

NOTICE OF EXEMPTION

To: County Clerk
County of San Diego
1600 Pacific Highway, Room 260
San Diego, CA 92101

From: Borrego Water District
806 Palm Canyon Drive
Borrego Springs, CA 92004

Office of Planning and Research
P.O. Box 3044, Room 113
Sacramento, CA 95812-3044

Project Title: Environmental Working Group of the Borrego Springs Watermaster Biological Restoration of Fallowed Lands

Project Location: The Project location will be focused within the agricultural land uses in the northern portion of the Borrego Springs Subbasin of the Borrego Valley Groundwater Basin, for which a central point is generally within the unincorporated community of Borrego Springs in San Diego County. The generalized central point of the Borrego Springs Subbasin is located within Section 3, Township 11 South and Range 6 East of the Clark Lake USGS Quadrangle Map, San Bernardino Meridian at Longitude 33.245163N, and Latitude 116.337139W. The Borrego Springs Subbasin is mapped within the USGS – Clark Lake, Borrego Sink, Borrego Palm Canyon, and Tubb Canyon Quadrangles, 7.5 Minute Series topographic maps.

Project Location - City: Borrego Springs (Unincorporated San Diego County)

Project Location - County: San Diego

Project Applicant: Borrego Water District, 806 Palm Canyon Drive, Borrego Springs, CA 92004

Description of Nature, Purpose,

and Beneficiaries of the Project: On 06/13/2023, the Board of Directors of the Borrego Water District (“District”) approved the Agreement for the Sustainable Groundwater Management Grant Program Between Borrego Water District and Borrego Springs Watermaster (“Watermaster”), Project Component No. 6 (“Agreement”).

On December 13, 2022, the District entered into a \$6,115,833 million dollar grant agreement with DWR for Proposition 68 funding awarded to the District. The grant will assist in financing projects associated with the SGM Grant Program on a reimbursable basis.

The District and Watermaster entered into the Agreement to assist in reimbursing Watermaster’s Project Component No. 6 with funds provided on a reimbursement basis to the District by DWR for SGM Grant Program Implementation. The proposed Project would facilitate the implementation of one of the Projects/management actions proposed under the Borrego Springs Subbasin (“Basin”), the Watermaster’s Groundwater Management Plan (“GMP”). To maintain a viable water supply for current and future beneficial uses and users of groundwater in the Basin, the Watermaster’s GMP defines a sustainability goal of operating the Basin within its sustainable yield in a manner that does not exhibit undesirable results by 2040.

The Watermaster’s Environmental Working Group (“EWG”) contends that biological restoration of current and future fallowed lands could be a solution for addressing the potential adverse impacts associated with land fallowing, and could be helpful in protecting human health, the environment, and the socioeconomic wellbeing of the Borrego Springs community during GMP implementation. However, the land use changes that have occurred in the past have created various barriers to the establishment of native habitat on fallowed lands, and not all land parcels will have equal habitat value.

The Biological Restoration of Fallowed Lands Project (“Project”) proposed herein describes a three-year program to: characterize historical and current conditions; explore the feasibility of various biological restoration/rehabilitation techniques; and develop guidance for future biological restoration Projects on

current and future fallowed lands within the Subbasin. The goals of restoration/rehabilitation are: reduce water consumption; manage airborne dust emissions; increase natural biodiversity and habitat value; and maintain or enhance values pertinent to the Anza Borrego State Park and the residents of Borrego Springs.

The Project scope-of-work will produce spatially explicit strategies for fallowing retired citrus orchards based upon the potential for rehabilitation given known environmental constraints. The Project will start with gathering and synthesizing existing information resources. The Project also proposes a citrus tree removal strategy that is conducive to both dust management and increasing natural habitat value, while minimizing visual blight in the short term. A case study will be executed to inform the development of best practices and will involve sample "Brush Pile Wildlife Sand Fences" with cut citrus tree material placed strategically to manage wind/dust patterns. The Project will be implemented in a phased approach over a three-year period under the guidance of the EWG and the approval of the Watermaster Board.

Name of Public Agency Approving Project: Borrego Water District

Name of Person or Agency Carrying Out Project: Borrego Springs Watermaster

Exempt Status: (Check One)


- Statutory Exemption (Section 15262)
- Categorical Exemption (Section 15306)

Reasons why Project is exempt: The proposed Biological Restoration of Fallowed Lands Project is statutorily exempt from substantive CEQA review as it has been determined to have no potential to cause significant adverse effects on the environment. The proposed Project meets the criteria for a the Feasibility and Planning Studies Statutory Exemption (identified in CEQA Section 15262), which consists of "A Project involving only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions which the agency, board, or commission has not approved, adopted, or funded does not require the preparation of an EIR or Negative Declaration but does require consideration of environmental factors. This section does not apply to the adoption of a plan that will have a legally binding effect on later activities." The proposed Project involves a three-year feasibility and planning program, involving a future action that has not yet been approved by the Watermaster Board (the full implementation of Biological Restoration at site specific locations within the Basin). The Project would inform future actions for which Environmental Documentation for the implementation of the Restoration Program as a whole would be required. Thus, based on the above, the Project qualifies for the Feasibility and Planning Studies Statutory Exemption (identified in Section 15262). Additionally, the Biological Restoration of Fallowed Lands Project meets the criteria for a Class 6 Categorical Exemption (15306). Class 6 consists of "Information Collection," outlined under Section 15306 of the State CEQA Guidelines. Class 6 exemptions consist of "basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. These may be strictly for information gathering purposes, or as part of a study leading to an action which a public agency has not yet approved, adopted, or funded." The Project would collect and develop data, information, and criteria to guide the use of biological restoration as a technique to mitigate the potential adverse impacts associated with the fallowing of lands that is expected to occur within the Subbasin. The Project will achieve these goals through analyses of existing data and information, field reconnaissance, and test cases of biological restoration techniques at existing fallowed lands within the Subbasin. A final technical report will describe and document the results, conclusions, and recommendations of the Project. The final report will describe and document the biological restoration strategies that are expected to be most effective within the Subbasin and a prioritization of land parcels for biological restoration. Thus, the data collected from the Project would be used as part of a study leading to an action which a public agency has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. Therefore, this proposed Project is not forecast to cause any potential for significant adverse environmental impacts and qualifies with the requirements for a Statutory Exemption (15262) and a Class 6 Categorical Exemption (15306). None of the exceptions to the categorical exemptions set forth in State CEQA Guidelines section 15300.2 have any applicability here. The Project will not impact any environmental resource of hazardous or critical concern, will not result in significant cumulative impacts, is not subject to any unusual circumstances that could result in a significant environmental impact, would not damage any scenic

resources within a scenic highway, is not located on a hazardous waste site identified on any list compiled pursuant to Government Code section 65962.5, and would not impact any historical resource. For all of the foregoing reasons, the entirety of the Project is categorically exempt from CEQA.

Lead Agency

Contact Person: Geoff Poole Telephone: 760-767-5806

Signature:  Title: General Manager Date: 06/20/2023