

Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal

San Benito County, California
05-SBt-101- Post Miles R1.28/2.01
Project Number 0524000159/EA 05-1S010

Initial Study with Mitigated Negative Declaration

Volume 1 of 2



Prepared by the
State of California Department of Transportation

July 2024



General Information About This Document

Document prepared by: Sunny McBride, Environmental Stewardship Branch Chief,
Caltrans District 5

The Initial Study circulated to the public for 30 days between May 31, 2024 and June 30, 2024. Comments received during this period are included in Appendix B.

Elsewhere, language has been added throughout the document to indicate where a change has been made since the circulation of the draft environmental document.

Minor editorial changes and clarifications have not been so indicated.

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Project Number 0524000159/EA 05-1S010

Eucalyptus tree removal on Highway 101
from post miles R1.28 to 2.01 in San Benito County

**INITIAL STUDY
with Mitigated Negative Declaration**

Submitted Pursuant to: (State) Division 13, California Public Resources Code

THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA
Department of Transportation

Responsible Agency: California Transportation Commission



for Brandy Rider
Deputy District Director Planning, district 5
California Department of Transportation

07/05/2024

Date

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Mitigated Negative Declaration

Pursuant to: Division 13, Public Resources Code

State Clearinghouse Number: 2024060227

District-County-Route-Post Mile: 05-SBt-101-PM R1.28/2.01

EA/Project Number: 05-1S010/0524000159

Project Description

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) proposes the Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project to improve safety for the traveling public on Highway 101 in San Benito County between post miles R1.28 and 2.01 near Aromas, California. The project area is approximately 3 miles west of San Juan Bautista. The project would remove approximately 228 blue gum eucalyptus trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*) adjacent to Highway 101 that are in poor health or in weak condition. The trees are within 40 to 60 feet of the pavement edge. The project includes replacement planting with native species.

The project is not expected to impact wetlands, riparian areas, or jurisdictional waterways. Therefore, the project will not require permits from the Regional Water Quality Control Board, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, or California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The project area is not within the California coastal zone, and the project will not require a Coastal Development Permit. With implementation of avoidance and minimization measures, the project is not expected to impact nesting migratory birds protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act or California Fish and Game Code. The project is not expected to impact any special-status plant species. The project is expected to likely adversely affect the California red-legged frog. The project is expected to meet the criteria for the Programmatic Biological Opinion for California red-legged frog for the purposes of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service formal consultation. Critical habitat for the California red-legged frog is not present within the Biological Study Area. No take of state-listed species is anticipated and therefore California Endangered Species Act consultation is not required.

Although the general baseline eucalyptus grove would remain, the removal of approximately 50 to 75 percent of the trees would result in a noticeable change in a visual landmark for highway travelers and local residents. However, the planting of native trees and shrubs throughout the project limits will help to minimize the reduction of the vegetated character.

Determination

An Initial Study has been prepared by Caltrans District 5. On the basis of this study, it is determined that the proposed action with the incorporation of the identified

mitigation measures will not have a significant effect on the environment for the following reasons:

- Minimization and avoidance measures for riparian areas and special-status species, nesting birds, and roosting bats will help to avoid impacts to these resources.
- The planting of native trees and shrubs throughout the project limits will provide native habitat and help to minimize the reduction of the vegetated character.

[The following has been added since the circulation of the draft environmental document.]

- Minimization and avoidance measures outlined in the Programmatic Biological Opinion obtained from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the California red-legged frog will be implemented.



for Brandy Rider
Deputy District Director Planning, district 5
California Department of Transportation

07/05/2024

Date

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Chapter 1 Proposed Project

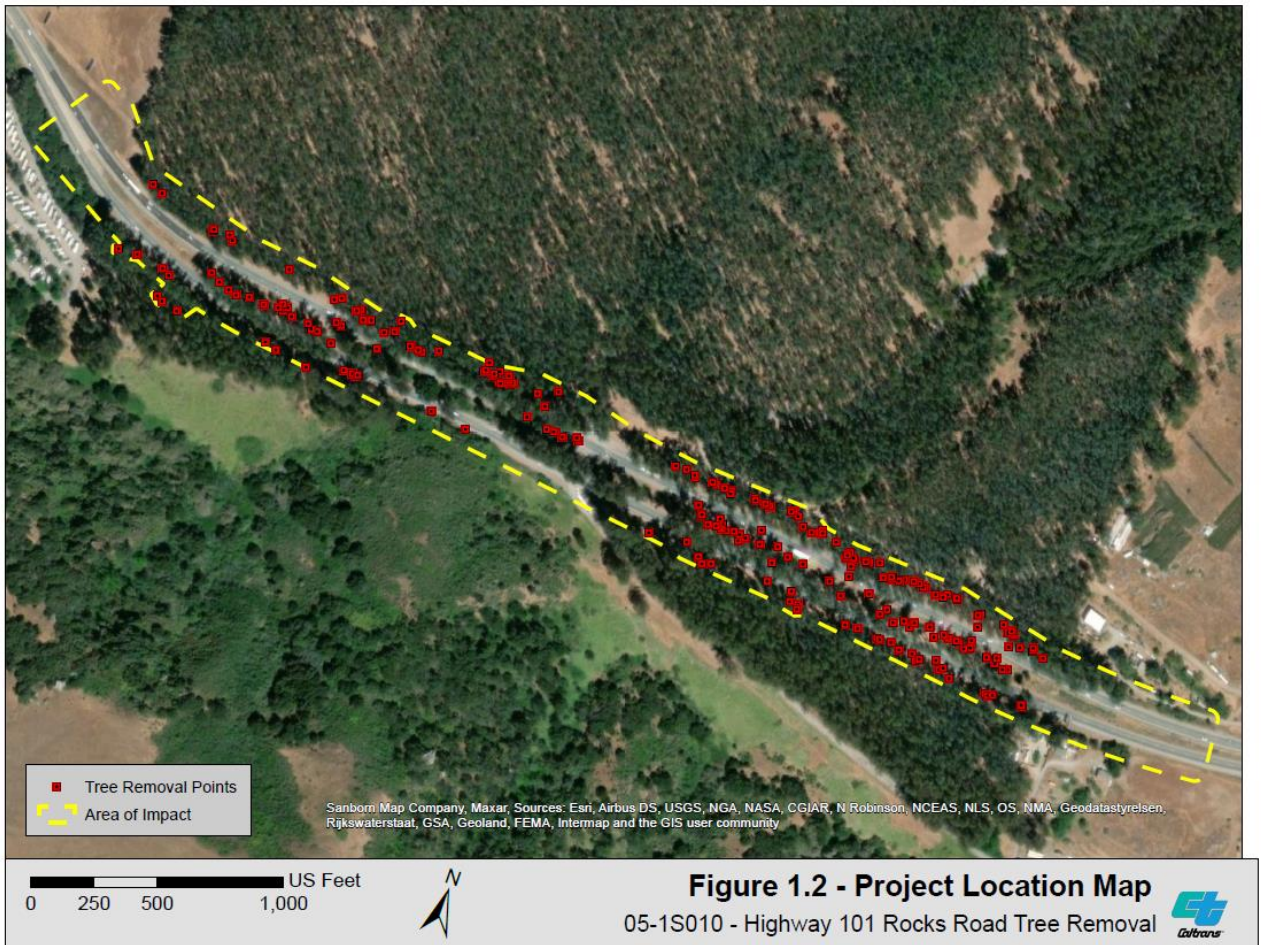
1.1 Introduction

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Caltrans proposes to improve safety for the traveling public on Highway 101 near Rocks Road in San Benito County between post miles R1.28 and 2.01 near Aromas, California, by cutting down approximately 228 eucalyptus trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*). The trees identified for removal are in declining health or exhibit structural weakness or imbalance. The project area is approximately 3 miles west of San Juan Bautista. Figures 1-1 and 1-2 show the project vicinity and project location.

Figure 1-1 Project Vicinity Map



Figure 1-2 Project Location Map



1.2 Purpose and Need

1.2.1 Purpose

The purpose of the project is to:

- Improve safety for the traveling public by eliminating the potential of trees and debris falling onto the roadway; and
- Reduce Caltrans maintenance worker exposure on the highway associated with maintenance activities.

1.2.2 Need

The project is needed to address the trees near the roadway that are in declining health or that exhibit structural weakness or imbalance.

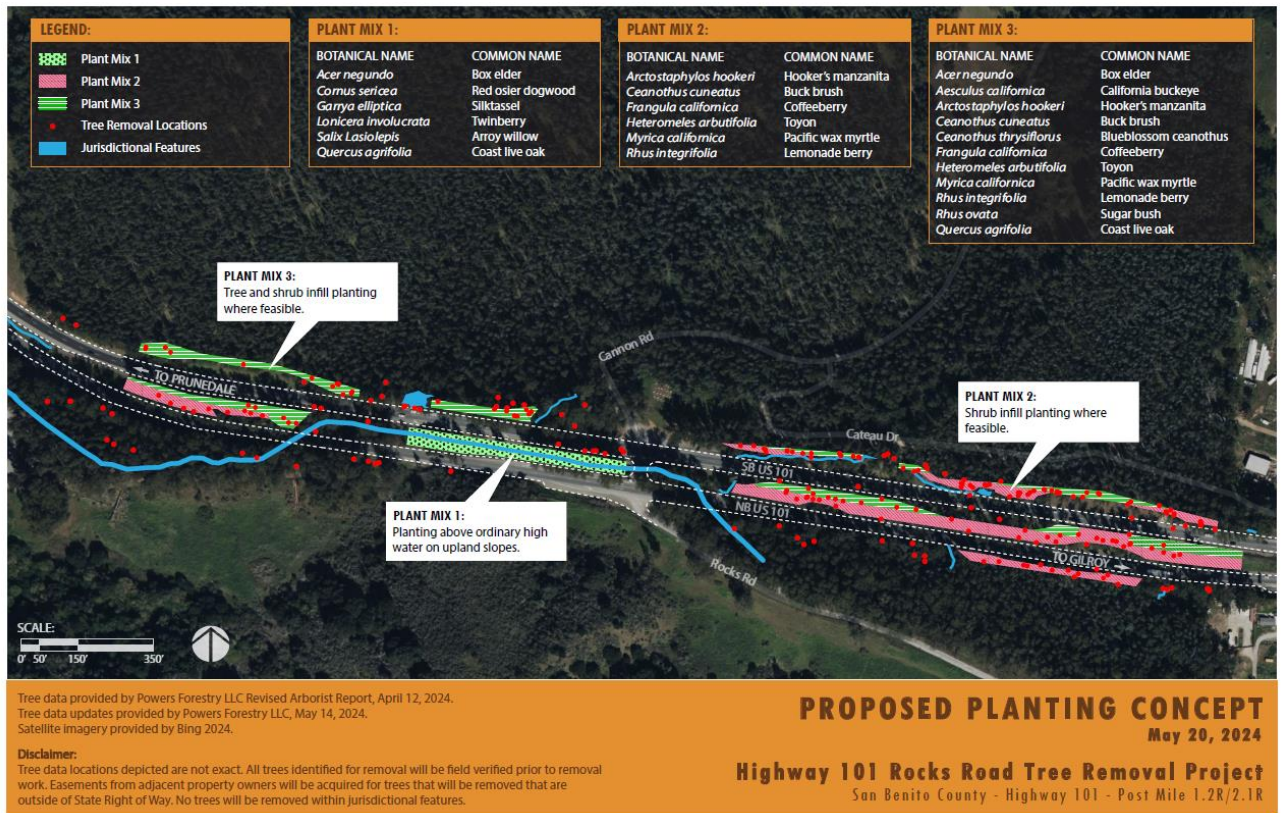
1.3 Project Description

Caltrans proposes the Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal project to improve safety for the traveling public on Highway 101 in San Benito County between post miles R1.28 and 2.01 near Aromas, California. The project area is approximately 3 miles west of San Juan Bautista. An arborist has assessed the condition of the grove of blue gum eucalyptus trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*) growing within the Caltrans right-of-way on both the northbound and southbound highway roadsides and in the median. The project would remove approximately 228 blue gum eucalyptus trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*) that are in poor health or in weak condition. The trees are within 40 to 60 feet from the pavement edge. After the trees are cut, the stumps will be ground out and/or treated with herbicide to prevent re-growth. The trees identified for removal are scattered throughout the grove; the entire grove will not be removed. About 50 to 75 percent of the trees in the grove will be removed. The scope of the project also includes replacement planting with more appropriate trees and shrubs. Replacement planting will consist of native species and native trees throughout the project area and will result in a higher density of planting, restoring the landscape to more native habitat and improving habitat for the California red-legged frog.

Replacement planting includes three different plant mixes that will be applied at multiple replacement planting areas. Figure 1-3 shows the locations of the trees that will be removed, where the jurisdictional features are found, and locations of where the three different plant mixes will be applied. The proposed planting plan also includes the species that will be included in each planting mix.

Note that the tree removal locations shown on the proposed planting plan, Figure 1-3, are not exact. All trees identified for removal will be verified in the field before removal. No tree removals will occur that are within jurisdictional features.

Figure 1-3 Proposed Planting Plan



1.4 Project Alternatives

1.4.1 Build Alternatives

The build alternative would remove approximately 228 blue gum eucalyptus trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*) that are in poor health or in weakened condition along Highway 101. The trees are within 40 to 60 feet from the pavement edge. The project includes replacement planting with native species.

This project contains a number of standardized project measures and Best Management Practices that are used on most, if not all, Caltrans projects and were not developed in response to any specific environmental impact resulting from the proposed project.

1.4.2 No-Build (No-Action) Alternative

Under the no-build alternative, the project would not be completed, and the unhealthy trees would remain.

1.5 Identification of a Preferred Alternative

[The following section has been added since the draft environmental document was circulated.]

The project development team selected the Build Alternative as the preferred alternative. The team chose the Build Alternative because it will address the purpose and need of the project.

1.6 Discussion of the NEPA Categorical Exclusion

This document contains information regarding compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and other state laws and regulations. Separate environmental documentation, supporting a Categorical Exclusion determination, has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. When needed for clarity, or as required by CEQA, this document may contain references to federal laws and/or regulations (CEQA, for example, requires consideration of adverse effects on species identified as a candidate, sensitive, or special-status species by the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—that is, species protected by the Federal Endangered Species Act).

1.7 Permits and Approvals Needed

The following permits, licenses, agreements, and certifications are required for project construction:

Agency	Permit/Approval	Status
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	Section 7 Consultation for Threatened and Endangered Species – California red-legged frog	Use of the Programmatic Biological Opinion for the California red-legged frog
California Transportation Commission	California Transportation Commission vote to approve construction funds	Following the approval of the final environmental document, the California Transportation Commission will be required to vote to approve construction funding for the project

Chapter 2 CEQA Evaluation

2.1 CEQA Environmental Checklist

This checklist identifies physical, biological, social, and economic factors that might be affected by the proposed project. Potential impact determinations include Significant and Unavoidable Impact, Less Than Significant Impact With Mitigation Incorporated, Less Than Significant Impact, and No Impact. In many cases, background studies performed in connection with a project will indicate that there are no impacts to a particular resource. A “No Impact” answer reflects this determination. The questions in this checklist are intended to encourage the thoughtful assessment of impacts and do not represent thresholds of significance.

Project features, which can include both design elements of the project and standardized measures that are applied to all or most Caltrans projects such as Best Management Practices and measures included in the Standard Plans and Specifications or as Standard Special Provisions, are considered to be an integral part of the project and have been considered prior to any significance determinations documented below.

“No Impact” determinations in each section are based on the scope, description, and location of the proposed project as well as the appropriate technical report (bound separately in Volume 2), and no further discussion is included in this document.

2.1.1 Aesthetics

Considering the information in the Visual Impact Assessment dated May 2024, the following significance determinations have been made:

Except as provided in Public Resources Code Section 21099:

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Aesthetics
a) Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?	Less Than Significant Impact
b) Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway?	No Impact

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Aesthetics
c) In non-urbanized areas, substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of public views of the site and its surroundings? (Public views are those that are experienced from a publicly accessible vantage point.) If the project is in an urbanized area, would the project conflict with applicable zoning and other regulations governing scenic quality?	Less Than Significant Impact
d) Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?	No Impact

Affected Environment

The project sits along Highway 101 in the northwestern portion of San Benito County. Highway 101 is a principal arterial that serves mostly interregional traffic. It is a slightly curving four-lane expressway from the Monterey County line, changing to a four-lane freeway about 1.6 miles north of the Monterey County line. The project is south of the Highway 101 and State Route 156 interchange near Rocks Road and the adjacent community of Aromas.

Within the California Coast Range, San Benito County’s generally rural character is defined by agricultural croplands, rangelands, rolling hills, and open spaces. The topography ranges from gently sloping to steep hills cut by narrow canyons, with riparian areas. Throughout the region, vegetation is a prime component of the visual character and encompasses mostly oak woodlands, chaparral, and open grasslands with stands of eucalyptus.

The project area is uniquely identified by a dense eucalyptus grove that is also in the center median of Highway 101, in areas where the northbound and southbound lanes are at different elevations. The dense stand of trees mostly blocks views to the surrounding hillsides. Where visible at the north and south ends of the project limits, the hillsides are heavily vegetated with native oak trees and chaparral.

Environmental Consequences

The existing visual quality of the highway corridor through the project area is moderately high, based mostly on the rural character and dense eucalyptus tree grove. The nearby city of Aromas is relatively compact and is not visible from the project area. Just south and north of the project area are a few sparsely set residences and businesses visible from the highway, but they do not change the overall rural visual character of the corridor.

The project would remove approximately 228 eucalyptus trees from both sides of the highway as well as in the median. The 228 trees account for approximately 50 to 75 percent of the total eucalyptus trees in the grove. The trees proposed for removal range from large mature trees over 50 feet tall (which grew from the original plantings that are over 60 years old) to resprouted trees that range from 10 to 40 years old.

The eucalyptus grove is a dominant visual element as seen from the surrounding area due to the trees' large stature, the number of trees, and the proximity to the highway. The eucalyptus grove has a high degree of memorability in the landscape. The size, density, and proximity to the highway make the grove very noticeable.

Following project implementation, although the general baseline eucalyptus grove would remain, the removal of approximately 50 to 75 percent of the trees would result in a noticeable change in a visual landmark for highway travelers and local residents. The planting of native trees and shrubs throughout the project limits will help to minimize the reduction of the vegetated character.

Avoidance, Minimization, and/or Mitigation Measures

With implementation of the following minimization measures, the project would be consistent with the aesthetic and visual resource protection goals along Highway 101, and potential visual impacts would be reduced:

- Preserve as much existing native vegetation as possible. Prescriptive clearing and grubbing and grading techniques that save the most existing native vegetation possible should be employed.
- Replacement planting shall include aesthetic considerations as well as the inherent biological goals. Revegetation shall include native trees and plants as determined by the Caltrans Biologist and Caltrans District 5 Landscape Architecture. Revegetation shall occur at the maximum extent horticulturally viable and be maintained until established.
- All tree stumps shall be ground and/or treated so that no portions remain visible at the completion of the project.
- An ISA Certified Arborist with Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ) must be present during tree work to direct and oversee implementation of ANSI A300 Tree Care Standards.
- Additional tree removal shall not occur unless previously authorized by Caltrans District 5 Landscape Architecture and Biology.
- Following construction, re-grade and re-contour all new construction staging areas and other temporary uses as necessary to match the surrounding pre-project topography.

2.1.2 Agriculture and Forestry Resources

In determining whether impacts to agricultural resources are significant environmental effects, lead agencies may refer to the California Agricultural Land Evaluation and Site Assessment Model (1997) prepared by the California Department of Conservation as an optional model to use in assessing impacts on agriculture and farmland. In determining whether impacts to forest resources, including timberland, are significant environmental effects, lead agencies may refer to information compiled by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection regarding the state’s inventory of forest land, including the Forest and Range Assessment Project and the Forest Legacy Assessment Project; and the forest carbon measurement methodology provided in Forest Protocols adopted by the California Air Resources Board.

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Agriculture and Forest Resources
a) Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland), as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use?	No Impact
b) Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract?	No Impact
c) Conflict with existing zoning, or cause rezoning of, forest land (as defined in Public Resources Code Section 12220(g)), timberland (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 4526), or timberland zoned Timberland Production (as defined by Government Code Section 51104(g))?	No Impact
d) Result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use?	No Impact
e) Involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of farmland to non-agricultural use or conversion of forest land to non-forest use?	No Impact

2.1.3 Air Quality

Where available, the significance criteria established by the applicable air quality management district or air pollution control district may be relied upon to make the following determinations.

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Air Quality
a) Conflict with or obstruct implementation of the applicable air quality plan?	No Impact
b) Result in a cumulatively considerable net increase of any criteria pollutant for which the project region is non-attainment under an applicable federal or state ambient air quality standard?	No Impact
c) Expose sensitive receptors to substantial pollutant concentrations?	No Impact
d) Result in other emissions (such as those leading to odors) adversely affecting a substantial number of people?	No Impact

2.1.4 Biological Resources

Considering the information in the Natural Environment Study – Minimal Impacts dated May 2024, the following significance determinations have been made:

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Biological Resources
a) Have a substantial adverse effect, either directly or through habitat modifications, on any species identified as a candidate, sensitive, or special-status species in local or regional plans, policies, or regulations, or by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, or National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries?	Less Than Significant Impact With Mitigation Incorporated
b) Have a substantial adverse effect on any riparian habitat or other sensitive natural community identified in local or regional plans, policies, regulations or by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?	Less Than Significant Impact

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Biological Resources
c) Have a substantial adverse effect on state or federally protected wetlands (including, but not limited to, marsh, vernal pool, coastal, etc.) through direct removal, filling, hydrological interruption, or other means?	No Impact
d) Interfere substantially with the movement of any native resident or migratory fish or wildlife species or with established native resident or migratory wildlife corridors, or impede the use of native wildlife nursery sites?	No Impact
e) Conflict with any local policies or ordinances protecting biological resources, such as a tree preservation policy or ordinance?	No Impact
f) Conflict with the provisions of an adopted Habitat Conservation Plan, Natural Community Conservation Plan, or other approved local, regional, or state habitat conservation plan?	No Impact

Affected Environment

Biological Study Area

The biological study area lies in a small valley 3 miles south of the northern foothills of the Gabilan Range and eastern opening to the Pajaro Valley formation, the division between the Gabilan Range and the Santa Cruz Mountains within the Central California Coast Mountain ranges. At roughly 250 feet elevation, the biological study area is 11.75 miles east of the Pacific Ocean and 3 miles west of San Juan Bautista. The regional climate is generally semi-arid to Mediterranean, with a small coastal influence from the Pacific Ocean. Little to no precipitation occurs during the summer months, and cool temperatures and moderate rain occur during the winter months. The 7-year average precipitation within the Aromas area is roughly 19.29 inches yearly.

The biological study area is mostly paved with highway or composed of eucalyptus trees, with minimal ruderal vegetation. Land use in this area of Aromas is agricultural and residential. The main soils within the biological study area include Arnold loamy sand, Botella loam, and Los Gatos rocky clay loam. A perennial creek runs through the project site, following Rocks Road from the east, passing through a culvert into a shallow corridor in the median between Rocks Road and Cannon Road and then continues west

through another final culvert out of the project site and continues along Highway 101.

The biological study area can be described as ruderal/disturbed; the area contains mostly non-native weedy and/or invasive species tolerant of conditions such as compacted soils, roadsides subjected to vehicle disturbance, and eucalyptus habitat. The vegetation that exists within the biological study area consists of upland, non-native, ruderal species such as black mustard (*Brassica nigra*), great brome (*Bromus diandrus*) spear thistle (*Carduus pycnocephalus*), and cheeseweed (*Malva parviflora*).

Most of the biological study area is composed of a large grove of eucalyptus trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*). Eucalyptus trees are also found along the banks and upland of the perennial and ephemeral creeks. Banks are also vegetated by non-native perennial herbs. A small segment of coyote brush scrub exists south of Rocks Road, mostly consisting of non-native ruderal species.

Special-Status Species and Critical Habitat

Animals are considered to be of special concern based on (1) federal, state, or local laws regulating their development; (2) limited distributions; and/or (3) the habitat requirements of special-status animals occurring onsite. The California red-legged frog may be present in the biological study area during project activities. No other state or federally listed animal species are expected to be present within the biological study area. The project does not occur within designated critical habitat for any species. Numerous species of nesting birds have the potential for occurrence in or adjacent to the project site and are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and California Department of Fish and Wildlife Section 3503.

Riparian Areas

Receiving water bodies for the project are two unnamed features: one perennial creek and one ephemeral creek. Jurisdictional areas of significance within the biological study area for the project are two unnamed features—one perennial creek and one ephemeral creek—which are tributaries to the Elkhorn Slough. No riparian vegetation removal or work within jurisdictional areas is proposed for the project.

Environmental Consequences

The project will have no permanent impacts. The project will have temporary impacts, with minimal ground disturbance. Temporary impacts involve work off pavement: cutting and limbing of eucalyptus trees. All impacts occur either in areas of existing hardscape or within non-native eucalyptus grove habitat.

Avoidance and minimization measures will require that the contractor use existing disturbed or developed areas within the area of potential impacts for temporary staging and storage. In addition, avoidance and minimization

measures will be incorporated into the project specifically for tree removal, trimming and limbing.

The project is not within the coastal zone. The literature and database search identified no California Department of Fish and Wildlife natural community of special concern in the project area. The project would have no negative impacts to wildlife habitat connectivity, and the project would have no impacts to wetlands, waters of the U.S., or jurisdictional waters of the State of California.

Potential impacts to special-status species are discussed below.

California Red-Legged Frog

The biological study area has low-quality habitat for the California red-legged frog, and no critical habitat or aquatic breeding habitat is present. Eucalyptus leaves, bark, and duff (and associated tannins) throughout the biological study area have greatly reduced the availability of habitat features for the California red-legged frog.

Eucalyptus trees throughout the upland sections of the creek and throughout the upland area have greatly reduced the availability or potential growth of dense vegetation necessary for California red-legged frog habitat. The species was found in one section of the creek lacking eucalyptus tree upland canopy; the absence of eucalyptus trees allowed creek banks to grow vegetation.

Habitat within the biological study area is likely used for dispersal and refuge. California red-legged frogs may occur in the project area during construction due to the observations of the species found within and adjacent to the biological study area during two April surveys and due to the presence of marginal upland and dispersal and refugia habitat for the species.

Project work would be conducted in the late summer and early fall of 2024, outside of California red-legged frog dispersal and breeding seasons. Temporary impacts to the California red-legged frog include potential relocation if this species is present during pre-construction surveys and/or construction. Only eucalyptus trees outside of jurisdictional areas would be removed. Any eucalyptus trees within the jurisdictional habitat that have been deemed high risk would be avoided. No grading, excavating or ground disturbance will occur. Project work within this area using heavy equipment may result in injury, death, or relocation of California red-legged frogs if the species were to inhabit the area during work activities.

The Federal Endangered Species Act Section 7 effects determination is the project may affect and is likely to adversely affect the California red-legged frog. The basis for this determination is that the California red-legged frog is present within the biological study area and therefore there could be potential for take of the species during construction. Federally designated critical

habitat for the California red-legged frog does not occur within the biological study area.

California Tiger Salamander

No habitat for the California tiger salamander exists within the biological study area, and no critical habitat or aquatic breeding habitat for the species is present. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conservation plan for the Ellicott Slough, the end for the neighboring Pajaro Valley watershed, found that eucalyptus species “continue to threaten native habitats” for amphibians, specifically the California tiger salamander. The California Department of Fish and Game conducted a status review of the California tiger salamander in 2010 through a large spatial analysis of California tiger salamander species habitat, deliberately ruling out any known eucalyptus stands. Eucalyptus leaves, bark, and duff (and associated tannins) throughout the biological study area have greatly reduced the availability for any habitat features for the California tiger salamander.

Project work would be conducted in the late summer and early fall of 2024, outside of California tiger salamander dispersal and breeding seasons. Tree removal work would be limited to eucalyptus trees, none within any jurisdictional habitat. Any eucalyptus trees within the jurisdictional habitat that have been deemed high risk would be avoided. No grading, excavating or ground disturbance would be conducted for the project.

The Federal Endangered Species Act Section 7 effects determination is the project will have no effect to the California tiger salamander or California tiger salamander habitat. The basis for this determination is that the California tiger salamander will not be present because the biological study area has no available habitat. The biological study area is not within critical habitat for the California tiger-salamander.

Monarch Butterfly

Full criteria for monarch butterfly habitat are lacking within the biological study area, with the absence of nectar sources for foraging and larval host plants for egg laying substrate; also, the species was not observed during wildlife surveys. The project would remove only eucalyptus trees that pose a danger to the traveling public. The eucalyptus grove stretches for an additional 1 mile north, outside of the Caltrans right-of-way, with the widest section of the grove at 0.64 mile.

The Federal Endangered Species Act Section 7 effects determination is the project will have no effect to the monarch butterfly. The basis for this determination is that the monarch butterfly will not be present because the biological study area has marginal habitat, lacking key criteria. Critical habitat has not been designated.

Roosting Bats

Although no bat roosts were observed during reconnaissance surveys, there is low potential that bats could establish new roosts in trees within the biological study area with the passage of time before trees are removed. Direct impacts to bats could result during removal of vegetation if bats are found to be roosting in these areas. These direct effects could result in the injury or mortality of bats or harassment that could alter roosting behaviors. Indirect impacts could also result from noise and disturbance associated with construction, which could also alter roosting behaviors. The implementation of pre-activity surveys and exclusion zones would reduce the potential for adverse effects to roosting bat species.

*Western Spadefoot (*Spea hammondi*)*

No habitat for the western spadefoot occurs within the biological study area, and no aquatic breeding habitat for the species is present. Eucalyptus leaves, bark, and duff (and associated tannins) throughout the biological study area have greatly reduced the availability for any habitat features for the western spadefoot. Tree removal work within the biological study area would be limited to the eucalyptus trees, none within any jurisdictional habitat. Any eucalyptus trees within the jurisdictional habitat that have been deemed high risk would be avoided. No grading, excavating or ground disturbance will be conducted for the project.

The Federal Endangered Species Act Section 7 effects determination is the project will have no effect to the western spadefoot. The basis for this determination is that the western spadefoot will not be present because the biological study area has no available habitat. The biological study area is not within critical habitat for the western spadefoot since no critical habitat for the species is currently available.

Nesting Birds

The chestnut-backed chickadee (*Poecile rufescens*), song sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), and Steller's jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) were observed during field surveys. The Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act and California Fish and Game Code protect native migratory birds and associated nests and eggs. Trees, shrubs, other vegetation, and structures within and adjacent to the biological study area could provide potential nesting habitat for native migratory bird species.

Direct impacts could occur during tree removal activities. Project activities may cause noise and vibrations that could indirectly impact nesting birds in the immediate vicinity. The avoidance and minimization measures described below would be implemented to protect all nesting bird species protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and California Fish and Game Code.

Avoidance, Minimization, and/or Mitigation Measures

Avoidance and Minimization Measures for Riparian Areas

The following avoidance and minimization measure would be incorporated into the project to avoid potential adverse effects to the perennial creek and the ephemeral creek jurisdictional habitats:

- Permanent erosion control on all disturbed areas proximate to perennial creek and the ephemeral creek would be applied.
- No equipment would be fueled or serviced within 100 feet of the riparian areas.
- Native riparian vegetation along the riparian corridor would be considered environmentally sensitive area (ESA) and defined and protected using Temporary Fence (Type ESA).

Avoidance and Minimization Measures for California Red-Legged Frog

No compensatory mitigation is required for California red-legged frog; however, implementation of mitigation through replacement of eucalyptus removal with native trees will benefit California red-legged frog and ensure any suitable habitat on-site that is temporarily impacted will be restored.

Caltrans anticipates the project will qualify for Federal Endangered Species Act incidental take coverage under the Programmatic Biological Opinion for Projects Funded or Approved under the Federal Highway Administration's Federal Aid Program (8-8-10-F-58). The following avoidance and minimization measures from the Programmatic Biological Opinion will be implemented for the California red-legged frog:

- Only U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologists shall participate in activities associated with the capture, handling, and monitoring of California red-legged frogs.
- Ground disturbance shall not begin until written approval is received from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that the biologist is qualified to conduct the work.
- A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist shall survey the project area no more than 48 hours before the onset of work activities. If any life stage of the California red-legged frog is found and these individuals are likely to be killed or injured by work activities, the approved biologist shall be allowed sufficient time to move them from the site before work begins. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist shall relocate the California red-legged frogs the shortest distance possible to a location that contains suitable habitat and will not be affected by the activities associated with the project. The relocation site shall be in the

same drainage to the extent practicable. Caltrans shall coordinate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the relocation site prior to the capture of any California red-legged frogs.

- Before any activities begin on a project, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist shall conduct a training session for all construction personnel. At a minimum, the training shall include a description of the California red-legged frog and its habitat, the specific measures that are being implemented to conserve the California red-legged frog for the current project, and the boundaries within which the project may be accomplished. Brochures, books, and briefings may be used in the training session, with a qualified person on hand to answer any questions.
- A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist shall be present at the work site until all California red-legged frogs have been removed, workers have been instructed, and disturbance of habitat has been completed. After this time, Caltrans shall designate a person to monitor onsite compliance with all minimization measures. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist shall ensure this monitor receives the training outlined in measure 4 above and in the identification of California red-legged frogs. If the monitor or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist recommends that work be stopped because California red-legged frogs would be affected in a manner not anticipated by Caltrans and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during review of the proposed action, the monitor shall notify the resident engineer immediately. The resident engineer shall resolve the situation by requiring that all actions that are causing these effects be halted. When work is stopped, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shall be notified as soon as possible.
- During project activities, all trash that may attract predators or scavengers shall be properly contained, removed from the work site, and disposed of regularly. Following construction, all trash and debris shall be removed from work areas.
- All refueling, maintenance and staging of equipment and vehicles shall occur at least 60 feet from riparian habitat or water bodies and not in a location from where a spill would drain directly toward aquatic habitat, unless otherwise preapproved by the necessary agencies. The monitor shall ensure contamination of habitat does not occur during operations. Prior to the onset of work, Caltrans shall ensure that a plan is in place for prompt and effective response to any accidental spills. All workers shall be informed of the importance of preventing spills and of the appropriate measures to take should a spill occur.
- Habitat contours shall be returned to a natural configuration at the end of the project activities. This measure shall be implemented in all areas disturbed by activities associated with the project, unless the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service and Caltrans determine that it is not feasible or modification of original contours would benefit the California red-legged frog.

- The number of access routes, size of staging areas, and the total area of activity shall be limited to the minimum necessary to achieve the project. Environmentally Sensitive Areas shall be established to confine access routes and construction areas to the minimum area necessary to complete construction, and minimize the impact to California red-legged frog habitat; this goal includes locating access routes and construction areas outside of wetlands and riparian areas to the maximum extent practicable.
- Caltrans shall attempt to schedule work for times of the year when impacts to the California red-legged frog would be minimal. For example, work that would affect large pools that may support breeding would be avoided, to the maximum degree practicable, during the breeding season (November through May). Isolated pools that are important to maintain California red-legged frogs through the driest portions of the year would be avoided, to the maximum degree practicable, during the late summer and early fall. Habitat assessments, surveys, and technical assistance between Caltrans and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during project planning shall be used to assist in scheduling work activities to avoid sensitive habitats during key times of year.
- To control sedimentation during and after project completion, Caltrans shall implement Best Management Practices (BMPs) outlined in any authorizations or permits issued under the authorities of the Clean Water Act received for the project. If Best Management Practices are ineffective, Caltrans shall attempt to remedy the situation immediately, in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- If a work site is to be temporarily dewatered by pumping, intakes shall be completely screened with wire mesh not larger than 0.2 inch to prevent California red-legged frogs from entering the pump system. Water shall be released or pumped downstream at an appropriate rate to maintain downstream flows during construction. Upon completion of construction activities, any diversions or barriers to flow shall be removed in a manner that would allow flow to resume with the least disturbance to the substrate. Alteration of the streambed shall be minimized to the maximum extent possible; any imported material shall be removed from the streambed upon completion of the project.
- Unless approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, water shall not be impounded in a manner that may attract California red-legged frogs.
- A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist shall permanently remove any individuals of exotic species, such as bullfrogs (*Rana catesbeiana*), signal and red swamp crayfish (*Pacifasticus leniusculus*;

Procambarus clarkii), and centrarchid fishes from the project area, to the maximum extent possible. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist shall be responsible for ensuring his or her activities are in compliance with the California Fish and Game Code.

- If Caltrans demonstrates that disturbed areas have been restored to conditions that allow them to function as habitat for the California red-legged frog, these areas will not be included in the amount of total habitat permanently disturbed.
- To ensure that diseases are not conveyed between work sites by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist, the fieldwork code of practice developed by the Declining Amphibian Task Force shall be followed at all times.
- Project sites shall be revegetated with an assemblage of native riparian, wetland, and upland vegetation suitable for the area. Locally collected plant materials shall be used to the extent practicable. Invasive, exotic plants shall be controlled to the maximum extent practicable. This measure shall be implemented in all areas disturbed by activities associated with the project, unless the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Caltrans determine that it is not feasible or practical.
- Caltrans shall not use herbicides as the primary method to control invasive, exotic plants. However, if it is determined that the use of herbicides is the only feasible method for controlling invasive plants at a specific project site; it will implement the following additional protective measures for the California red-legged frog:
 - a) Caltrans shall not use herbicides during the breeding season for the California red-legged frog;
 - b) Caltrans shall conduct surveys for the California red-legged frog immediately prior to the start of herbicide use. If found, California red-legged frogs shall be relocated to suitable habitat far enough from the project area that no direct contact with herbicide would occur;
 - c) Giant reed and other invasive plants shall be cut and hauled out by hand and painted with glyphosate-based products, such as Aquamaster® or Rodeo®;
 - d) Licensed and experienced Caltrans staff or a licensed and experienced contractor shall use a hand-held sprayer for foliar application of Aquamaster® or Rodeo® where large monoculture stands occur at an individual project site;

- e) All precautions shall be taken to ensure that no herbicide is applied to native vegetation;
- f) Herbicides shall not be applied on or near open water surfaces (no closer than 60 feet from open water);
- g) Foliar applications of herbicide shall not occur when wind speeds are in excess of 3 miles per hour;
- h) No herbicides shall be applied within 24 hours of forecasted rain;
- i) Application of all herbicides shall be done by qualified Caltrans staff or contractors to ensure that overspray is minimized, that all applications are made in accordance with the label recommendations, and with implementation of all required and reasonable safety measures. A safe dye shall be added to the mixture to visually denote treated sites. Application of herbicides shall be consistent with the U.S Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Pesticide Programs, Endangered Species Protection Program county bulletins;
- j) All herbicides, fuels, lubricants, and equipment shall be stored, poured, or refilled at least 60 feet from riparian habitat or water bodies in a location where a spill would not drain directly toward aquatic habitat, unless otherwise preapproved by the necessary agencies. Prior to the onset of work, Caltrans shall ensure that a plan is in place for a prompt and effective response to accidental spills. All workers shall be informed of the importance of preventing spills and of the appropriate measures to take should a spill occur.

Avoidance and Minimization Measures for California Tiger Salamander

The following avoidance and minimization measures will be applied for the California tiger salamander:

- Before any activities begin on a project, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-approved biologist shall conduct a training session for all construction personnel. At a minimum, the training shall include a description of the California tiger salamander and its habitat, the specific measures that are being implemented to conserve the California tiger salamander for the current project, and the boundaries within which the project may be accomplished. Brochures, books, and briefings may be used in the training session, with a qualified person on hand to answer any questions.
- If a California tiger salamander is found, work would stop and consultation would be required with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and an incidental

take permit through the California Department of Fish and Wildlife would be required.

Avoidance and Minimization Measures for Monarch Butterfly

The project would have no effect to the monarch butterfly because the marginal habitat lacks key criteria, and the species was not observed during surveys. Regardless, Caltrans will implement measures to avoid and minimize impacts to the monarch butterfly. Prior to conducting work and during the work associated with the project, the following measures will be implemented:

- Before any eucalyptus tree removal within the project biological study area, a biologist will survey for the presence of roosting or aggregated, overwintering monarch butterflies.
- A temporary fence will be installed along the outer boundary of the buffer zone prior to and during any construction activities on the site.
- If an active roost or aggregation is present on the project site, any construction grading, or other development within 200 feet of the active roost will be prohibited between October 1 and March 1.

Avoidance and Minimization Measures for Roosting Bats

Removal of eucalyptus trees will be offset with replacement plantings, which will provide native roosting habitat. No other compensatory mitigation is proposed.

In addition, Caltrans would implement the following measure to protect roosting bats:

- If tree removal is required during the bat maternity roosting season (February 1 to September 30), a bat roost survey shall be conducted by a qualified biologist within three (3) days prior to removal. If an active bat roost is found, a qualified biologist shall determine an appropriate buffer or monitoring strategy based on the habits and needs of the species. The buffer area shall be avoided, or monitoring shall continue until a qualified biologist has determined that roosting activity has ceased. Active bat maternity roosts shall not be disturbed or destroyed at any time.

Avoidance and Minimization Measures for Nesting Birds

The following measures apply to all birds protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and California Fish and Game Code. There are no formal survey protocols for most of these bird species, but the California Department of Fish and Wildlife typically requires pre-construction nesting bird surveys and avoidance of impacts to active bird nests.

- If necessary, vegetation should be removed between September 1 to January 31, outside of the typical nesting bird season, to avoid potential impacts to nesting birds. If construction activities are proposed to occur within 100 feet of potential habitat during the nesting season (February 1 to August 31), a nesting bird survey shall be conducted by a biologist determined qualified by Caltrans no more than two weeks (14 days) prior to construction. If an active nest is found, Caltrans shall determine an appropriate buffer based on the habits and needs of the species. The buffer area shall be avoided until a qualified biologist has determined that juveniles have fledged and no longer dependent on the nest.
- Active bird nests shall not be disturbed, and eggs or young birds covered by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and California Fish and Game Code shall not be killed, destroyed, injured, or harassed at any time.

2.1.5 Cultural Resources

Considering the information in the Screened Undertaking Memo dated March 2024, the following significance determinations have been made:

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Cultural Resources
a) Cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource pursuant to Section 15064.5?	No Impact
b) Cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of an archaeological resource pursuant to Section 15064.5?	No Impact
c) Disturb any human remains, including those interred outside of dedicated cemeteries?	No Impact

2.1.6 Energy

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Energy
a) Result in potentially significant environmental impact due to wasteful, inefficient, or unnecessary consumption of energy resources during project construction or operation?	No Impact

2.1.7 Geology and Soils

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Geology and Soils
a) Directly or indirectly cause potential substantial adverse effects, including the risk of loss, injury, or death involving: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Rupture of a known earthquake fault, as delineated on the most recent Alquist-Priolo Earthquake Fault Zoning Map issued by the State Geologist for the area or based on other substantial evidence of a known fault? Refer to Division of Mines and Geology Special Publication 42. 	No Impact
ii) Strong seismic ground shaking?	No Impact
iii) Seismic-related ground failure, including liquefaction?	No Impact
iv) Landslides?	No Impact
b) Result in substantial soil erosion or the loss of topsoil?	No Impact
c) Be located on a geologic unit or soil that is unstable, or that would become unstable as a result of the project, and potentially result in onsite or offsite landslide, lateral spreading, subsidence, liquefaction or collapse?	No Impact
d) Be located on expansive soil, as defined in Table 18-1-B of the Uniform Building Code (1994), creating substantial risks to life or property?	No Impact
e) Have soils incapable of adequately supporting the use of septic tanks or alternative waste water disposal systems where sewers are not available for the disposal of waste water?	No Impact
f) Directly or indirectly destroy a unique paleontological resource or site or unique geologic feature?	No Impact

2.1.8 Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Greenhouse Gas Emissions
a) Generate greenhouse gas emissions, either directly or indirectly, that may have a significant impact on the environment?	No Impact
b) Conflict with an applicable plan, policy or regulation adopted for the purpose of reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases?	No Impact

2.1.9 Hazards and Hazardous Materials

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Hazards and Hazardous Materials
a) Create a significant hazard to the public or the environment through the routine transport, use, or disposal of hazardous materials?	No Impact
b) Create a significant hazard to the public or the environment through reasonably foreseeable upset and accident conditions involving the release of hazardous materials into the environment?	No Impact
c) Emit hazardous emissions or handle hazardous or acutely hazardous materials, substances, or waste within one-quarter mile of an existing or proposed school?	No Impact
d) Be located on a site which is included on a list of hazardous materials sites compiled pursuant to Government Code Section 65962.5 and, as a result, would it create a significant hazard to the public or the environment?	No Impact
e) For a project located within an airport land use plan or, where such a plan has not been adopted, within two miles of a public airport or public use airport, would the project result in a safety hazard or excessive noise for people residing or working in the project area?	No Impact

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Hazards and Hazardous Materials
f) Impair implementation of or physically interfere with an adopted emergency response plan or emergency evacuation plan?	No Impact
g) Expose people or structures, either directly or indirectly, to a significant risk of loss, injury or death involving wildland fires?	No Impact

2.1.10 Hydrology and Water Quality

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Hydrology and Water Quality
a) Violate any water quality standards or waste discharge requirements or otherwise substantially degrade surface water or groundwater quality?	No Impact
b) Substantially decrease groundwater supplies or interfere substantially with groundwater recharge such that the project may impede sustainable groundwater management of the basin?	No Impact
c) Substantially alter the existing drainage pattern of the site or area, including through the alteration of the course of a stream or river or through the addition of impervious surfaces, in a manner which would: (i) result in substantial erosion or siltation onsite or offsite;	No Impact
(ii) substantially increase the rate or amount of surface runoff in a manner which would result in flooding onsite or offsite;	No Impact
(iii) create or contribute runoff water which would exceed the capacity of existing or planned stormwater drainage systems or provide substantial additional sources of polluted runoff; or	No Impact
(iv) impede or redirect flood flows?	No Impact

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Hydrology and Water Quality
d) In flood hazard, tsunami, or seiche zones, risk release of pollutants due to project inundation?	No Impact
e) Conflict with or obstruct implementation of a water quality control plan or sustainable groundwater management plan?	No Impact

2.1.11 Land Use and Planning

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Land Use and Planning
a) Physically divide an established community?	No Impact
b) Cause a significant environmental impact due to a conflict with any land use plan, policy, or regulation adopted for the purpose of avoiding or mitigating an environmental effect?	No Impact

2.1.12 Mineral Resources

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Mineral Resources
a) Result in the loss of availability of a known mineral resource that would be of value to the region and the residents of the state?	No Impact
b) Result in the loss of availability of a locally important mineral resource recovery site delineated on a local general plan, specific plan or other land use plan?	No Impact

2.1.13 Noise

Question—Would the project result in:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Noise
a) Generation of a substantial temporary or permanent increase in ambient noise levels in the vicinity of the project in excess of standards established in the local general plan or noise ordinance, or applicable standards of other agencies?	No Impact
b) Generation of excessive groundborne vibration or groundborne noise levels?	No Impact
c) For a project located within the vicinity of a private airstrip or an airport land use plan or, where such a plan has not been adopted, within two miles of a public airport or public use airport, would the project expose people residing or working in the project area to excessive noise levels?	No Impact

2.1.14 Population and Housing

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Population and Housing
a) Induce substantial unplanned population growth in an area, either directly (for example, by proposing new homes and businesses) or indirectly (for example, through extension of roads or other infrastructure)?	No Impact
b) Displace substantial numbers of existing people or housing, necessitating the construction of replacement housing elsewhere?	No Impact

2.1.15 Public Services

Question:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Public Services
a) Would the project result in substantial adverse physical impacts associated with the provision of new or physically altered governmental facilities, need for new or physically altered governmental facilities, the construction of which could cause significant environmental impacts, in order to maintain acceptable service ratios, response times or other performance objectives for any of the public services: Fire protection?	No Impact
Police protection?	No Impact
Schools?	No Impact
Parks?	No Impact
Other public facilities?	No Impact

2.1.16 Recreation

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Recreation
a) Would the project increase the use of existing neighborhood and regional parks or other recreational facilities such that substantial physical deterioration of the facility would occur or be accelerated?	No Impact
b) Does the project include recreational facilities or require the construction or expansion of recreational facilities which might have an adverse physical effect on the environment?	No Impact

2.1.17 Transportation

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Transportation
a) Conflict with a program, plan, ordinance, or policy addressing the circulation system, including transit, roadway, bicycle and pedestrian facilities?	No Impact
b) Conflict or be inconsistent with CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.3, subdivision (b)?	No Impact
c) Substantially increase hazards due to a geometric design feature (e.g., sharp curves or dangerous intersections) or incompatible uses (e.g., farm equipment)?	No Impact
d) Result in inadequate emergency access?	No Impact

2.1.18 Tribal Cultural Resources

Considering the information in the Screened Undertaking Memo dated March 2024, the following significance determinations have been made:

Would the project cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a tribal cultural resource, defined in Public Resources Code Section 21074 as either a site, feature, place, cultural landscape that is geographically defined in terms of the size and scope of the landscape, sacred place, or object with cultural value to a California Native American tribe, and that is:

Question:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Tribal Cultural Resources
a) Listed or eligible for listing in the California Register of Historical Resources, or in a local register of historical resources as defined in Public Resources Code Section 5020.1(k), or	No Impact
b) A resource determined by the lead agency, in its discretion and supported by substantial evidence, to be significant pursuant to criteria set forth in subdivision (c) of Public Resources Code Section 5024.1. In applying the criteria set forth in subdivision (c) of Public Resources Code Section 5024.1, the lead agency shall consider the significance of the resource to a California Native American tribe.	No Impact

2.1.19 Utilities and Service Systems

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Utilities and Service Systems
a) Require or result in the relocation or construction of new or expanded water, wastewater treatment or storm water drainage, electric power, natural gas, or telecommunications facilities, the construction or relocation of which could cause significant environmental effects?	No Impact
b) Have sufficient water supplies available to serve the project and reasonably foreseeable future development during normal, dry and multiple dry years?	No Impact
c) Result in a determination by the wastewater treatment provider which serves or may serve the project that it has adequate capacity to serve the project’s projected demand in addition to the provider’s existing commitments?	No Impact
d) Generate solid waste in excess of state or local standards, or in excess of the capacity of local infrastructure, or otherwise impair the attainment of solid waste reduction goals?	No Impact
e) Comply with federal, state, and local management and reduction statutes and regulations related to solid waste?	No Impact

2.1.20 Wildfire

If located in or near state responsibility areas or lands classified as very high fire hazard severity zones:

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Wildfire
a) Substantially impair an adopted emergency response plan or emergency evacuation plan?	No Impact
b) Due to slope, prevailing winds, and other factors, exacerbate wildfire risks, and thereby expose project occupants to pollutant concentrations from a wildfire or the uncontrolled spread of a wildfire?	No Impact

Question—Would the project:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Wildfire
c) Require the installation or maintenance of associated infrastructure (such as roads, fuel breaks, emergency water sources, power lines or other utilities) that may exacerbate fire risk or that may result in temporary or ongoing impacts to the environment?	No Impact
d) Expose people or structures to significant risks, including downslope or downstream flooding or landslides, as a result of runoff, post-fire slope instability, or drainage changes?	No Impact

2.1.21 Mandatory Findings of Significance

Question:	CEQA Significance Determinations for Mandatory Findings of Significance
a) Does the project have the potential to substantially 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, substantially 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?	Less Than Significant Impact
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 probable future projects.)	Less Than Significant Impact
c) Does the project have environmental effects which will cause substantial adverse effects on human beings, either directly or indirectly?	Less Than Significant Impact

Chapter 3 **Coordination**

March 28, 2024 – Caltrans obtained a special-status species list through the California Natural Diversity Database.

March 28, 2024 – Caltrans obtained an Unofficial Species List from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through the IPaC.

March 28, 2024 – Caltrans obtained an Official Species List from the National Marine Fisheries Service Google Earth-based species list generator and emailed the list to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

May 15, 2024 – Caltrans obtained an Official Species List (Project Code: 2024-0093758) from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through the IPaC.

[The following coordination has been added since the circulation of the draft environmental document.]

May 24, 2024 – Caltrans initiated informal Section 7 consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for use of the Programmatic Biological Opinion for the California red-legged frog.

June 30, 2024 – Caltrans received concurrence from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that the project satisfies the four criteria for use of the Programmatic Biological Opinion, and with the implementation of the measures outlined in the Programmatic Biological Opinion and in this Initial Study, the project may proceed without further consultation.



United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Ecological Services
Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office
2493 Portola Road, Suite B
Ventura, California 93003



IN REPLY REFER TO:
2024-0090986-S7-001

June 26, 2024

Sunny McBride
California Department of Transportation, District 5
50 Higuera Street
San Luis Obispo, California 93401-5415

Subject: Biological Opinion on the Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project, San Benito County, California

Dear Sunny McBride:

This document transmits the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) biological opinion based on our review of the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) proposal to improve safety for the traveling public on Highway 101 in San Benito County, California between postmiles (PM) R1.28 and 2.01, and its effects on the federally threatened California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*), in accordance with section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (Act) (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.). We received your request for formal consultation on May 24, 2024 and supporting documents on May 28, 2024.

Caltrans determined that the proposed project meets the criteria for inclusion under the 2011 Caltrans Programmatic Biological Opinion (PBO) for Projects Funded or Approved under the Federal Highway Administration's Federal Aid Program (8-8-10-F-58) (Service 2011).

We have based this biological opinion on information that accompanied your May 24, 2024, request for consultation including the Initial Study with Proposed Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project (Caltrans 2024) and information in our records.

Programmatic Biological Opinion for California Red-legged Frog

Under the administration of the PBO (Service 2011), Caltrans is required to notify the Service of project activities that may adversely affect the California red-legged frog and its designated critical habitat. Caltrans has assumed the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) responsibilities under the Act for the proposed action in accordance with section 1313, Surface Transportation Project Delivery Program, of the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century

Sunny McBride

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Act (Map-21) of 2012, as described in the National Environmental Policy Act Assignment Memorandum of Understanding between FHWA and Caltrans (effective October 1, 2012) and codified in 23 U.S.C. 327.

Project Description

Caltrans proposes to remove approximately 228 blue gum eucalyptus trees (*Eucalyptus globulus*) adjacent to Highway 101 between PM R1.28 and 2.01 near Aromas, California. The trees identified for removal are in declining health or exhibit structural weakness or imbalance. Because the trees are within 40 to 60 feet of the pavement edge, they are at risk of falling into the roadway and are a potential safety hazard for the traveling public. After the trees are cut, the stumps will be ground out and treated with herbicide to prevent re-growth. Although approximately 50 to 75 percent of the existing eucalyptus grove will be removed, the trees identified for removal are scattered throughout the grove. Caltrans proposes to plant native trees and shrubs throughout the project area to increase the density of native habitat. Figure 1-3 of the initial study (Caltrans 2024) depicts the locations of the trees that will be removed and the locations where the replacement plantings will occur.

The proposed project area is highly disturbed and supports non-native weedy and invasive species tolerant of compacted soils, roadsides subjected to vehicle disturbance, and eucalyptus habitat. Most of the area is composed of a large grove of eucalyptus trees. Additional vegetation within the action area includes upland, non-native, ruderal species such as black mustard (*Brassica nigra*), great brome (*Bromus diandrus*), spear thistle (*Carduus pycnocephalus*), and cheeseweed (*Malva parviflora*). A small segment of coyote brush scrub (*Baccharis pilularis*) exists south of Rocks Road. The project is not expected to impact wetlands, riparian areas, or jurisdictional waterways.

The proposed project will only result in temporary impacts, with minimal ground disturbance. No grading or excavation will occur. All impacts will occur either in areas of existing hardscape or within non-native eucalyptus grove habitat. Caltrans anticipates project work will occur in late summer and early fall of 2024.

Avoidance and Minimization Measures

Caltrans will implement the measures outlined in the PBO (Service 2011, pp. 7–12) for avoiding and minimizing adverse effects to the California red-legged frog. In addition, Caltrans details specific measures associated with tree removal in the initial study (Caltrans 2024).

Status of the California Red-legged Frog in the Action Area

Caltrans observed California red-legged frogs nearby the project area, specifically in a section of the creek that lacked eucalyptus tree canopy and where vegetation was able to grow along the creek banks. Eucalyptus trees, leaves, bark, and duff (and associated tannins) throughout the available upland habitat have greatly reduced the availability or potential growth of dense

Sunny McBride

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vegetation necessary for California red-legged frog habitat. Therefore, the project area supports low-quality dispersal and refuge habitat for California red-legged frogs. The project does not occur within critical habitat for California red-legged frog.

Conclusion

Caltrans determined that the proposed work to remove approximately 228 eucalyptus trees as described in the initial study (Caltrans 2024), satisfies the four criteria outlined in the PBO for projects that are likely to result in adverse effects to the California red-legged frog, but would not affect the long-term viability of those populations. Project effects of this nature were analyzed in the PBO under the Effects of the Action section (Service 2011, pp. 29–34). You also propose to implement the measures outlined in the PBO (pp. 7–12) for avoiding and minimizing effects to the California red-legged. Additionally, you propose to implement the measures outlined in the initial study (Caltrans 2024, p. 9). Based on the information provided, the proposed project may proceed without further consultation.

This concludes formal consultation on the action outlined in the request. As provided in 50 CFR 402.16, reinitiation of formal consultation is required where discretionary Federal agency involvement or control over the action has been retained (or is authorized by law) and if: (1) the amount or extent of incidental take is exceeded; (2) new information reveals effects of the agency action that may affect listed species or critical habitat in a manner or to an extent not considered in this opinion; (3) the agency action is subsequently modified in a manner that causes an effect to the listed species or critical habitat not considered in this opinion; or (4) a new species is listed or critical habitat designated that may be affected by the action. In instances where the amount or extent of incidental take is exceeded, the exemption issued pursuant to section 7(o)(2) may have lapsed and any further take would be a violation of section 4(d) or 9. Consequently, we recommend that any operations causing such take cease pending reinitiation.

If you have any questions about this biological opinion, please contact Karen Sinclair of my staff by electronic mail at karen_sinclair@fws.gov.

Sincerely,

LEILANI
TAKANODigitally signed by
LEILANI TAKANO
Date: 2024.06.26
09:04:45 -07'00'

Leilani Takano

Assistant Field Supervisor

LITERATURE CITED

[Caltrans] California Department of Transportation. 2024. Initial Study with Proposed Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal. May 2024. 43 pp.

[Service] U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. Programmatic biological opinion for projects funded or approved under the Federal Highway Administration's Federal Aid Program (8-8-10-F-58). Ventura Fish and Wildlife Service, Ventura, California. May 2011. 40 pp.

Appendix A Title VI Policy Statement

CALIFORNIA STATE TRANSPORTATION AGENCY

GAVIN NEWSOM, GOVERNOR

California Department of Transportation

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR
P.O. BOX 942873, MS-49 | SACRAMENTO, CA 94273-0001
(916) 654-6130 | FAX (916) 653-5776 TTY 711
www.dot.ca.gov



September 2023

NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICY STATEMENT

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To obtain this information in an alternate format such as Braille or in a language other than English, please contact the California Department of Transportation, Office of Civil Rights, at PO Box 942874, MS-79, Sacramento, CA 94274-0001; (916) 879-6768 (TTY 711); or at Title.VI@dot.ca.gov.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Tavares'.

TONY TAVARES
Director

"Provide a safe and reliable transportation network that serves all people and respects the environment"

Appendix B Comment Letters and Responses

[This appendix has been added since the circulation of the draft environmental document.]

This appendix contains the comments received during the public circulation and comment period from May 31, 2024 to June 30, 2024, retyped for readability. The comment letters are stated verbatim as submitted, with acronyms, abbreviations, and any original grammatical or typographical errors included. A Caltrans response follows each comment presented. Copies of the original comment letters and documents can be found in Volume 2 of this document.

A public notice was circulated in the local newspaper, the Hollister Freelance, and on the Caltrans website with information about the document's availability for review and comment. There was a news article published on BenitoLink, an online news source, on June 14, 2024, providing information on the project and that Caltrans was asking for public comments on the draft environmental document.

1. Comment from Lori Woodle (email dated 6/14/2024)

I support the project. I have made many written complaints about the trees. It is in the best interest of the public at large. I commute to Salinas daily driving through the grove and am always stressed about my safety. Thank you

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

2. Comment from Cara Vonk (email dated 6/14/2024)

Please send me the EIR report. I am concerned about removal of the trees.

Response

The commentor has been provided via email with the link to the project site where they can access the environmental document.

3. Comment from Michael Stephenson (email dated 6/14/2024)

I'm happy to see these trees removed. They are not native to California and can be a fire hazard.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

4. Comment from Jennifer Olds (email dated 6/14/2024)

Good afternoon. I would like to add my input to the decision to remove the eucalyptus trees at the subject location. If you are keeping score, I am whole heartedly FOR this removal!! These trees are non-native, high fire hazard, fall easily, and need to go! I applaud the decision to remove them.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

5. Comment from Edward Fitzhenry (email dated 6/14/2024)

Thank you for announcing the plan to remove the eucalyptus trees at Rocks Road on Hwy 101, beginning in the Fall.

I would like to suggest you coordinate with SF Zoo, or any zoo that has Koalas. They can come down to remove the branches and leaves and feed them to the Koala bears. This way the trees won't be wasted. Thanks.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project. Regarding the eucalyptus trees being a food source for Koalas, Caltrans has contacted nearby zoos and has not had any responses.

6. Comment from Dave Ruprecht (email dated 6/14/2024)

I fully support removal of the eucalyptus trees on 101. I think it is a wise move as is the plan to replace with indigenous plants.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support for the project.

7. Comment from Diane Mesiroff (email dated 6/14/2024)

This letter is to voice my opinion for the removal of the eucalyptus trees on 101 by Aromas, Ca. These trees are so dangerous as many have fallen unexpectedly. This is a heavily traveled area. These trees have shallow root systems and are a significant danger. Please approve the removal based on the expertise of the arborist report. Can you imagine traveling and having a tree this large suddenly fall. It has already caused deaths. Thank You for your consideration,

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

8. Comment from M. McBride (email dated 6/14/2024)

I agree that the trees should be removed to prevent future accidents. The euc's are not native and although they have been there-forever it seems-future safety should be the priority!

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

9. Comment from Nancy Treffry (email dated 6/14/2024)

I support Caltrans' plan to remove approximately 228 damaged or unhealthy blue gum eucalyptus trees from the large grove on Highway 101 at the Rocks Road exit three miles west of San Juan Bautista. More than half of the trees in the grove will be removed.

The trees are not native, are a fire hazard, and are a danger to our community.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

10. Comment from Joshua Gates (email dated 6/15/2024)

Wanted to throw my 2 cents in on this subject. I think it would be amazing if all of the eucalyptus trees were removed. Replacing with native shrubs, and trees would be amazing. It would be amazing to throw in some native pollinator plants for the butterflies and bees. I am a local beekeeper out of Salinas. If you need a list of native pollinator plants, please let me know. Thank you for your time.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

11. Comment from Crystal Merz (email dated 6/15/2024)

Please! Feel free to cut down all of the eucalyptus! They are non-native, invasive and fire hazards. Thank you for considering this project. I live in Aromas and drive this road often.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

12. Comment from Robert Tas (email dated 6/15/2024)

As a daily commuter traversing this area, I fully agree with the removal of these 228 Eucalyptus trees. In fact I would like to see all of them removed. These trees are a fire hazard in dry times and a collision hazard in wet times. Replacing them with native plants will improve biodiversity in addition. You have my support!

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

13. Comment from Patricia M. (Trish) Duarte (email dated 6/15/2024)

As a resident of San Benito County, I am very much in favor of the planned removal of the Blue Gum Eucalyptus trees located along Hwy. 101 at Rocks Road in San Benito County. They are a dirty, dangerous, invasive non-native tree. They are also a fire hazard, which we have seen first hand near Anzar Lake (technically a pond), which is located along Anzar Road, between the communities of Aromas and San Juan Bautista in San Benito County.

Since Hwy. 101 is the major state highway linking the S.F. bay area with destinations such as the City of Monterey and other Central Coast tourist communities, an unplanned closure of Hwy. 101 causes gridlock in small communities nearby and even causes significant traffic on Hwys 129 and 1, as drivers try to get around the closure. Additionally, there is significant

truck traffic on Hwy. 101, which I saw first hand today, as I returned home from a vacation in Solvang. (And traffic heading South, to the Monterey area was bumper to bumper today.)

If you have a notification list for the status of this project, I would like to be included on it.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project. We don't have a project notification list, however any updates on start of work will be provided on Caltrans District 5 social media. You may also send an email to Public Information Officer, Kevin Drabinski at kevin.drabinski@dot.ca.gov and request to be put on the press release email list.

14. Comment from Jane Rekedal (email dated 6/16/2024)

Thank you for the eucalyptus removal project near Aromas at Cannon Road and US 101. That stand of trees is dangerous to motorists due to falling hazards and to the neighborhood in terms of wildfire.

I support the removal of these trees. They are non native and considered by many to be weed-like in terms of their invasive growth pattern. With many local residents recently losing homeowner's fire insurance, there is much support to remove as much of the eucalyptus in the area as possible. It is well known that fires often begin along roadways and the prevailing winds can carry burning leaves miles from the original sources. I personally have experienced this some years ago when I lived on Cannon Road when a fire erupted along 101 in this very grove.

Thank you again for removing as many of these trees and for thoughtfully replanting with natives, although I hope they are not apt to be particularly fire prone trees. Maybe skip the shrubs?

Response

Thank you for your comment. The majority of the plants included in this project re-planting efforts are known for being fire-resistant. Due to clear recovery setback requirements tree re-planting areas will be limited, so in order to meet planting requirements for biological and visual purposes, shrubs will be required. That being said, the re-planting area will still be located within the existing eucalyptus grove, so the fire risk associated with the smaller amounts of shrub planting along the highway will be very limited.

15. Comment from Jglopez (email dated 6/14/2024)

I am a resident of San Juan Bautista, Ca. and I frequently drive through the Grove of trees at that location. I fully support the decision to remove

the trees because I think they are a danger to anyone traveling through that area.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support for the project.

16. Comment from Manuel Santana (email dated 6/18/2024)

On the subject of the highway 101 rocks road Tree Removal I would like to applaud the action, the idea that we have been keeping these trees there for aesthetic reasons, ignoring public and fire safety, is ridiculous. If the trees had been native trees in any way my opinion may be different but I agree with the removal of all invasive Eucalyptus trees everywhere and everywhere. Obviously, since I live in San Juan, I drive out to Salinas past these trees often, and know a family personally that has experienced the loss of a family member, I will be glad to see them go.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

17. Comment from Brian Birkeland (email dated 6/18/2024)

The recent local news report was interesting and I'm in support of this CalTrans project. I hope 228 trees is all of them actually as I think any eucalyptus near a major highway is a hazard.

I think this project area is a very important gateway/entrance to Monterey County from points north and east and a fallen tree or a fire in this grove could be potentially dangerous because first responders would have a more difficult time reaching us. I hope you consider a future project where all the eucalyptus trees are removed from the Rocks Road area.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

18. Comment from June Reeves (email dated 6/18/2024)

Take all the trees out, they are a hazard...only plant minimum trees back in that area.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support for the project.

19. Comment from Karen Fink (email dated 6/19/2024)

I traverse 101 by Rocks Road very often and I am fearful of those trees. Great work

Response

Thank you for your comment and support for the project.

20. Comment from Charles Obeso-Bradley (email dated 6/19/2024)

Please expedite the removal of the eucalyptus trees near Rocks Rd on Hwy 101. It is a dangerous situation.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

21. Comment from Judy Gansen (email dated 6/20/2024)

Does the Cooper family still own the property with the trees? I'm assuming the property owner has a say in this. Too bad they're a danger because they sure are pretty.

Response

Thank you for your comment. Caltrans contacted several adjacent property owners regarding several trees that need to be removed. Those owners are responsible for removing them. The Cooper family is not one of these owners.

22. Comment from Cyndi Franks (email dated 6/19/2024)

You have made the right decision to remove the eucalyptus trees along Highway 101 near Rocks Road. They are shallow-rooted, weak-wooded fire hazards that are not native to California. Removing them and replacing them with more appropriate trees that are native to California is a good idea.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

23. Comment from Michelle Noble McCain (email dated 6/19/2024)

I am a resident of North Monterey County. I support the removal of the Eucalyptus trees along 101. They are not native and they are a hazard. I also believe the crossing from Rocks Road is very hazardous, made even more so by the poor visibility caused by the trees.

Please replant with actual natives. Not all of the list in the article i read are natives. The California Native Plant Society can advise you and perhaps will provide volunteers.

I am sure you will get blowback from people for nostalgia reasons... I saw Vertigo too... but please remind people they are a fire hazard and that natives will provide more habitat for our precious wildlife. Monterey County now is offering grants for Eucalyptus removal and we need to get rid of these large stands.

Response

Thank you for your feedback. All of the listed plants are native to California, see plant list table below. There are a few species listed that are not typically naturally found within the project area, however they were selected based on adaptability to the disturbed soil conditions at the site, tolerance to growing under/adjacent to eucalyptus trees, maintenance, and availability. We are very open to receiving plant recommendations for this project. Please keep in mind that due to the reasons listed above, as well as meeting visual and biological requirements, we may not be able to incorporate them into the project.

COMMON NAME	BOTANICAL NAME
Box elder	<i>Acer negundo</i>
California buckeye	<i>Aesculus californica</i>
Hooker’s manzanita	<i>Arctostaphylos hookeri</i>
Buck brush	<i>Ceanothus cuneatus</i>
Blueblossom ceanothus	<i>Ceanothus thrysiflorus</i>
Red osier dogwood	<i>Cornus sericea</i>
Coffeeberry	<i>Frangula californica</i>
Silktassel	<i>Garrya elliptica</i>
Toyon	<i>Heteromeles arbutifolia</i>
Twinberry	<i>Lonicera involucrata</i>
Pacific wax myrtle	<i>Myrica californica</i>
Lemonade berry	<i>Rhus integrifolia</i>
Sugar bush	<i>Rhus ovata</i>
Arroyo willow	<i>Salix lasiolepis</i>
Coast live oak	<i>Quercus agrifolia</i>

24. Comment from Renee Thomason (6/20/2024)

I am writing to express my opposition to the proposed removal of 228 blue gum eucalyptus trees near Highway 101 and Rocks Road.

My concern is that these trees provide nesting habitat for birds that require the height and foliage only eucalyptus trees in this area can provide. Even unhealthy trees provide safe nesting for these birds. I understand that replacement planting with native species will occur. It is impossible to think that these new trees can immediately provide the shelter those birds require. Are you willing to let these birds disappear? Are you willing to be responsible for their disappearance?

I also understand that a study has determined that this project will have no environmental impact. Again, it is impossible to think that cutting down 228 trees will have "no environmental impact". I also ask, did this study take into consideration the recent removal of eucalyptus trees at Elkhorn Slough? It was my understanding that many birds lost their homes in that action and have moved to other eucalyptus trees, such as the ones about to be cut down with your current project. Someday there will be no more eucalyptus trees. Someday there will be no birds that once found safety in those trees.

Public leaders have appeared on TV saying that the trees are "dangerous". If we use that as our criteria, please cut down every tree in my neighborhood. At any time, one could fall on an innocent passerby. I obviously do not want you to cut down every tree in my neighborhood. My point is that we should not base public policy on the possibility of freak accidents. Living on planet Earth does not come without a few risks.

I implore you, please reconsider this unnecessary and irrevocable action!

Response

The project site makes up a small section (roughly 3%) of a larger eucalyptus grove which spans a 0.901 square mile (577 acres) area north of the project location. Caltrans proposes removing 228 trees within a 0.0264 sq mile (16.9 acre) area of Caltrans' right of way or are adjacent to our right of way and have the ability to reach the roadway if they were to fall. Even with the proposed removal, the eucalyptus grove would continue to provide approximately 0.875 sq miles (560 acres) of eucalyptus tree habitat and canopy to any raptor or nesting bird species.

Additionally, the site was surveyed multiple times over 2 years by wildlife biologists and no bird or raptor nests were observed during these surveys. Caltrans will implement standard specifications during construction including pre-construction nesting bird surveys and continual biological monitoring during construction of the project to ensure that any potential impacts to nesting birds are avoided. If any nests are found in the project area, an avoidance buffer would be implemented to ensure no construction or tree removal activities would be conducted in the area until the young have fledged.

Additionally, eucalyptus trees are an invasive species (non-native) that are allelopathic, producing chemicals that inhibit understory growth and affect the growth of other native perennials, shrubs, and trees. Caltrans will replant the area with native arroyo willow, box elder, California buckeye, and coast live oak trees in addition to native shrub species hooker's

manzanita, buck brush, coffeeberry and toyon, all of which will provide future nesting habitat for birds.

Within this Initial Study with Mitigated Negative Declaration, please see section 2.1.4, pages 14 – 15 for the language about amphibians and eucalyptus habitat, and section 2.1.4 pages 16 – 17 for a discussion of nesting birds and pages 22 – 23 for protection measures for nesting birds listed here:

Avoidance and Minimization Efforts (nesting birds)

The following measures apply to all birds protected by the Migratory Bird treaty Act (MBTA) and California Fish and Game Code. There are no formal survey protocols for most of these bird species, but the California Department of Fish and Wildlife typically requires pre-construction nesting bird surveys and avoidance of impacts to active bird nests.

1. If necessary, vegetation should be removed between September 1 to January 31, outside of the typical nesting bird season, to avoid potential impacts to nesting birds. If construction activities are proposed to occur within 100 ft of potential habitat during the nesting season (February 1 to August 31), a nesting bird survey shall be conducted by a biologist determined qualified by Caltrans no more than two weeks (14 days) prior to construction. If an active nest is found, Caltrans shall determine an appropriate buffer based on the habits and needs of the species. The buffer area shall be avoided until a qualified biologist has determined that juveniles have fledged and no longer dependent on the nest.
2. Active bird nests shall not be disturbed, and eggs or young birds covered by the MBTA and CFGC shall not be killed, destroyed, injured, or harassed at any time.

25. Comment from Elizabeth Birkeland (email dated 6/24/2024)

I am in support of the Hwy 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project. That section of Hwy 101 is an important part for travelers heading south to Monterey and Salinas or north to San Jose and San Francisco...and more. I have been stuck in traffic during storms and can see the tall trees sway dangerously from side to side. The fear of my car or any other car crushed by those long limbs or heavy trunks is too real when my vehicle crawls along that section of the road.

Another major concern in Monterey County is FIRE! As a long-time resident of Prunedale, fire has been a major worry. We have been adhering to FIREWISE's suggestions as to how we can protect our home. It would be a shame if neighboring acres are fire hazards.

Please remove the eucalyptus trees ASAP.

Thank you for considering my concerns in this serious matter.

Response

Thank you for your comment and support of the project.

26. Comment from the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (email dated 6/24/2024)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project as proposed by Caltrans in unincorporated San Benito County. Attached is a letter of support for the proposed project to remove Eucalyptus in this corridor along Highway 101.

Response

Thank you for your comments and letter of support for the project.

27. Comment from the Wildlife Conservation Network (email dated 6/24/2024)

Please find a letter of support attached.

Response

Thank you for your comments and letter of support for the project.

28. Hobo91349 (email dated 6/30/2024)

No surprise that the amount of time to respond is so short. Some of the trees may need to be replaced, others could be trimmed back to ensure safety. No confidence in CT due to the management by the state bureaucracy

Response

Thank you for your comment.



Attention: Sunny McBride, District 5 Senior Environmental Scientist
Department of Transportation
50 Higuera Street
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401

delivered electronically

June 24, 2024

Re: Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project – Public Comment Period

Dear Sunny McBride,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project as proposed by Caltrans in unincorporated San Benito County. I am a conservation project manager with the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County. The Land Trust of Santa Cruz owns in fee-title the Rocks Ranch, 2,618-acres of high-quality oak woodland and grassland habitat acre ranch adjacent the project area to the south in San Benito County.

On behalf of the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, we would like to provide full support of this proposed project to remove Eucalyptus in this corridor along Highway 101.

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- We and partners are in the midst of developing a regional action plan to steward and protect a landscape linkage to facilitate movement by native species between the Santa Cruz and Gabilan mountain ranges and support the ecological processes that sustain biodiversity. The Highway 101 corridor portion of the Rocks Road Tree Removal Project is the center of this regional planning area. A key strategy in making the landscape more permeability to wildlife movement will be habitat enhancement activities such as the removal of Eucalyptus, both in this highway corridor, as well other extensive Eucalyptus plantations in the region.
- The Land Trust of Santa Cruz is collaborating with Caltrans on a planning process for a highway crossing of Highway 101 (either an undercrossing, an overcrossing or both, to be determined) to improve wildlife movement in this area and improve highway safety by preventing wildlife collision. That crossing project location is planned to be somewhere within the proposed "Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project" area. The removal of Eucalyptus in this area will benefit wildlife that would use that future crossing.
- We have reviewed the proposed planting plan and agree with the proposal to not only remove Eucalyptus, but to include measures to restore areas that were dominated by Eucalyptus to native tree and shrub-dominated habitat, using surrounding vegetation as a reference for the recommended target habitat. To that end we have reviewed the proposed planting palette and strongly encourage Caltrans to follow those restoration recommendations and measures as proposed.
- As land managers and restoration ecologists we are aware of the challenges that come with the prospect of removing long-established Eucalyptus groves and restoring those areas to native habitat. We see Caltrans proposed project as an opportunity to evaluate what works and what does not when it comes to removal of large numbers of Eucalyptus, preventing their re-growth, and restoration of that area to native habitat. Based on recent discussions with other conservation organizations working in the region that have taken on large-scale Eucalyptus removal projects, one of the primary challenges to successful restoration of Eucalyptus groves to native habitat is the question of how to deal with the immense volumes of above ground biomass in existing groves. This includes both the volume of wood of the standing trees, as well as the large build up bark and leaf litter on the ground that has accumulated on the ground from the many years the trees have been established on the landscape. While we did not see any prescriptions in the environmental documents provided for how biomass would be removed, we do



recommend removal of all above ground standing biomass, as this will facilitate the success of the native plantings, and too many large logs scattered across the areas may not be beneficial to s movement.

In summary, we are in full support of the removal of Eucalyptus in this corridor. In fact, we would like to support and facilitate to the extent we can removal of Eucalyptus on our neighbors' properties. Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Bibbo".

Mark Bibbo, M.S.
Conservation Project Manager
Land Trust of Santa Cruz County
617 Water Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95060
mark.bibbo@landtrustsantacruz.org

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Attention: Sunny McBride, District 5 Senior Environmental Scientist
Department of Transportation
50 Higuera Street
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401

delivered electronically

June 24, 2024

Re: Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project – Public Comment Period

Dear Sunny,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project as proposed by Caltrans in unincorporated San Benito County. On behalf of the Wildlife Conservation Network's (WCN) California Wildlife Program, I am writing to express support for the proposed project.

Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN) protects wildlife by supporting conservationists around the world who pursue strategies for people and wildlife to coexist and thrive. WCN's California Wildlife Program (CWP) is focused on protecting and restoring ecological connectivity throughout the state. The CWP provides funding and is otherwise partnering with a constellation of organizations who are conducting scientific studies, planning and building wildlife crossing infrastructure, protecting, restoring, or enhancing habitats, or improving public policies. It functions as a hub for connectivity conservation, supporting complementary approaches at multiple scales to advance collective impact throughout California.

WCN and partners are in the midst of developing a regional action plan to steward and protect the landscape conditions that facilitate movement by native species between the Santa Cruz Mountains and Gabilan Range and support the ecological processes that sustain biodiversity. The Highway 101 corridor portion of the Rocks Road Tree Removal Project is the center of this regional planning area. A key strategy in making the landscape more permeability to wildlife movement will be habitat enhancement activities such as the removal of Eucalyptus, both in this highway corridor, as well other extensive Eucalyptus stands in the region.

We are collaborating with The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, Caltrans, and other partners on a planning process for a highway crossing of Highway 101 (either an undercrossing, an overcrossing or both, to be determined) to improve wildlife

209 Mississippi Street | San Francisco, CA 94107 | USA
Ph. 415.202.6380 | Fx. 415.202.6381 | www.wildnet.org

movement in this area and improve highway safety by preventing wildlife-vehicle collisions. That crossing project location is planned to be somewhere within the proposed "Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal Project" area. The removal of Eucalyptus and replacement with appropriate native vegetation in this area will benefit wildlife that would use that future crossing.

We encourage continued coordination between Caltrans functions who are working on the proposed project and planned wildlife crossing(s), in order to best integrate the outcomes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Neal Sharma".

Neal Sharma
Senior Manager, California Wildlife Program
Wildlife Conservation Network

List of Technical Studies Bound Separately (Volume 2)

Natural Environment Study Minimal Impacts

Screened Undertaking Memo

Visual Impacts Assessment

To obtain a copy of one or more of these technical studies/reports or the Initial Study, please send your request to:

Sunny McBride
District 5 Environmental Division
California Department of Transportation
50 South Higuera Street, San Luis Obispo, California 93405

Or send your request via email to: sunny.mcbride@dot.ca.gov

Or call: 805-440-9575

Please provide the following information in your request:

Project title: Highway 101 Rocks Road Tree Removal

General location information: On Highway 101 from post miles R1.28 to 2.01 in San Benito County

District number-county code-route-post mile: 05-SBt-101- PM R1.28/2.01

Project ID number: 0524000159 / EA 05-1S010