



State of California – Natural Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
Central Region
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GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor
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December 23, 2022

Melissa Miller, Facilities Planning Manager
Merced Union High School District
2130 Spacecraft Drive
Atwater, California 95301
mmiller@muhsd.org

**Subject: Buhach Colony High School Stadium Project (Project)
Notice of Preparation (NOP) of a Draft EIR
State Clearinghouse No. 2022120347**

Dear Melissa Miller:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) received a NOP from the Merced Union High School District 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

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.

Melissa Miller, Facilities Planning Manager
Merced Union High School District
December 23, 2022
Page 2

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 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: Merced Union High School District

Objective: The Project includes the construction and operation of a 3,000-seat athletic stadium which would serve Buhach Colony High School's athletic programs. Facilities planned as part of the Project include bleacher seating, monument entry, a ticket booth, an announcer's booth, two concession/team room/restroom buildings, a natural turf competition field, a rubberized running track, and a scoreboard. The stadium would be lighted using state-of-the-art LED light fixtures mounted on four 90-foot tall poles. The lighting would be designed and oriented to light the field and Project areas adjacent to the field. Additionally, the Project includes landscaping features and new concrete-paved areas within the campus.

Location: The Project site is located at the existing Buhach Colony High School campus, addressed at 1800 Buhach Road in the City of Atwater, California.

Timeframe: If approved, the Project is anticipated to begin construction in September 2023 and begin operation in September 2024.

Melissa Miller, Facilities Planning Manager
Merced Union High School District
December 23, 2022
Page 3

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CDFW offers the following comments and recommendations to assist the Merced Union High School District 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 Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for this Project.

The DEIR that will be prepared will determine the likely environmental impacts associated with the Project. CDFW is concerned regarding potential impacts to special-status species from the development activities, including but not limited to, the State threatened Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*).

Swainson's Hawk (SWHA)

SWHA exhibit high nest-site fidelity year after year in the San Joaquin Valley (CDFW 2016). The Project as proposed 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. Without appropriate avoidance and minimization measures for SWHA, potential significant impacts that may result from Project activities include nest abandonment, and reduced nesting success (loss or reduced health or vigor of eggs or young).

CDFW recommend surveys be conducted as part of the biological technical studies conducted in support of the DEIR following the survey methods developed by the Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee (SWHA TAC 2000) and that they be conducted by a qualified wildlife biologist again prior to Project implementation. CDFW recommends a minimum no disturbance buffer of 0.5-mile be delineated around active nests until the breeding season (March 1 to September 15) 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. If an active SWHA nest is detected during surveys and a 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 issuance of an ITP, pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b) is necessary to comply with CESA.

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 proponent 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.

Melissa Miller, Facilities Planning Manager
Merced Union High School District
December 23, 2022
Page 4

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 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

Melissa Miller, Facilities Planning Manager
Merced Union High School District
December 23, 2022
Page 5

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).

CDFW appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Project to assist the Merced Union High School District 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 Jim Vang, Environmental Scientist, at the address provided on this letterhead, by telephone at (559) 580-3203, or by electronic mail at Jim.Vang@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

E9964E60293D40A...
Sarah Paulson for Julie A. Vance
Regional Manager

Attachment 1

Melissa Miller, Facilities Planning Manager
Merced Union High School District
December 23, 2022
Page 6

LITERATURE CITED

CDFW. 2016. Five Year Status Review for Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*).
California Department of Fish and Wildlife. April 11, 2016.

Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee (SWHA TAC). 2000. Recommended
Timing and Methodology for Swainson's Hawk Nesting Surveys in California's
Central Valley. Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee, May 31, 2000.

Attachment 1

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

PROJECT: Buhach Colony High School Stadium Project

SCH No.: 2022120347

| RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE | STATUS/DATE/INITIALS |
|---|-----------------------------|
| <i>Before Disturbing Soil or Vegetation</i> | |
| Mitigation Measure: SWHA | |
| SWHA Surveys | |
| SWHA Take Authorization | |
| | |
| <i>During Construction</i> | |
| Mitigation Measure: SWHA | |
| SWHA Avoidance | |