

## Notice of Exemption

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

County Clerk  
County of San Diego  
1600 Pacific Highway, Ste 260  
San Diego, CA 92101

County Clerk  
County of Riverside  
4080 Lemon St., 1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
Riverside, CA 92501

**From:** Rancho California Water District  
42135 Winchester Road  
Temecula, CA 92590

**Project Title:** Regional CropSWAP Program

**Project Applicant:** Rancho California Water District

**Project Location – Specific:** The proposed Regional CropSWAP Program (“Project” or “Program”) includes an approximate 272,980-acre area throughout Riverside and San Diego Counties (“Project Area”). Individual projects could occur on farmland anywhere within the Project Area.

**Project Location – City:** Various Cities

**Project Location – County:** Riverside and San Diego Counties

**Description of Nature, Purpose, and Beneficiaries of Project:** In 2016, the Rancho California Water District (“RCWD”) introduced a program called CropSWAP (Sustainable Water for Agricultural Program) to Riverside County. Building on the success on this previous program, the Regional CropSWAP Program was created and expanded to include territories in northern San Diego and southern Riverside Counties. The purpose of the Project is to address adverse effects of resource constraints and competing demands on farming operations within the service areas of the Regional Partners, which include:

- Rancho California Water District
- Fallbrook Public Utility District
- Rainbow Municipal Water District
- Yuima Municipal Water District
- City of Oceanside
- City of Escondido
- Valley Center Municipal District

The Regional CropSWAP Program provides financial support for the adoption of agricultural best management practices (BMPs), described below. Participants in the Project will receive funding through a collaborative partnership involving the RCWD, the California Department of Water Resources, Regional Partners, and the participating farmers. The Program will reduce demand on imported water and help sustain the limited local water supply and enhance the sustainability and resiliency of agriculture in the Project Area. Based on the 2016 CropSWAP implementation, approximately 500 acres of existing farmland within the Project Area may be upgraded. The primary beneficiaries of the Project include the participating farmers and Regional Partners.

### Project Description

Eligible participants may implement three distinct types of BMPs, which are tailored to enhance agricultural efficiency, productivity, and environmental stewardship on existing agricultural and irrigated land. The three project types include:

I. **Comprehensive Crop Upgrades:**

Crop Conversion Projects: Participants can switch to lower water-use crop varieties.

Avocado Rootstock Upgrades: Removal of mature avocado trees and replacement with juvenile avocado trees grafted to modern, disease-resistant, and salt-tolerant rootstocks to enhance crop resilience.

Crop Rejuvenation (Stumping): A practice aimed at rejuvenating crops, such as avocado trees, for improved yields and sustainability.

II. **Irrigation Efficiency Upgrades:**

Uniformity Improvements: This option involves upgrading irrigation equipment (e.g., pipes, sprinklers, pressure regulators, drip irrigation) to achieve more efficient water distribution.

Soil Moisture Sensors: Installing soil moisture sensors to optimize irrigation scheduling.

Scheduling Automation: Utilizing remote monitoring and valve control equipment based on real-time data.

III. **Other Best Management Practices (BMPs):**

Nutrient Management: Installation of direct fertigation systems that offer precise nutrient delivery and increased crop yield potential.

Mulching: Mulching to improve soil moisture retention and reduce evaporation.

Cover Crops: Planting cover crops to protect and enhance soil health.

To be eligible, the participant must have existing land within the Project Area boundary that is actively farmed with an intact and operable irrigation system and be customers of one of the regional water agencies participating in the Program. The BMP implementation must be within the limits of the area being actively farmed by the participant at the time of the application. For Comprehensive Crop Upgrades, a minimum of one acre of crop must be replaced, converted, or stumped on a single property, and the existing crops must not have been removed prior to application for Program participation. For Irrigation Efficiency Upgrade and Other BMPs project types, growers must have one or more acres of planted, irrigated, agricultural material. BMP implementation would primarily involve hand tools, ditch witches, existing trucks and equipment, and existing workers necessary for routine farming activities.

Participants submit their application via the Regional CropSWAP online portal. The application would then be approved or denied after review by RCWD. Approved projects would be permitted to proceed with construction activities as outlined in the application to adhere to project-specific requirements such as project completion and timeline standards. Upon project completion, the participant would be required to submit documentation. The documentation would undergo review by RCWD, and potentially include post-project site inspection for some BMPs. The RCWD would have an inspector verify the work is done per the approved application to ensure all activities are consistent with the CropSWAP Program requirements. Upon successful completion of all verification procedures, the participant would receive incentive disbursement. If verification fails, the disbursement would be denied until corrective action is taken.

**Name of Public Agency Approving Project:** Rancho California Water District

**Name of Person or Agency Carrying Out Project:** Rancho California Water District

**Exempt Status:** (check one)

- Ministerial (Sec. 21080(b)(1); 15268);
- Declared Emergency (Sec. 21080(b)(3); 15296(a));
- Emergency Project (Sec. 21080(b)(4); 15269)
- Categorical Exemption. **Section 15301 (Class 1 Existing Facilities), Section 15302 (Class 2 Replacement or Reconstruction), and Section 15304 (Class 4 Minor Alterations to Land)**
- Statutory Exemption.

**Reasons why project is exempt:**

**Class 1:** Pursuant to Section 15301 of the State CEQA Guidelines, a Class 1 CE consists of:

*The operation, repair, maintenance, permitting, leasing, licensing, or minor alteration of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment, or topographical features, involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use. The types of "existing facilities" itemized below are not intended to be all-inclusive of the types of projects which might fall within Class 1. The key consideration is whether the project involves negligible or no expansion of use.*

The Project would involve the minor alteration of existing, private agricultural land and facilities, involving no expansion of use. To be eligible, the participant must be actively farming and have an intact and operable irrigation system on their farmland at the time of the application. As such, implementation of BMPs would not result in the expansion of the currently farmed boundaries of any properties or parcels within the Project area. As such, the Project would comply with the provisions as discussed under Class 1.

**Class 2:** Pursuant to Section 15302 of the State CEQA Guidelines, a Class 2 CE consists of:

*Replacement or reconstruction of existing structures and facilities where the new structure will be located on the same site as the structure replaced and will have substantially the same purpose and capacity as the structure replaced, including but not limited to.... (c) Replacement or reconstruction of existing utility systems and/or facilities involving negligible or no expansion of capacity.*

The Project would involve replacement or reconstruction of existing utility systems and facilities (i.e., irrigation and fertilization systems) involving no expansion of capacity. To be eligible, the participant must be actively farming and have an intact and operable irrigation system at the time of the application. No expanded irrigation systems would be installed; only replacements and/or retrofits of the existing backbone irrigation infrastructure would occur. As such, the Project would comply with the provisions as discussed under Class 2.

**Class 4:** Pursuant to Section 15304 of the State CEQA Guidelines, a Class 4 CE consists of:

*Minor public or private alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry or agricultural purposes.*

As stated above, the Project would involve the minor alteration of existing agricultural land and vegetation. The Program would not result in the removal of healthy, mature, or scenic trees, except for agricultural purposes where tree crops are replaced or stumped. As such, the Project would comply with the provisions as discussed under Class 4.

**Exceptions:** Section 15300.2, Exceptions, of the State CEQA Guidelines defines six exceptions to the application of a CE. The Project would not trigger any exceptions to a CE, defined under Section 15300.2 et. seq. of the State CEQA Guidelines, as discussed below.


- a. **Location.** The location of individual BMPs would solely consist of lands within the Project Area that are actively farmed and irrigated at the time of the application. Properties with ongoing agricultural activities at the time individual BMPs are implemented would not reasonably be expected to contain a designated, mapped, or adopted environmental resource of hazardous or critical concern.
- b. **Cumulative Impact.** The RCWD and participating water agencies are not planning successive similar programs within the same area and time frame as the current Program. As such, cumulative impacts would not occur.
- c. **Significant Effect.** It is not reasonably possible that the Project would have a significant effect on the environment due to “unusual circumstances”. All BMP activities would be limited to the currently farmed boundary and pre-existing use areas (e.g., roads, windbreaks, fencing). The individual BMP locations do not have any features or characteristics that would distinguish it from others in the exempt classes.
- d. **Scenic Highways.** There are no officially designated scenic highways within the Project Area pursuant to the California Scenic Highway Program (Caltrans 2024).
- e. **Hazardous Waste Sites.** The hazardous waste sites compiled, pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code (“Cortese List”), may be identified throughout the Project Area typical of an urban setting. However, the actively farmed areas for crop production would not reasonably be expected to be included on the Cortese List.
- f. **Historic Resources.** The Program BMPs would occur within the existing farmed boundary of each participants’ property and would not affect potentially historic structures or facilities.

Based on the above analysis, the Project would be consistent with the requirements of Sections 15061(b)(2), 15301, 15303 and 15304 of the State CEQA Guidelines, and no exceptions apply. Therefore, the Project is categorically exempt from CEQA.

California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). 2024 (April 5, last accessed). *California State Scenic Highway System Map*. Sacramento, CA: Caltrans. <https://caltrans.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=465dfd3d807c46cc8e8057116f1aaca>.

**Lead Agency Contact Person:** Dan Ruiz

**Area Code/Telephone Extension:** 951-296-6989

Signature:  Date: April 9, 2024 Title: Director of Engineering

Signed by Lead Agency     Signed by Applicant

Authority cited: Sections 21083 and 21110, Public Resources Code. Date received for filing at OPR: \_\_\_\_\_

Reference: Sections 21108, 21152, and 21152.1, Public Resources Code