

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
Inland Deserts Region
Ontario Field Office
3602 Inland Empire Blvd., Suite C-220
Ontario, CA 91764

Project Title: Finney Ramer Salt Cedar Control Project

Project Location: The project will be located at the 1,500-acre Finney-Ramer Unit of the Imperial Wildlife Area (Wildlife Area) in Imperial County, California in portions of Township 23 South, Range 14 East, Sections 28, 29, 32, 33, and 34; Township 13 South, Range 14 East, Sections 2 and 3, MDBM and within USGS 7.5' quad maps Westmoreland East and West.

Project Description: The California Department of Fish and Wildlife ("CDFW") proposes to remove stands of invasive salt cedar and re-plant with diverse native vegetation naturally resilient to fire.

Dense stands of invasive salt cedar currently dominate the Finney-Ramer Unit of IWA creating a wildfire hazard, converting the naturally wet riparian zone into a fire corridor of dry fuel stands. In the agricultural landscape of the Imperial Valley, salt-cedar dominated riparian corridors are the most frequent sites of accidental wildfires, with portions of the river-bottom burning every year and impacting human infrastructure and wildlife habitat. Uncontrolled wildfires contribute to poor air quality across the region and corresponding respiratory health challenges. By reducing water availability, increasing soil salinity, and introducing fire into the riparian zone, salt cedar also creates conditions that reduce spontaneous recovery of native vegetation, promoting further dominance of salt cedar.

Specifically, salt cedar will be mechanically removed and resprouts will be treated with herbicide. Planting will be completed by hand and irrigation will be temporarily installed to establish native vegetation.

The project consists of multiple phases of salt cedar removal to accommodate a re-treatment period to control salt cedar resprouts before planting, to replace every acre of removed salt cedar with an equivalent or more area of diverse native forest, sustain riparian habitat for wildlife, and to facilitate adaptive management. This approach will reduce salt cedar stands to an extent such that annual retreatment with local staff is sufficient to maintain high quality habitat.

This project will also remove overgrown vegetation along existing roads throughout the Finney-Ramer Unit to allow vehicle access and maintain emergency access throughout the unit.

Project activities will commence in Fall 2023. Operations will continue through 2027, or until completed. Salt cedar treatments may be repeated as needed to maintain native vegetation.

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 15304, 15307, and 15308

Reasons why Project is exempt:

The project is *Class 4, §15304* (Minor Alterations to Land) Exempt; the Project will result in minor alterations to land and vegetation on an officially designated wildlife area that will result in improvement of habitat for fish and wildlife resources.

The project is *Class 7, §15307* (Actions by regulatory agencies for Protection of natural resources) Exempt; the Project includes actions taken by CDFW for the protection of natural resources on a designated wildlife area to improve native riparian habitat.

The project is *Class 8, §15308* (Actions by regulatory agencies for protection of the environment) Exempt; the Project includes actions taken by CDFW for the protection of the environment, on a designated wildlife area, to establish native vegetation resilient to wildfire at the Finney-Ramer Unit of Imperial Wildlife Area.

Field and office review by CDFW staff and contracted environmental specialists confirmed that no exceptions apply which would preclude the use of a notice of exemption for this project. The Department has concluded that no significant environmental impact would occur to aesthetics, agriculture and forestland/timberland, air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, geology and soils, greenhouse gas emissions, hazards and hazardous materials, hydrology and water quality, land use planning, mineral resource, noise, population and housing, public services, recreation, transportation/traffic, or utilities and service systems. Documentation of the environmental review completed by the CDFW is kept on file at the Ontario office.

Lead Agency Contact Person: Richard Kim, Richard.Kim@wildlife.ca.gov, (760) 518-1333

Signature:  52BC6ECB38384BD **Date:** 8/30/2023
Chris Hayes, Environmental Program Manager

Signed by Lead Agency

Date Received for filing at OPR: _____