
→ SCE Gorman Kern River Project

Blunt-nosed Leopard Lizard Minimization and Avoidance Strategy



1.0 Introduction

Implementation of Southern California Edison's (SCE) Gorman Kern River Project (Project), which includes overhead transmission line tower remove-and-replace activities, will take place in areas of the upper San Joaquin Valley floor within the historic ranges of several protected endemic species. Ground disturbing activities that occur within habitat considered suitable for the blunt-nosed leopard lizard (*Gambelia sila*) (BNLL) will be considered in the development of take minimization and avoidance measures for this US Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) endangered and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) endangered and Fully Protected species that may be present in the planned work areas.

The following plan includes proposed methods intended to minimize and avoid take of the BNLL. Contingencies are also proposed as some degree of risk may be present; however, the intention of this plan is to eliminate risk potential through repetitive observations and surveys, robust sampling, enhanced observation methods, and a dedicated team to ensure that compliance and efforts in the field are congruent with proposed methodologies for take minimization and avoidance.

As project activities are anticipated to commence as early as 2026, SCE initiated protocol surveys during the current 2023 season so that data representing multiple seasons of observations for BNLL in proximity to the planned work areas can be assessed. The location data for known occurrences will be used to develop strategies for Project implementation and coordinated with proposed take avoidance and minimization methods and implemented in cases determined through early technical assistance and coordination with Agency staff, internal management, and species experts.

SCE will include the BNLL in its USFWS Section 10 Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP).

2.0 Timing and Surveys

Survey Definitions:

Pre-project Surveys/Activities: Within this document, surveys/activities conducted in seasons during the Project permitting/licensing timeframe are referred to as pre-project surveys/activities.

Preconstruction Surveys/Activities: Surveys/activities conducted after the project has completed permitting/licensing, including those conducted within 14 days of the initiation of ground-disturbing activities are referred to as preconstruction surveys/activities.

Clearance Sweeps: Biological sweeps on or near the day of construction are referred to as clearance sweeps.

BNLL Seasons:

Active Season: BNLL active season is generally defined as the months between April and October (mid-spring to mid-fall), or when temperatures are within 77–95 degrees F. The optimum activity period for adults occurs between April and July and juveniles remain active into October.

Inactive Season: The inactive season is generally defined as the months between November and March as BNLL spend these colder months in a state of dormancy underground within small mammal burrows.

Protocol surveys are the Agency accepted methods for searching for BNLL in habitat and confirming presence under suitable conditions for the species. These surveys are necessary because the Project may result in some degree of habitat removal and work will be conducted in habitat where there is a risk of Take for the species. While the USFWS has a permitting mechanism for take of the BNLL, this species is fully protected by the State and no permitting mechanism exists.

The California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) includes BNLL that have been identified in areas that overlap the Gorman Kern River Project. Benefits to the Project for conducting BNLL surveys are that they facilitate agency coordination related to concerns for potential take of the species. Under agency guidance the following approach should produce a pathway for the implementation of construction activities.

Protocol BNLL surveys collected over multiple seasons will provide a basis of information to assist in developing methods for construction avoidance. It is anticipated that 2 or more years of data will be available with the second-year data providing valuable insight relative to local population demographics. Please note, reference to Year 3 survey and data collection assumes it would follow if project implementation does not commence in avoidance buffered work areas during the year following completion of Year 2 protocol BNLL surveys.

Protocol BNLL surveys will occur in all project areas where overlap with habitat is considered suitable for the species. Hatchling surveys will follow adult BNLL surveys and may occur in areas where no adult BNLL has been found. Protocol surveys will continue if construction has not been completed prior to the expiration of the most recent protocol surveys. A careful review of areas under and/or pending construction at the time of survey expiration will occur to identify those sites in need of further protocol surveys.

-
- Agency coordination may be sought to determine if and where additional surveys should be completed.
 - No specific avoidance measures are proposed in excess of adoption and implementation of standard avoidance and minimization measures for work in listed species habitat. This practice is consistent with completion of protocol surveys where the species has not been detected.

3.0 Pre-Project Activities

Following protocol surveys, and in all areas where project activities are anticipated to overlap within a 15-meter radius to known or suspected BNLL occupied burrows, monitoring will be performed on all suitable burrows to assess activity.

3.1 Activities Conducted During the Active Season (April through October)

3.1.1 Burrow Monitoring

Suitable burrows in planned work areas where ground disturbance is anticipated will be treated according to presence/absence observations as follows:

- Burrow monitoring will be initiated upon completion of protocol surveys to determine BNLL activity at each location.
- In the vicinity of suitable burrows, burrow activity will be assessed by collecting and placing a loose handful of locally occurring herbaceous vegetation, such as dry grass, from the surrounding area, over the burrow opening. The vegetation would be lightweight and light enough that any animal present, up to and including hatchling BNLL, would be able to easily push the vegetation in or out during attempted ingress or egress. When placing vegetation, the biologists mimic what one would encounter if vegetation were to be blown over an opening naturally by wind. An animal would not be trapped using this methodology. A biologist with extensive expertise in BNLL ecology will train, direct, and inspect such activities and ensure that application of this technique by field biologists will be consistent with ecology of the species and closely resemble natural landscape patterns experienced by the species.
- Burrow activity will be monitored for a period of 5 consecutive days after which, if the vegetation placed at the burrow entrance or other tracking medium (i.e., diatomaceous earth) indicate no ingress or egress, then the burrow shall be determined to be inactive.
- Each burrow will be checked following recognized seasonal protocol surveys. Burrows will be determined to be inactive due to collapse, intact vegetation placed during burrow stuffing efforts, or if other sign is observed.

3.1.2 Inactive Burrow Management

Suitable burrows deemed inactive in planned work areas where ground disturbance is anticipated (foundation removal, tower installation, etc..) will be treated as follows:

-
- If inactive burrows are identified within a tower or pole footprint, these burrows will be excavated and collapsed during the BNLL active period and excluded for use (i.e., rock placement over top of burrow) one year prior to construction commencement. This treatment will create a clear, clean site devoid of sensitive resources. These sites will be monitored monthly to ensure additional burrowing activities do not occur.
 - Inactive burrows that are identified outside tower or pole work areas (15 meters from work areas) will not be and will remain intact.
 - Inactive burrows will be recorded on handheld device in ESRI FieldMaps for later reference. Burrow mapping will be added to SCE's Field Reporting Environmental Database (FRED), for ease of project access and availability.

3.1.3 Active Burrow Management

The following methods are to be implemented prior to ground disturbance activities, such as tower footing removal or installation, in areas where ground disturbing activities are not able to avoid impacts to burrows and where disturbing activities are within 15 meters of confirmed or suspected BNLL observations. These methods are considered when burrow avoidance cannot be achieved through rerouting, alternate staging, and other reasonably feasible measures. Note, Agency contact will be initiated prior to encroachment within 5 meters of any known or suspected occupied BNLL burrow where construction methods and siting cannot be modified for safety or other valid rationale.

Burrow excavations are not anticipated in locations where overland travel ground disturbance is scheduled to occur. These locations include such worksites as pulling and splice locations and spur roads. Where necessary, avoidance of burrows by sequencing work to the inactive season and/or coverboards will be utilized in these locations.

3.1.3.1 *Burrow Assessment*

- Burrows within 15 meters of confirmed or suspected BNLL observations will be assessed for activity and presence of protected species.
- Burrow preparation will consist of clearing of standing herbaceous vegetation within 0.5 meters of each respective burrow opening.
- Soils flattened and cleared of debris then dusted with food-grade diatomaceous earth to assist with tracking.
- Burrow openings will be treated with vegetation as previously discussed in Section 3.1.1, Burrow Monitoring.
- Tracking set up will be checked following rain events and refreshed as needed.
- Tracking will commence as early as April 1st and checked weekly until emergence of BNLL at local reference sites. Upon emergence of BNLL at local reference sites, tracking will continue for 2 additional weeks. Tracking will be initiated earlier than April 1st if BNLL emergence is detected at any reference population in the region.

-
- BNLL location data will be updated throughout monitoring and radius buffers adjusted according to new sightings.
 - Upon completion of 2 weeks of tracking in post-emergence conditions, all sites will be checked for 3 consecutive days where temperature regimes are consistent with above ground activity for BNLL.
 - Burrows in Project disturbance areas that are located greater than 5 meters but less than 15 meters from known-occupied BNLL burrows will be excluded from entry until they can be further assessed, and hand excavated. A one-way door type device that permits egress will be installed to prevent subsequent entry by fossorial species that may be present in the vicinity of the target BNLL location.

3.1.3.2 *Burrow Excavation*

- A Qualified Biological Monitor (QBM) will be present and be responsible for ensuring all methods are adhered to and serve as the daily monitor for burrow excavations, effectively recording all results from excavations, communicating presence and disposition of any observed BNLL and directly observing all excavations in their sight where pedestrian response can be quickly employed to address wildlife and human safety and other pertinent concerns.
- Excavations will commence within 30 minutes of sunrise, conclude 1 hour before sunset, and during temperature regimes between 77- and 95-degrees Fahrenheit.
- Excavations will not take place during inclement weather events including active rain or subsequent to rain events where standing water is present in the excavation area.
- A training protocol will be established by the environmental team that ensures technicians have received a combination of classroom, job-shadowing, and directly supervised practical application to ensure that they are able to adhere to methods and safely complete excavation procedures. This training is critical to ensuring all wildlife is kept at a safe distance from the excavation process as well as serves to educate the team on procedures that will ensure technician safety.
- Preparation at burrow excavation sites will include wire pin flag marking of all burrows within 5 meters of planned burrow excavation. Vegetation should be raked off the surface and placed in close proximity with attention given to other present burrows to prevent unintentional covering.
- Prior to initiation of hand excavation, suitable burrows will be scoped using a fiber optic-type inspection camera. Burrow excavation may proceed if no listed wildlife is observed.
- If no BNLL is observed, a soft-tipped burrow plug will be carefully inserted into the burrow opening at a distance no further than was visible by the inspection camera. The burrow plug size should be sufficient in diameter to reasonably avoid any wildlife present beyond the plug from moving past the burrow plug tip. Installation of the burrow plug prevents wildlife from accessing active excavation and reduces potential accidental strikes from hand excavation activities.

-
- Hand tools will be used to remove soil and other materials sufficient to expose the target burrow as well as any lateral openings discovered during the course of excavation. Additional lateral openings will be plugged at their respective opening to prevent exit by any undetected wildlife
 - Spoils and overburden will be removed and placed only in locations where no accidental covering of other burrows may occur. Small battery-operated hand tools, such as demo hammers with spade bit attachment may be used to assist with breaking apart soils proximal to target openings.
 - All burrow excavation will cease at a depth in excess of 4ft below ground level. Depths in excesses of 4ft are required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to includes safe means of entry or exit, such as ladders, steps, or ramps. Trenches exceeding 4ft in depth also have a greater safety risk of collapse and may require shoring. For these safety reasons, trenching will not exceed 4ft.
 - As excavation continues and reaches the burrow plug terminus, the burrow plug is moved back, and the process repeats until the burrow has been excavated to the extent that no listed species could be reasonably assumed present. All burrow plugs are only used during active excavation and are removed at the end of each day.
 - Great care is taken, and enhanced monitoring is conducted to identify any BNLL that may come into contact with burrow excavation activities once the depth of the excavations reaches 4ft. Enhanced monitoring may include camera stations, infrared technology, an increase in the frequency of tracking checks, additional tracking medium, monitoring during the emergence time as well as binocular scans. This enhanced monitoring would be utilized to identify BNLL prior to backfill and compaction. Biologists will stop work immediately if BNLL is identified within the work area to ensure the BNLL is not impacted by the excavation activities.
 - Burrows will be excavated up to a depth of 4ft and until it is determined that the burrow and all lateral openings are at their respective ends or alternatively, conditions are considered unsuitable for the target species.
 - The QBM will be responsible for assessing burrow conditions and will approve backfill only at the time that it is determined the excavation has been completed and assessment can reasonably conclude that no listed wildlife is present.
 - Burrow excavations left open overnight will be treated with vegetation covering of the opening consistent with measures in 3.1.1. If the QBM determines appropriate, a one-way door and tracking methods may be applied to assess potential use.
 - All burrow excavations will include ramped points of exit not exceeding 2:1 slope.
 - No active burrow excavations will occur outside of the 5-meter buffer where proposed ground disturbance will occur. Note: burrow excavations will not occur until after burrow monitoring confirms absence or active exclusion from the burrow. See Section 3.1.1.
 - Burrows within 5 meters of the BNLL observation will be recorded on handheld device in ESRI FieldMaps and documented in SCE's FRED for later reference.

3.1.4 Burrow Avoidance

- No burrow monitoring efforts, as described in Section 3.1.1, will be conducted within 5 meters of burrow locations associated with known BNLL observations, unless within work areas where ground disturbance is anticipated (see Section 3.1.3).
- Presumed active burrows will be flagged for avoidance and routinely monitored for activity.
- Burrows marked for avoidance will be recorded on handheld device in ESRI FieldMaps and documented in SCE's FRED for later reference.

3.2 Activities Conducted During the Inactive Season (November through March)

Suitable burrows in planned work areas where ground disturbance is anticipated that were excavated and collapsed during the active season will continue to be monitored monthly during the inactive season to ensure additional burrowing activities do not occur.

4.0 Preconstruction Activities

Any burrows located less than 5 meters from confirmed occupied/ known burrows will be treated either through direct burrow avoidance or temporary coverboard placement, to avoid burrow collapse. If necessary, burrow monitoring methods, as discussed in Section 3.1.1, will also be utilized. These methods will be implemented throughout the year, regardless of seasonal activity.

4.1 Standard Avoidance and Minimization Practices

- A preconstruction survey will be completed within 14 days of ground disturbing activities to assess changes in conditions at the site and determine if sign is present that would indicate listed species presence. If construction stops for longer than 2 weeks, a preconstruction survey will need to be conducted prior to construction starting again.
- A clearance sweep will be conducted prior to ground disturbing activities, as well as at the start of each day with attention provided to potential sources of entrapment or attractants to covered species.
- All work areas where ground disturbance is anticipated (foundation removal, tower installation, etc..) will be cleared and will be devoid of burrows prior to construction. (See Section 3.1). Ground disturbing activities such as drilling or excavating will be conducted in the inactive season and due to on-going burrow monitoring, will occur in areas where no known- or potentially occupied listed species burrows occur or, if present, can be reasonably avoided during ground disturbance.
- All auger holes, trenches, pits, or other steep-sided excavations that may pose a hazard to BNLL will be either constructed with escape ramps (earthen or wooden) or securely covered when unattended to prevent entrapping animals. An approved General Biological Monitor (GBM) will

conduct trenches inspections twice daily, at the beginning and end of each day, and immediately prior to backfill.

- An approved GBM will be present and directly monitor all active construction areas.
- No staging, driving, or operating within ESA buffers is to be permitted except as allowed through avoidance methods and only under the supervision of a GBM.
- All BNLL locations will be marked with ESA signage and a staked buffer installed including t-posts and rope delineations.
- Stop Work Authority will be implemented at any time a listed species is observed or suspected to be present and may be lifted when the assigned GBM confirms that no Take will occur as a result of activities at that location.
- Daily monitoring efforts will be recorded and electronically transmitted to SCE through SCE's FRED for inclusion in final project reports or to be provided at the request of wildlife agencies.
- All observations of covered species will be updated monthly in submissions to the CNDDDB web portal through SCE.
- Any take of any listed species will be reported immediately to the SCE representative with full documentation of the incident and disposition of the injured or deceased animal provided in a telephonic notification to State and Federal regulators within 24 hours of the incident. A written incident report will be submitted within 48 hours and distributed to Agency personnel.
- A road escort, GBM, will be present to control speed and direct traffic and construction personnel during April through October. Site traffic will abide by a 15mph limit on all non-paved surfaces except for locations within proximity to listed species occurrences where speeds will be maintained at 5mph or less.
- The use of 4ft x 4ft coverboards consisting of 1 inch thick of plywood or similar board or hardened plating may be applied on burrows or positioned to prevent inadvertent collapse while permitting traffic through ESA buffers. Placement of coverboards will be at the direction of the GBM.
 - During the active season, coverboards must be installed immediately prior to encroachment and removed immediately after vehicle passage.
 - During the inactive season, long-term use of coverboards may be deployed in areas where prolonged work is scheduled to occur.