regular vegetation management seemingly has resumed, creating an open, ruderal (weedy) field with remnant stalks of coyote brush present (**Figure 1**). The eastern boundary of the project site is lined with eucalyptus trees and remnant scrub vegetation is found around the project site periphery. Gopher burrows were present throughout the site on 12 November 2021 (**Figure 2**). No aquatic habitat is present on the project site.

Figure 1. View of the project site looking northward from Searle Road. Note the managed vegetation, the remnant scrub along the project site periphery and the eucalyptus trees that line the eastern margin of the site. Photo taken on 12 November 2021.

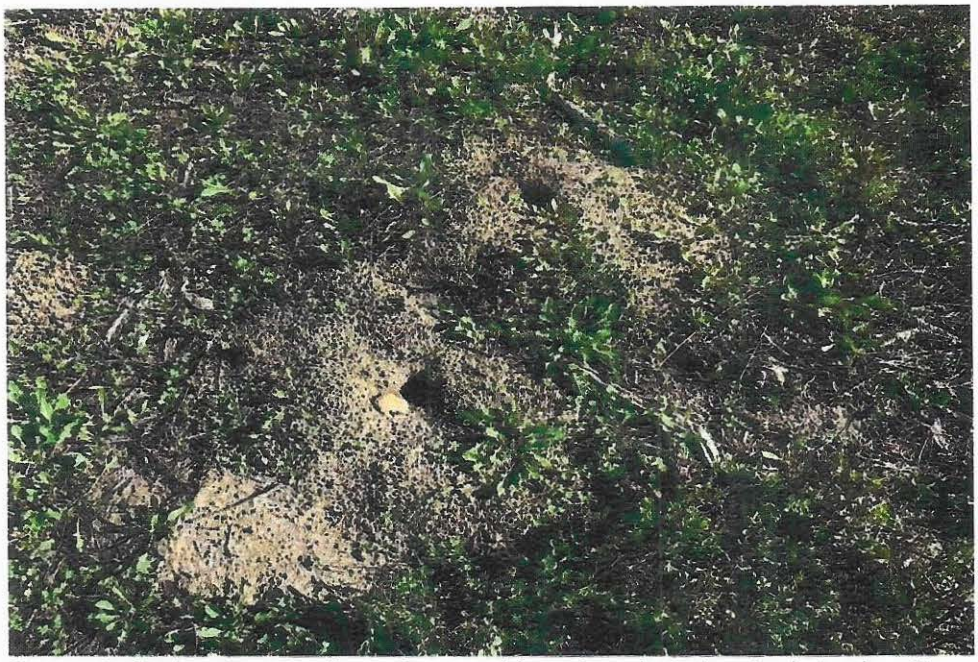

Figure 2. Gopher burrows were observed scattered throughout the project site during the 12 November site visit.

SPECIAL-STATUS WILDLIFE

For the purposes of this report, special-status wildlife species are defined as species with state or federal endangered/threatened status, California species of special concern, or locally significant species which may be protected under CEQA Section 15380(d).

Based on a review of the CNDDB Watsonville East and Chittenden quadrangles, personal knowledge of special-status species regional patterns of occurrence, and habitat conditions observed at the

project site, five species were considered possible inhabitants of the project site and surrounding area. These included California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*), white-tailed kite (*Elanus leucurus*), loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), pallid bat (*Antrozous pallida*) and western red bat (*Lasiurus blossevillii*). Seven other special-status species are either known from or may occur in the project region, but are not considered further in this assessment for one or more of the following reasons: 1) the species is expected to occur in the study area only briefly as a transient (e.g., during migration, occasional foraging); 2) the study area does not support suitable habitat (e.g., breeding ponds, trees with bat roost potential, etc.); and 3) the study area appears to be outside of the species' local distributional range. A summary of the legal status, natural history and local patterns of occurrence for these species are presented on **Attachment - Table 1.**

MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY ACT (MBTA) SPECIES

Birds and active nests of all native species are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), regardless of their lack of regulatory status as state or federally threatened or endangered, or California species of special concern. The MBTA does exclude protection for migratory birds that have been introduced to North America, such as rock pigeon (*Columba livia*), Eurasian collared dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*), house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and European starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*). The MBTA is administered by the USFWS.

In addition to the bird species identified on Table 1, other potential nesting species may occur at the project site or vicinity during the nesting season, which generally spans 1 February – 1 September. No focused bird surveys were conducted for this assessment.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

California Tiger Salamander

Due to the close proximity of the project site to a known CTS breeding pond, CTS may occur on the project site, using gopher burrows as upland refugia. Since CTS are state and federally listed as 'threatened', they are protected from take. Therefore, implement the following recommendations.

- Perform a protocol-level survey to determine presence/absence of CTS on the project site. If present, consult with the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFW) to obtain an Incidental Take Permit (ITP), in order for the project to proceed. The ITP will include measures to protect CTS during project construction, such as worker's environmental training, construction monitoring by a qualified biologist, and the implementation of a CTS relocation plan prepared by the project proponent.
- If the project proponent decides to forgo the protocol survey and presume the presence of CTS, consult directly with CDFW to obtain an ITP. Mitigation for the loss of habitat would require purchasing credits from a local mitigation bank at ratios determined by CDFW.

Bird Species of Concern and Other Nesting Birds

The eucalyptus trees on the property could supports nest sites for bird species of concern and other birds protected by the MTBA. Depending on the period of the project, tree removal or construction activities in close proximity to the trees could result in the failure of bird nests. If construction activities are scheduled between 1 February and 1 September, the protection measures, below, are recommended. If the project is scheduled outside of the nesting season, no additional bird protection measures are needed.

- Perform pre-construction nesting birds surveys no later than one week before the scheduled start of the project.

- In the event active nests are observed, the nest site shall be flagged and a buffer shall be established, in an effort to prevent nest failure. The buffer widths shall be determined by the monitoring biologist.
- Active nests should be monitored at a frequency determined by the monitoring biologist, but at a minimum of once per week, until the nestlings have fledged.
- In the event that construction activities appear to be interfering with nest maintenance (e.g., feedings and incubation), then construction activities should be postponed until the young have fledged, as determined by the biological monitor.
- To prevent deter birds from nesting onsite during construction of the project, consider removing trees outside of the nesting period (1 February – 1 September).

Pallid Bat and Western Red Bat

The eucalyptus trees on the property could support bat roost sites for cavity and foliage roosting bats. Tree removal or construction activities adjacent to the trees could lead to bat roost abandonment or mortality of individuals. Therefore, the following measures are recommended.

- Two weeks prior to the start of the project, a qualified bat specialist should perform a pre-construction survey to determine the presence/absence of roosting bats. If bat roosts are present, implement measures prepared by the bat specialist. These could include establishing buffers around bat roosts, strategies to deter bat use of the trees, or the removal of trees outside of the maternity roost period (typically 1 March – 31 August), under the guidance of the bat specialist. If roosting bats are found, bat deterrence or tree removal operations should be performed in consultation with CDFW.

If you have any questions or comments regarding this report, please contact me anytime.

Sincerely,

Bryan Mori
Attachment: Table 1 Species of Concern

REFERENCES

Bolster, B. C. Ed. 1998. *DRAFT* Mammalian Species of Special Concern in California. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, CA.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). 2021. California Natural Diversity Data Base Watsonville East and Chittenden Quadrangles. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, CA.

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Jennings, M. R. and M. P. Hayes. 1994. Amphibian and Reptile Species of Concern in California. California Department of Fish and Game. Sacramento, CA.

Shuford, W. D. and T. Gardali, Eds. 2008. California Bird Species of Special Concern. Studies of Western Birds No. 1, published jointly by the Western Field Ornithologists and California Department of Fish and Game.

Thompson, R. C., Wright, A. N., and H. B. Shaffer. 2016. California Amphibian and Reptile Species of Special Concern. California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Attachment - Table 1. Special-Status Wildlife Species, Traveler's Station.

SPECIES	STATUS	HABITAT	STATUS AT THE PROJECT SITE
California Tiger Salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*)	FT, ST	Breeds in seasonal ponds and uses primarily adjacent grasslands as nonbreeding habitat, occupying small mammal burrows. Capable of overland movements of up to 1.24 miles.	**Possible occurrence at the project site.** The project site supports gopher burrows and the site is within dispersal distance of a known CTS breeding pond approximately 1050 feet to the NW. Additionally, two other potential breeding ponds are present to the SE and closer to the project site.
California Red-legged Frog (*Rana draytoni*)	FT, SSC	Ponds, freshwater marshes, quiet stream pools for breeding or year round. May be found in various mesic habitats during dispersal. Capable of overland movements of up to 2 miles.	**Not expected to occur at the project site.** No CNDDB records in the project vicinity. Species is known to occur regionally, but aquatic breeding (e.g., ponds) and wetland over-summering habitats are lacking on the project site.
San Joaquin Coachwhip (*Masticophis flagellum ruddocki*)	SSC	Occurs in open, dry habitats with little or no trees, including desert plains, open grasslands, scrub, pasturelands and farmlands. Mammal burrows are used for cover and egg deposition.	**Not expected to occur at the project site.** Known from the project region, but the project site is considered unsuitable given the current vegetation management activities and recent occurrence of dense scrub, which is not considered suitable habitat. Species apparently is sensitive to habitat disturbances.
Western Pond Turtle (*Emys marmorata*)	SSC	Inhabits rivers, ponds, reservoirs and lakes. Nests in grasslands and other open vegetation.	**Not expected to occur at the project site.** No CNDDB records in the project vicinity. Species known to occur in the Pajaro River watershed, but aquatic habitat is absent on the project site and nesting habitat is marginal due to on-going vegetation management and recent occurrence of dense scrub vegetation.
White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*)	FP	Nests in trees of open landscapes.	**Possible nesting species at the project site.** This species is known to occur in the project vicinity (eBird; pers. obs.). The eucalyptus trees may provide nesting sites.
Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)	SSC (Nesting)	Nests in secluded coastal scrub, dense grasslands and marshes.	**Not expected to nest at the project site.** Known from the project vicinity, but the project site is considered unsuitable given the current vegetation management activities, small area and lack of seclusion. Likely as a year-round non-nesting visitor.
Merlin (*Falco columbarius*)	SSC (Wintering)	Along the coast and in open habitats inland.	**Does not nest in the project region.** Possible at the project site, as an uncommon winter resident only.

SPECIES	STATUS	HABITAT	STATUS AT THE PROJECT SITE
Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*)	SSC (Nesting and Wintering)	Grasslands, fallow fields with sparse vegetation, dune scrub (winter). Uses ground squirrel burrows or burrow equivalents.	**Not expected to occur at the project site.** The species is known from the project region, but the vegetation management activities and lack of ground squirrel burrows create unsuitable conditions on the project site.
Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*)	SSC (Nesting)	Nests in scattered shrubs and trees with dense branching. Prefers open habitats such as grasslands, fallow ag fields, open scrub.	**Possible nesting at the project site.** This species is known to occur in the project vicinity (eBird; pers. obs.). The eucalyptus trees may provide nesting sites.
Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*)	ST/SSC	Nests in secluded emergent wetlands and dense brambles/thistles adjacent to wetlands or ag fields.	**Not expected to nest at the project site.** This species is known to occur in the project region. But nesting habitat is lacking on the project site, due to on-going vegetation management the lack of seclusion. May occur as a non-nesting visitor during foraging forays.
Pallid Bat (*Antrozous pallida*)	SSC	Found in a variety of habitats from low desert to high elevation forests. A colonial species that roosts in buildings, tree hollows, rock crevices and under concrete bridges. Considered to be non-migratory.	**Possible roosting species.** No records of pallid bat are listed in the CNDDB for the project vicinity, but the eucalyptus trees may provide roosting habitat, if large hollows or cavities are present.
Western Red Bat (*Lasiurus blossevillii*)	SSC	A migratory species. Prefers warmer summertime temperatures for reproduction (80s – 90s F). Roosts mostly in foliage of deciduous trees and shrubs in edge habitats near streams and open fields; orchards used in Central Valley.	**Possible roosting species.** The eucalyptus trees may provide roosting habitat, perhaps more commonly during winter. No CNDDB records for this species were found in the project vicinity.

SPECIES	STATUS	HABITAT	STATUS AT THE PROJECT SITE
American Badger (*Taxidea taxus*)	SSC	Most abundant in drier, open stages of most shrub, forest, and grassland habitats, with friable soils and abundant fossorial prey.	**Not expected to occur at the project site.** The species is known from the project region, but the vegetation management activities and lack of ground squirrel burrows (prey) create largely unsuitable conditions on site. No badger burrows were observed during the site assessment.

Key: FE = Federal endangered species; FT = Federal threatened species; SE = State endangered species; ST = State threatened; FP = State fully protected species; SSC = State species of special concern.
Note: Occurrence evaluations are based on observations of habitat conditions and literature review. No focused surveys were performed as part of this study