California Department of Fish and Wildlife
Environmental Review Report for an Exempt Project

Note: This report form is intended for use by California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) staff to document a limited environmental impact analysis supporting the filing of a Notice of Exemption (NOE) document for a proposed CDFW project. Although the project appears to fit within the descriptions for allowable Categorical Exemptions, this report presents CDFWs review for possible "Exceptions" that would preclude finding the project to be categorically exempt as discussed in CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2. This report will be filed with the CEQA administrative record for this project to document the environmental impact analysis conducted by the Department.

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Title:	Big Springs Ranch Wildfire Resiliency Project
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Project Name:	Big Springs Ranch Wildfire Resiliency Project
Project Number:	NA
Program Type:	Fire Protection/Fire Resiliency
CDFW Region:	1
County:	Siskiyou
Acres:	1050
Legal Location:	Portions of Sections 25 & 36, T44N, R06W; portions of Sections 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, & 33, T44N, R05W; and portions of Sections 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, & 9, T43N, R06W MDB&M

Name of USGS 7.5'Quad Map(s): Lake Shastina, Little Shasta

☒Project Vicinity Map Attached ☒Project Location Map Attached ☒Photos Attached

Other Public Agency Review/Permit Required:

Would the project result in:	YES	NO
alterations to a watercourse (DFG - Lake and Stream Alteration Agreement)	☐	☒
conversion of timberland (CAL FIRE - Conversion Permit or Exemption)	☐	☒
demolition (Local Air District - Demolition Permit)	☐	☒
soil disturbance over 1 acre (RWQCB - SWPPP)	☐	☒
fill of possible wetlands (404 Permit - USACE)	☐	☒
other: N/A	☐	☐

Discuss any above-listed topic item checked Yes and consultation with agencies:

Project Description and Environmental Setting (Describe the project activities, project site and its surroundings, its location, and the environmental setting): The project area is located approximately three to five miles southeast of the town of Grenada, California. The project occurs entirely on the Big Springs Ranch Wildlife Area.

The entire project area is located on the Big Springs Ranch Wildlife Area. The project does not, however, encompass the entirety of the wildlife area, it only includes areas deemed to be strategic for stopping the forward spread of a wildfire that might originate on the wildlife area, to prevent the spread of a wildfire onto the wildlife area, and to protect important habitat critical for listed anadromous fish and other species. Historically this area was comprised of open grass and sage/steppe habitat types. Both natural fire and cultural burning would have maintained the area in light fuels with the occasional juniper or pine tree on the upslope areas. Currently, due primarily to fire exclusion, the area is comprised of stands of juniper trees, with lesser amounts of brush and grass. This has created a condition where there is much higher fuel loading than what would be considered natural. Elevations range from 2,500' to 2,800'. Slopes range from flat to >40%. Most, if not all, of the project area has seen extensive grazing activity within the past 80-100 years. There has also been past juniper removal efforts on some of the property. The Shasta River and Big Springs Creek runs through the property and are critical habitat for anadromous fish, including the state and federally listed coho salmon. The project is intended to protect critical riparian habitat that runs along the Shasta River. The source of Big Springs Creek, an important

water source for the Shasta River, is located approximately 0.25 miles east of the project area on an adjacent parcel. The source of Little Springs Creek, also an important source of water for the Shasta River, is located on the property but will not have any fuel reduction efforts due to the relatively low fuel loading that currently exists along Little Springs Creek.

The area surrounding the project is primarily ranch land with similar vegetative characteristics, although the properties to the east has significantly more irrigated pasture than on the north, south and west.

The project is designed to reduce and eliminate medium and heavy fuels (brush and juniper trees up to 16" diameter) through the use of hand and mechanical treatments as a means to reduce the fire danger in the immediate area. The project is intended to expand areas of low fuel loading and to create defensible fuel breaks where there currently are none. This will begin to restore the area to a more natural condition.

Project activities will entail using hand crews to cut and pile juniper trees in areas without road access and in steeper areas along the Shasta River. Piles will be burned during appropriate climatic conditions. Mechanical juniper removal will be conducted in flat areas with good road access, along all major roads and trails, and under powerlines. Any chips created through mechanical means will be disposed of at the operator's discretion or left scattered onsite. Any skid roads on slopes greater than 10% will be water barred at spacing found in the Geology and Soils section of this document.

Environmental Impact Analysis

Aesthetics

☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☒ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

The area is not currently open to the public. The project area is located in a remote area which is not visible from a main road or densely populated area; therefore, adverse impacts associated with impacts to visual resources are not anticipated.

Agriculture and Forest Resources

☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☒ Yes ☐ No Would any trees be felled? If yes, discuss protection of nesting birds.
☐ Yes ☒ No Would the project convert any prime or unique farmland?
☐ Yes ☒ No Would the project result in the conversion of forest land/timberland to non-forest use?

☒ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

Western juniper is the only tree species within the project area. The proposed treatment will result in the removal of many western juniper trees during operations. If operations are to be conducted during breeding bird season (March-July) a walk-through survey will be conducted one week prior to operations to look for nesting birds and nests. If nests are located the area will be flagged for avoidance.

If a nest of a raptor is found a larger area will be flagged for avoidance. This area will include appropriate screen trees and potential replacement trees.

The project, as proposed, would restore the treatment areas to a condition that existed before the era of fire exclusion. This would restore the area to a more fire resilient grass and shrub habitat type. No healthy, mature, scenic trees will be removed pursuant to CEQA 15304.

No negative impacts to Agriculture or Forest Resources are expected from this project.

Air Quality

☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☒ Yes ☐ No The local Air Quality Management District guidelines for dust abatement and other air quality concerns were reviewed for this project.
☒ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

According to the California Air Resources Board (CARB), the Siskiyou County Air Pollution Control District is currently designated within "attainment" of California's standards related to Particulate Pollution (PM 10 and PM 2.5) and Ozone (ppm). Siskiyou County is one of two counties in California which are in attainment of State PM10 standards.

In 2002 Siskiyou County exceeded the state's 24 hour maximum allowable emission levels of PM 10, on six occurrences, due to wildfire. This happened again in 2022 due to smoke impacts from the McKinney Fire. The proposed project is designed to prevent or reduce the spread of wildfires which could contribute to Siskiyou Counties' "attainment" status.

http://climatechange.ca.gov/

The proposed project will not result in a significant amount of ground disturbance; therefore, project activities will not result in air quality impacts associated with dust. Minimal smoke emissions will result from exhaust associated with the use of transport vehicles, mechanical felling and skidding equipment and chain saws.

Exhaust emissions should not result in detectable impacts to air quality, but smoke emissions will likely be detectable during pile burning.

Pile burning will be conducted over a period of 14 to 21 days, on an annual basis, in compliance with an approved Smoke Management Plan. Burning will not be conducted during no burn days, wind events which exceed ten miles per hour, inversion layers located below eight thousand feet in elevation or during easterly wind events which could carry smoke to the nearby community of Granada.

Potential adverse impacts to air quality are not anticipated given the avoidance measures described above.

Biological Resources

☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☐ Yes ☒ No Will the project potentially effect biological resources?
☒ Yes ☐ No Was a current NDDB review completed? Results discussed below:
☒ Yes ☐ No Was a biological survey of the project area completed? Results discussed below:
☒ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

A query of the California Natural Diversity Data Base was conducted on 8/20/22 and again on 2/21/23. Scoping was conducted within the Lake Shastina and Little Shasta Quads (project quads) and the ten surrounding quads to determine the potential occurrence of State or Federally listed plant and animal species, animal species of special concern and California Rare Plant Rank 1 and 2 plants within or directly adjacent to the project area. According to CNDDB the following listed or sensitive animal and listed plant

species are known to occur within the scoping area: coho salmon, northern goshawk, greater sandhill crane, golden eagle, Crotch bumble bee, Franklin's bumble bee, western bumble bee, Swainson's hawk, western yellow-billed cuckoo, willow flycatcher, western pond turtle, prairie falcon, bald eagle, fisher, foothill yellow-legged frog, bank swallow, Cascades frog and Sierra Nevada red fox. Two listed plant species are known to occur within the scoping area: Ashland thistle and Yreka phlox. A full report of all species found in the CNDDB query is attached as Appendix 1.

The project area is characterized by high mountain desert comprised of western junipers of mostly young age classes (less than 80 years old) with a few large, older juniper. The age class of the existing jumper coincides with the widespread practice of excluding fire from the landscape in the early 20th century which has allowed the juniper to expand into areas where fire was being excluded. Elevation ranges from 2,500 feet to 2,900 feet with slopes ranging from 0% to 40%. Most of the project area is located on the valley floor, but the area contains several isolated foothills throughout. In general, soils are typically shallow, very rocky and poorly developed. The Shasta River runs through the project area. The presence of the river and its important riparian vegetation are one of the reasons this project is important. The riparian vegetation comprised of willows, cottonwood, reeds, bullrush, and tall grass are important habitat elements for endangered anadromous salmonids. No activities will take place within the riparian vegetation zone and only hand work will be permitted within 300' of the river. There are other small ephemeral streams and irrigation ditches throughout the area.

Coho Salmon

This state and federally listed species is known to occur in the Shasta River and Big Springs Creek where they traverse the property. These streams are critically important spawning and rearing habitat for this, and other, anadromous species. Treatment activities are partially designed to protect critical riparian habitat along the streams that run through the property. Elimination of overly dense juniper stands adjacent to riparian area will help prevent fire impacts to the important riparian habitat should a fire burn through the area.

Treatment activities will not impact this species.

Northern goshawk

Goshawks are found in open to dense conifer and mixed conifer forests. Juniper is not known to be a suitable habitat for goshawks. The project area does not contain suitable habitat for northern goshawks, therefore project activities will not impact this species

Bald Eagle

The bald eagle requires wetland habitat such as seacoasts, rivers, large lakes or marshes or other large bodies of open water with an abundance of fish.

The project area is adjacent to the Shasta River which may be an important foraging area for bald eagles. There is also a seasonally flooded pond/lake that provides habitat for waterfowl which eagles may forage on. The project proposes to only remove young juniper that would be too small and short to provide optimum nesting sites for bald eagles. Foraging habitat along the Shasta River will be left unchanged. Treatment activities will not impact this species.

Golden eagle

Golden eagles require vast open rolling foothill, sage flats and desert habitat for foraging. They require large cliffs and rock outcrops for nesting. They can also nest in large trees in more open areas.

Golden eagles have been seen on the property including during a project planning reconnaissance visit on April 15, 2022. There are two known golden eagle nesting areas within 10 miles of the project area. Birds

from either or both of these sites would find portions of the property suitable for foraging. The majority of the treatment areas, however, are probably too densely covered in juniper to provide adequate foraging accessibility. Further there are no rocky bluffs or large trees that would typically be considered adequate nesting habitat for golden eagles. The removal of juniper will open the area up and provide increased foraging opportunities for golden eagles and other raptors. Treatment activities will not impact this species.

Bank Swallow

The bank swallow is a California Threatened species that requires natural erodible bluffs or eroding streamside banks within low areas along rivers, streams, ocean coasts, or reservoirs.

There is one known occurrence of bank swallow on the property along the Shasta River. No project activities will occur within the riparian vegetation of the river so there will be no potential to impact the streamside habitat used by this species. The treatment areas do not contain any wetland habitat or erodible bluffs; therefore, treatment activities will not impact the concerned species.

Fisher

The fisher requires mature coniferous forests but has also been known to reside in oak foothill woodlands.

The project area does not contain coniferous forests or oak woodlands; therefore, treatment activities will not impact the concerned species.

Foothill yellow-legged frog

The foothill-legged frog requires flowing streams and rivers with rocky substrates.

The Shasta River flows through the project area, however, due to the nature of the river there is little to no suitable habitat for this species. Due to the nearly constant flow of the river from the large springs that feed it, and due to the local geologic conditions, there are no areas of rock or gravely substrates which this species favors.

Treatment activities will not impact this species.

Cascades frog

The Cascades from is a California Candidate Endangered species. This species is found in high elevation mountain springs, lakes, ponds and wet meadows. The project area is located in a valley floor habitat with none of the habitat characteristics typically associated with Cascades frog.

Treatment activities will not impact this species.

Greater sandhill crane

The greater sandhill crane, a California Threatened species, requires marshes, bogs, wet meadows, irrigated pastures, prairies, burned-over aspen stands, and other moist habitats, preferring those with standing water.

There are two known occurrences of this species on the property, both associated with irrigated pastures. Since the acquisition of the property by the CDFW, however, the practice of flood irrigation on the property has largely been eliminated. The area no longer provides high quality habitat for this species. The project area may provide limited foraging opportunities within the old pastures directly adjacent to the treatment areas, but the proposed treatment will not adversely impact potential foraging habitat within the project area. Removal of the juniper may help rehydrate some of the previously irrigated lands thereby improving habitat for this species.

Treatment activities will not impact this species.

Sierra Nevada red fox

The Sierra Nevada red fox is a California Threatened species and they are the only red fox that occurs naturally in the high mountain habitats of the Sierra Nevada and southern Cascade mountains of eastern California. They require open conifer woodlands and mountain meadows near tree line.

The project area is located below 3,000 feet in elevation and does not contain coniferous forests; therefore, treatment activities will not impact this species.

Swainson's hawk

The Swainson's hawk requires open and semi-open country, deserts, grasslands and prairies for both its breeding and wintering ranges. Nesting adults typically arrive at their selected nesting area in early February and depart in early September.

The project area is primarily composed of juniper forests which are not suitable habitat for the species. The locations found during project scoping are in open agricultural areas

Western yellow-billed cuckoo

The Western yellow-billed cuckoo is a federal Threatened species and a California Endangered species. It requires wooded habitat with dense cover and water nearby, including woodlands with low, scrubby, vegetation, overgrown orchards, abandoned farmland, and dense thickets along streams and marshes.

The riparian areas on the property that could serve as habitat for this species are not being treated; therefore, treatment activities will not impact the concerned species.

Willow flycatcher

The Willow flycatcher is a California Endangered species that requires thickets of deciduous trees and shrubs, especially willows, or along woodland edges often near streams or marshes.

The project area does contain dense wooded vegetation along the Shasta River, however, these areas are not within the treatment areas therefore, treatment activities will not impact this species.

State and Federally listed plants

Yreka phlox

Yreka phlox is a state and federally listed Endangered Species. The plant is restricted to serpentine soils at elevations between 2,800 to 4,400 feet. Jeffrey pines (Pinus jeffreyi), incense cedar (Calocedrus decurrens) and junipers (Juniperus spp) have evolved to live in serpentine soils and are indicators of Yreka phlox habitat. This species blooms during the months of April through June.

Although western juniper dominate the vegetation within the project boundary, the soils are derived from volcanic rock and ash, and there are no serpentine soils within the project boundary. In addition, the species was not observed during extensive field reconnaissance conducted for a previous project during the month of June 2017; therefore, treatment activities will not impact this species.

Ashland thistle

This plant is endemic to Jackson and Josephine Counties in Oregon and to one general area in the Shasta Valley in Siskiyou County California. It is a California listed Endangered Species. The five known occurrences in CA are clustered in an area along York Road approximately 13 miles north of the project area. This species is rather large and conspicuous, reaching a height of up to 6 feet. There have been past botanical surveys on the property and there are no records of this species occurring in or near the project area. Three other thistle species were identified.

No impacts to this species are anticipated due to implementation of the project.

Non-listed Plants

Nearly 290 different plant species have been identified on the property through botanical surveys. In addition to the two listed species of plants there are approximately 34 plants within the scoping area that are California Rare Plant Rank (CNPR) 1 or 2. Only four of these are known to occur on the property and from within the treatment area.

Brittle prickly-pear.

Brittle prickly-pear is a CNPR 2B.1 species and is known to occur on the property. One occurrence of this species was found in the CNDDB outside of the treatment area in a database search in 2023. Several new occurrences, however, were discovered during archeological surveys for this project. Most of the new occurrences are outside of the treatment areas. The occurrences that occur within the project area are all within areas designated for hand treatment only. Occurrences of this species will be flagged to ensure that no impacts to the occurrences occur.

Due to avoidance measures, no impacts to this species are anticipated due to implementation of the project.

Alkali hymenoxys

This is a CNPR 2B.2 species. There is one historic occurrence of this species along the county road (A12) on the north end of the property. This was a 1934 occurrence that was not accurately mapped and the database suggests that the mapped location was a "best guess" based on the 1934 location description. CDFW staff identified one additional occurrence on the property in 2014. This occurrence is well outside any proposed treatment areas.

No impacts to this species are anticipated due to implementation of the project.

Wooly balsamroot

This is a CNPR 1B.2 species. It is found throughout the Shasta Valley with occurrences ranging from a few individuals to over 500,000. There are no known occurrences of this species in the CNDDB, however, the previous landowner identified one occurrence on the property in 2010. The singe occurrence is just outside of the treatment area but close to a roadside fuelbreak. The habitat conditions have changed significantly in this area since the 2010 survey. The pond which this plant was growing near has been dried and so it is unknown if the current conditions still allow for the occurrence to persist. If the plant is still found in this location, it will be flagged for avoidance.

No impacts to this species are anticipated due to implementation of the project.

Hairy marsh hedge-nettle

This CRPR 2B.3 species is known to occur in one location on the property but outside of the treatment area. It typically is associated with wetland areas. Only upland areas will be treated in this project.

No impacts to this species are anticipated due to implementation of the project.

Cultural Resources

☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.

☒ Yes ☐ No Was a current archaeological records check completed? Results discussed below:

☒ Yes ☐ No Was an archaeological survey of the project area completed? Results discussed below:

☐ Yes ☒ No Will the project effect any historic buildings or archaeological site?

☒ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

Archeological record checks and surveys had been conducted as part of the acquisition of this property by the DFW. We conducted a complete review of these past archeological reports. Several sensitive locations were documented in past reports. Additionally, a list of tribal contacts was requested from the Native American Heritage Commission. Letters were sent to all tribal contacts on that list requesting information on any known significant sites and asking for input on the proposed project. One response was received from the tribal outreach stating that the project area was outside of their geographic area of concern. No additional sites were identified, and no concerns were brought to our attention through this outreach. The area was surveyed again specifically for this project and several previously unrecorded historic and prehistoric sites were found. All known potentially significant cultural resource sites have been removed from the treatment areas.

If additional sites are located during project activities, crews will be instructed to cease operations in that area and contact the contract administrator for additional instructions.

No impacts to known cultural resources are anticipated from this project.

Geology and Soils

☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☒ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

The project area contains low to high density stands of western juniper. Additionally annual grasses, highly scattered sage, rabbit brush occur mixed with the juniper The area is also characterized by an abundance of surface rock which occupies between 10 to 90 percent of the soil surface. Fuel loads appear to vary between one to 10 tons per acre.

Mechanical operations have the potential to cause erosion. This will be minimized through seasonal restrictions which limit operations to periods of dry stable soils. Additionally, the steepest slopes are also those that have the highest rock component limiting the erosiveness of the treatment area. Where skid trails are developed, water bars will be installed to dissipate any runoff. Waterbar spacing is detailed below.

The project area does not contain any unstable slopes that would pose a risk of mass wasting or erosion.

Maximum Distance Between Waterbars

On slopes between 11% to 25%, install waterbars no more than 200 feet apart.
On slopes over 25%, install waterbars no more than 150 feet apart.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☐ Yes ☒ No Would the project generate significant greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions?
☐ Yes ☒ No Would these GHG emissions result in a significant impact on the environment? Discuss below:
☐ Yes ☒ No Would the project conflict with an applicable plan, policy or regulation adopted for the purpose of reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases? Discuss below:

Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions will result from smoke and exhaust associated with the use of chain saws, mechanical fallers, skidders, chippers and transport vehicles.

The project is 1,050 acres in size which is relatively small in scope and not likely to produce measurable GHG emissions which could result in adverse cumulative impacts on a global scale. Furthermore, treatment activities will be limited to a short time frame (three to four months) and will not lead to long term increases in greenhouse gas emissions. In terms of net GHG emissions ensuing from cut vegetation, the probable result is known through the scientific principles of the carbon cycle which explains that CO_2 is released through decay or burning and then sequestered from the atmosphere and the soil as plants absorb CO_2 in order to grow and conduct photosynthesis. The improved growing conditions resulting from the proposed treatment should increase the grass lands ability to carry out photosynthesis and; therefore, sequester carbon at a high rate. Furthermore, by reducing the probability of catastrophic wildfire this project has the potential to reduce the substantial increase in short term emissions from wildfire.

Hazards and Hazardous Materials

☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.

☒ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

Potential hazards to the public, hand crews and overhead personnel could result from exposure to heat and smoke. Additional hazards to hand crews and overhead personnel could result from the use of chainsaws and working on rugged terrain.

All necessary precautions will be implemented to ensure personnel safety including the proper use of personal protective equipment and appropriate training associated with the proper use of chainsaws. Crews will not be allowed to use tools or conduct work beyond their level of training. Prescribed burning will only be conducted during safe climatic conditions in accordance with a Prescribed Burn Plan and an approved Smoke Management Plan.

The hazardous materials being utilized for this project include diesel, gasoline, oil and other fluids associated with motorized equipment. Diesel and gasoline with also be used during firing operations as drip torch fuel. Equipment used on this project will not be serviced in locations which could allow oil or fuel to contaminate soil or pass into a watercourse. Drip torches will be filled over an absorbent pad to prevent fossil fuels from contacting the soil. All containers shall be properly labeled and equipped with nozzles designed to prevent accidental spillage.

The project is not likely to result in adverse impacts created by hazardous conditions or hazardous materials.

Hydrology and Water Quality

☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.

☐ Yes ☒ No Will the project potentially affect any watercourse or body of water?

☒ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

As indicated above, the Shasta River runs through the project area. No operations will take place within the riparian vegetation zone of the river thereby eliminating any potential for direct impact to the river. There are several small swales that are normally dry but that likely run water during extreme precipitation events. These low-lying areas have typically been the areas of the highest intensity livestock grazing over the recent past and so few to no junipers are growing in these areas meaning treatment impacts will be extremely low. There are no other lakes, ponds or watercourses in the treatment areas.

Several springs originate on the side slopes along the Shasta River. These areas will be targeted for hand treatment to remove the juniper above the spring to enhance water availability and spring flow.

The proposed project will not alter the drainage patterns or adversely impact water quality.

Land Use and Planning
☒ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☐ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

Mineral Resources
☒ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☐ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

Noise
☐ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☒ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

The project area is remotely located, not open to public use and is not within close proximity to a business or residential area. Therefore, adverse impacts resulting from noise is not anticipated.

Population and Housing
☒ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☐ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

Public Services
☒ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☐ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

Recreation
☒ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☐ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

The project area is currently not open for public recreational use.

Transportation/Traffic
☒ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☐ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

Utilities and Service Systems
☒ This topic does not apply to this project and was not evaluated further.
☐ This topic could apply to this project, and results of the assessment are provided below:

Changes Made to Avoid Environmental Impacts:

Any active bird nests will be avoided.

Areas of potential archeological significance were removed from the project area.

Equipment used on this project will not be serviced in locations which could allow oil or fuel to contaminate soil or pass into a watercourse.

Skid trails developed on slopes in excess of 5% will have waterbreaks installed pursuant to the specifications described above under Hydrology and Water Quality.

Mandatory Findings of Significance:	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☒
(a) Does the project have the potential to degrade the quality of the environment, substantially reduce the habitat of a fish or wildlife species, cause a fish or wildlife population to drop below self-sustaining levels, threaten to eliminate a plant or animal community, reduce the number or restrict the range of a rare or endangered plant or animal, or eliminate important examples of the major periods of California history or prehistory?		
(b) Does the project have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? ("Cumulatively considerable" means that the incremental effects of a project are considerable when viewed in connection with the effects of past projects, the effects of other current projects, and the effects of probably future projects)	☐	☒
(c) Does the project have environmental effects which will cause substantial adverse effects on human beings, either directly or indirectly?	☐	☒

Justification for Use of a Categorical Exemption (discuss why the project is exempt, cite exemption number(s), and describe how the project fits the class):

The proposed project is designed to reduce the risk of damage to the environment and wildlife habitat due to impacts from a large, catastrophic wildfire. Due to the project's design and goals, it qualifies for several Categorical Exemption under CEQA. It qualifies for Section 15301 (i) which consists of maintenance of wildlife habitat areas and stream channels to protect fish and wildlife resources. The project is designed to lessen the impacts of large catastrophic wildfire. By doing so, the project is maintaining habitat areas and the riparian habitat along stream channels to protect both the habitat and the individual animals that inhabit these areas were a wildfire to occur. It qualifies for Categorical Exemption 15304. Pursuant to Section 15304, Class 4 (d) consists of alterations of vegetation on officially designated wildlife management areas which results in improvement of habitat for fish and wildlife resources which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. It also qualifies for Section 15308 which pertains to actions taken by regulatory agencies for the protection of the environment to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of the environment. The project is designed to protect the environment by reducing the risk of large catastrophic wildfire impacting the area any by making the Wildlife Management Area more resilient to wildfire.

The project involves removal of encroaching juniper trees less than 80 years old generally less than 15" diameter at breast height. No healthy, mature, scenic trees will be removed. By implementing the project the entire wildlife area and the surrounding communities will be much less likely to be impacted by large catastrophic wildfire.

Conclusion:

☒ After assessing potential environmental impacts and evaluating the description for the various classes of Categorical Exemptions to CEQA, the California Dept of Fish and Wildlfie has determined that the project fits within one or more of the exemption classes and no exceptions exist at the project site which would preclude the use of this exemption. The Department considered the possibility of (a) sensitive location, (b) cumulative impact, (c) significant impact due to unusual circumstances, (d) impacts to scenic highways, (e) activities within a hazardous waste site, and (f) significant adverse change to the significance of a historical resource. A Notice of Exemption will be filed at the State Clearinghouse.

☐ After assessing potential environmental impacts and evaluating the description for the various classes of Categorical Exemptions to CEQA, the California Dept of Fish and Wildlife has determined that the project does not fit within the description for the various exemption classes or has found that exceptions exist at the project site which precludes the use of a Categorical Exemption for this project. Additional environmental review will be conducted and the appropriate CEQA document used may be a Negative Declaration or a Mitigated Negative Declaration.

Figure 1.

Big Springs Ranch Wildfire Resiliency Project Vicinity Map

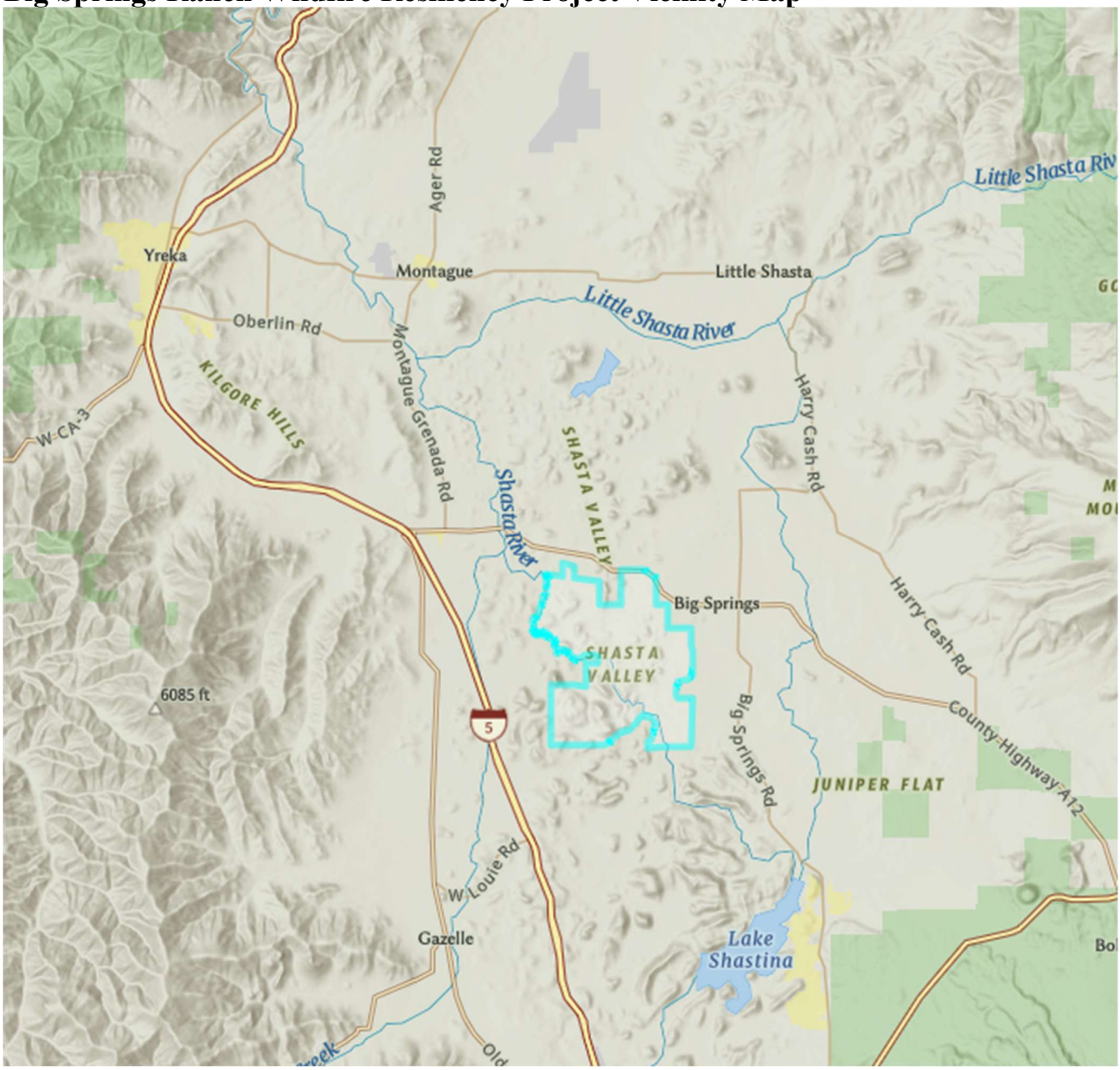
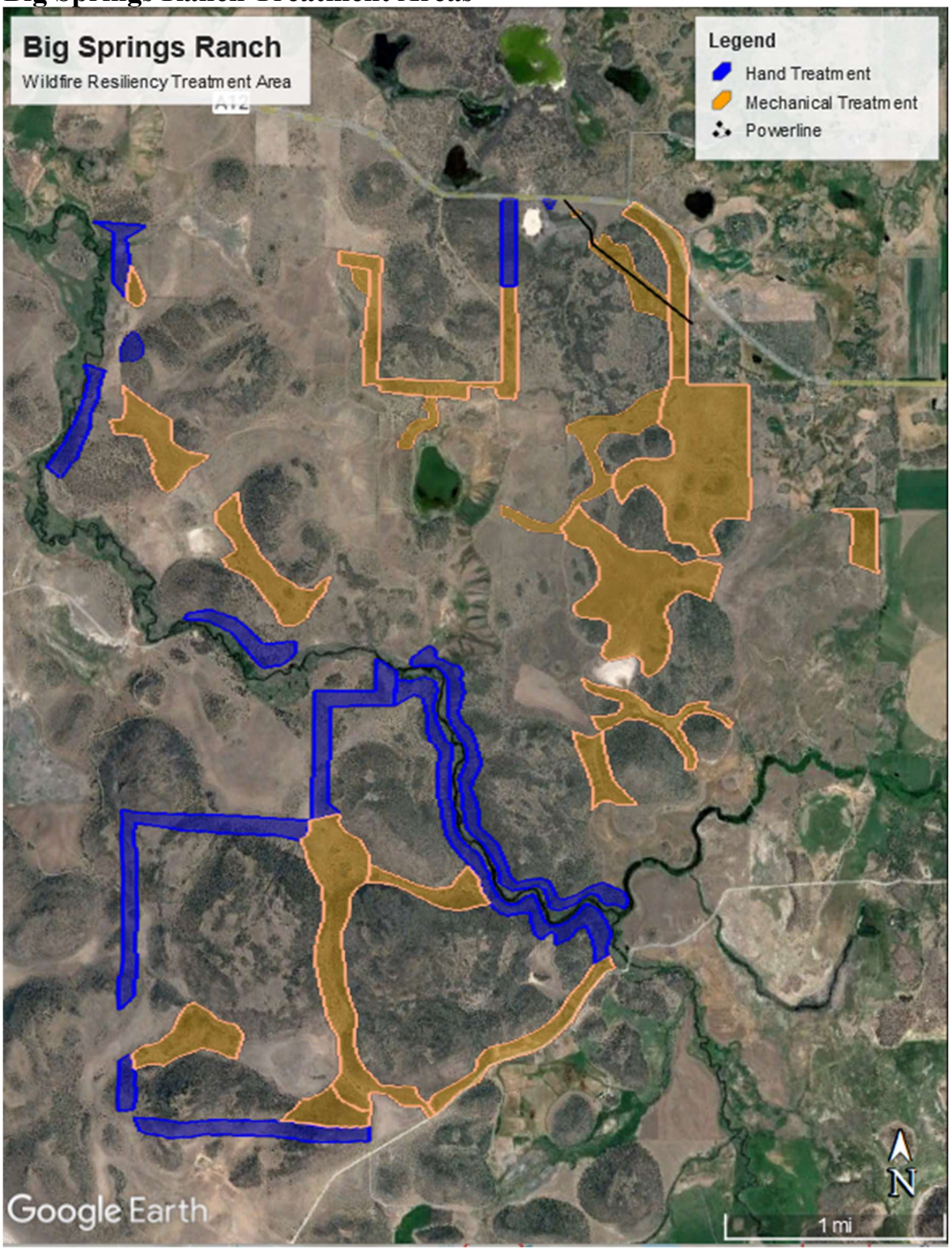


Figure 2.
Big Springs Ranch Treatment Areas



Typical view of valley floor, scattered foothills, western junipres, sage and grasses within project area

Dry pond near historic wooly balsamroot occurence

Big Springs Ranch Wildlife Area above the Shasta River. Extensive juniper encroachment can be seen throughout the area where natural grass and brush used to exist.

The Shasta River with dense juniper stands encroaching into traditioanal riparian habitat

One of many brittle prickly-pear cactus occurrences found during project planning.

Notice of Exemption

To: Office of Planning and Research
PO Box 3044
1400 Tenth Street, Room 2
Sacramento, CA 95812-3044

From: California Department of Fish and Wildlife
Northern Region
601 Locust St
Redding, CA 96001

Project Title: Big Springs Ranch Wildfire Resiliency Project

Project Location: The project will be located on the Big Springs Ranch Wildlife Area (Wildlife Area) in central Siskiyou County, State of California. The Project is located in portions of Sections 25 & 36, T44N, R06W; portions of Sections 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, & 33, T44N, R05W; and portions of Sections 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, & 9, T43N, R06W MDB&M, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Lake Shastina and Little Shasta Quadrangle maps

Project Description: The project area is located approximately three to five miles southeast of the town of Grenada, California. The project occurs entirely on the Big Springs Ranch Wildlife Area.

The entire project area is located on the Big Springs Ranch Wildlife Area. The project does not, however, encompass the entirety of the wildlife area, it only includes areas deemed to be strategic for stopping the forward spread of a wildfire that might originate on the wildlife area, to prevent the spread of a wildfire onto the wildlife area, and to protect important habitat critical for listed anadromous fish and other species.

Historically this area was comprised of open grass and sage/steppe habitat types. Both natural fire and cultural burning would have maintained the area in light fuels with the occasional juniper or pine tree on the upslope areas. Currently, due primarily to fire exclusion, the area is comprised of stands of juniper trees, with lesser amounts of brush, and grass. This has created a condition of deteriorated habitat conditions and of much higher fuel loading than what would be considered natural. Elevations range from 2,500’ to 2,800’. Slopes range from flat to >40%. Most, if not all, of the project area has seen extensive grazing activity within the past 80-100 years. There has also been past juniper removal efforts on some of the property. The Shasta River and Big Springs Creek runs through the property and are critical habitat for anadromous fish, including the state and federally listed coho salmon. The project is intended to protect critical riparian habitat that runs along the Shasta River. The source of Big Springs Creek, an important water source for the Shasta River, is located approximately 0.25 miles east of the project area on an adjacent parcel. The source of Little Springs Creek, also an important source of water for the Shasta River, is located on the property but will not have any fuel reduction efforts due to the relatively low fuel loading that currently exists along Little Springs Creek.

The area surrounding the project is primarily ranch land with similar vegetative characteristics, although the property to the east has significantly more irrigated pasture than on the north, south and west.

The project is designed to improve habitat by the reduction and elimination of medium and heavy fuels (brush and juniper trees up to 15” diameter) through the use of hand and mechanical treatments as a means to reduce the fire danger in the immediate area. The project is intended to expand areas of low fuel loading and to create defensible fuel breaks where there currently are none. This will begin to restore the area to a more natural condition and protect important habitats.

Project activities will entail using hand crews to cut and pile juniper trees in areas without road access and in steeper areas along the Shasta River. Piles will be burned during appropriate climatic conditions. Mechanical juniper removal will be conducted in flat areas with good road access, along all major roads and trails, and under powerlines. Any chips created through mechanical means will be disposed of at the operator’s discretion or left scattered onsite. Any skid roads on slopes greater than 10% will be appropriately water barred.

Name of Public Agency Approving Project: California Department of Fish and Wildlife

Person or Agency Carrying out Project: California Department of Fish and Wildlife

Exempt Status:

- ☐ Ministerial:
- ☐ Declared Emergency:
- ☐ Emergency Project:
- ☒ Categorical Exemption: 14 CCR, Section 15301,15304 and 15308

Reasons why Project is exempt:

The proposed project is designed to reduce the risk of damage to the environment and wildlife habitat due to impacts from a large, catastrophic wildfire. Due to the project's design and goals, it qualifies for several Categorical Exemption under CEQA. It qualifies for Section 15301 (i) which consists of maintenance of wildlife habitat areas and stream channels to protect fish and wildlife resources. The project is designed to lessen the impacts of large catastrophic wildfire. By doing so, the project is maintaining habitat areas and the riparian habitat along stream channels to protect both the habitat and the individual animals that inhabit these areas were a wildfire to occur. It qualifies for Categorical Exemption 15304. Pursuant to Section 15304, Class 4 (d) consists of alterations of vegetation on officially designated wildlife management areas which results in improvement of habitat for fish and wildlife resources which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. It also qualifies for Section 15308 which pertains to actions taken by regulatory agencies for the protection of the environment to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of the environment. The project is designed to protect the environment by reducing the risk of large catastrophic wildfire impacting the area any by making the Wildlife Management Area more resilient to wildfire.

Lead Agency Contact Person: Rich Klug, CDFW, (530) 598-9322

Signature: DocuSigned by: Robert Hawkins F8D52F774C764C2... **Date:** 3/21/2023

Robert Hawkins, Environmental Program Manager

☐ Signed by Lead Agency Date Received for filing at OPR: _____