CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
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CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT STATUTORY EXEMPTION FOR RESTORATION PROJECTS
CONCURRENCE NO. 21080.56-2023-022-R2

Project:	Hoke Valley Meadow Restoration Project Phase 1
Location:	Sierra County
Lead Agency:	California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Lahontan Region
Lead Agency Contact:	Adam Henriques; Adam.Henriques@Waterboards.ca.gov

Background

Project Location: The Hoke Valley Meadow Restoration Project Phase 1 (Project) is located within Hoke Valley, a 60-acre meadow upstream of the northeast arm of Stampede Reservoir at approximately 6,000 feet in elevation. The Project area is approximately 5.8 acres, situated within the 25-acre Lower Hoke Meadow portion of the Hoke Valley, and is located 14 miles northeast of the town of Truckee, centering on 39.50330, -120.08467. The land where the Project restoration efforts are being implemented is owned and managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS) and covers two parcels with Assessor Parcel Numbers 023-040-001 and 023-030-004. The Project is accessible via Stampede Meadows Road (Sierra County Road 270), approximately 10 miles north from the intersection with Interstate 80.

Project Description: Through implementation of the Project, the USFS in partnership with the Truckee River Watershed Council propose to conserve, restore, protect, or enhance and assist in the recovery of California native fish and wildlife, and the habitat upon which they depend. The Project is designed to hydrologically reconnect and enhance a portion of a degraded meadow and its functions. To do this, the Project will utilize natural features to encourage the spread of flows, promote channel aggradation, provide bank stability, and re-establish multiple secondary flow paths across the meadow surface.

Centuries of impacts from settler emigration, roads, camping, utility lines, and logging and grazing activities have caused intense erosion and stream incision, disconnecting the stream from its floodplain. Previous attempts to reduce erosion with gabion structures, berms, and rock sills failed to restore meadow function. Although an inset floodplain has persisted with wetland species, the rest of the meadow has transitioned to drier vegetation communities.

To address these impacts and improve habitat for California native fish and wildlife, the Project's design elements include: partially filling the mainstem channel with native soil from on-site sources; installing one fill plug on the remnant channel just upstream of Stampede Meadows Road; constructing riffles in the main and reactivated remnant channels; connecting ponded water features to channels; adding up to four culverts under Stampede Meadow Road; improving an existing culvert by adding cobble to raise the base elevation; transplanting willows and riparian vegetation; and harvesting trees for woody debris features.

If enough fill soil is available, the main incision in the Project area will be filled to the meadow surface. In the event gaps are left between fill locations, they will be shaped to conform to channel features, be seasonally filled with water, and recede in conjunction with groundwater elevations. Fill material is planned to primarily come from the slopes adjacent to the valley, fill imported from the local area, as well as from the five small excavation areas that are required to disperse surface water to the adjacent meadow surface.

Over time, the Project's activities are expected to convert and reconnect existing upland habitat to an additional 14.76 acres of meadow habitat and 3.6 acres of riparian habitat. As a result, the 5.8-acre Project may benefit a total area of approximately 20 acres.

Tribal Engagement: The Tribal Historic Preservation Officer of the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California consulted with USFS by email on December 12, 2022. The Officer stated that the Tribe did not have any significant concerns related to the Project and provided recommendations for Project implementation.

Interested Party Coordination: The planning, design, and National Environmental Protection Act process included coordination with various stakeholders including the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Sierra County, utility providers (Pacific Bell, Kinder Morgan, Sierra Pacific Power), and off highway vehicle user groups.

Anticipated Project Implementation Timeframes: Start date: June 2023
Completion date: October 2027

Lead Agency Request for CDFW Concurrence: On March 10, 2023, the Director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW Director) received a concurrence request from the California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Lahontan Region (Lead Agency) pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.56, subdivision (e) (Request). The Request seeks the CDFW Director's concurrence with the Lead Agency's determination on March 7, 2023, that the Project meets certain qualifying criteria set forth in subdivisions (a) to (d), inclusive, of the same section of the Public Resources Code (Lead Agency Determination). The CDFW Director's concurrence is required for the Lead Agency to approve the Project relying on this section of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Pub. Resources Code, § 21000 et seq.).

Concurrence Determination

The CDFW Director concurs with the Lead Agency Determination that the Project meets the qualifying criteria set forth in Public Resources Code section 21080.56, subdivisions (a) to (d), inclusive (Concurrence).

Specifically, the CDFW Director concurs with the Lead Agency that the Project meets all of the following conditions: (1) the Project is exclusively to conserve, restore, protect, or enhance, and assist in the recovery of California native fish and wildlife, and the habitat upon which they depend; or is exclusively to restore or provide habitat for California native fish and wildlife; (2) the Project may have public benefits incidental to the Project's fundamental purpose; (3) the Project will result in long-term net benefits to climate resiliency, biodiversity, and sensitive species recovery; and includes procedures and ongoing management for the protection of the environment; and (4) Project construction activities are solely related to

habitat restoration. Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.56, subdivision (g), CDFW will post this Concurrence on its CEQA Notices and Documents internet page: https://wildlife.ca.gov/Notices/CEQA.

This Concurrence is based on best available science and supported, as described below, by substantial evidence in CDFW's administrative record of proceedings for the Project.

This Concurrence is also based on a finding that the Project is consistent with and that its implementation will further CDFW's mandate as California's trustee agency for fish and wildlife, including the responsibility to hold and manage these resources in trust for all the people of California.

Discussion

A. Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.56, subdivision (a), the CDFW Director concurs with the Lead Agency that the Project will exclusively conserve, restore, protect, or enhance, and assist in the recovery of California native fish and wildlife, and the habitat upon which they depend; or restore or provide habitat for California native fish and wildlife.

   The Project will enhance mountain meadow hydrology and habitat within the meadow complex, which has been encroached by vegetation of the great basin sagebrush community due to loss of hydrologic connectivity. Furthermore, the Project will contribute to a regional meadow restoration effort that aims to support breeding and foraging habitat for the willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*), which is listed as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act.

B. Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.56, subdivision (b), the CDFW Director concurs with the Lead Agency that the Project may have incidental public benefits, such as public access and recreation.

   The Project may have incidental public recreation benefits. The Project does not include design or implementation elements that directly address public access or recreation; however, the Project area is adjacent to a heavily used dispersed camping area and numerous recreational roads and trails. The Project restoration measures are expected to enhance the habitat for resident plant and wildlife species, which may result in increased opportunities for bird watching and wildlife viewing.

C. Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.56, subdivision (c), the CDFW Director concurs with the Lead Agency that the Project will result in long-term net benefits to climate resiliency, biodiversity, and sensitive species recovery, and includes procedures and ongoing management for the protection of the environment.

   Long-term Net Benefits to Climate Resiliency:
   Restoration of mountain meadows increases the wetted area and water storage capacity of the landscape, increasing resilience to shifting hydrologic regimes. A restored meadow will increase carryover groundwater storage, have improved ability to capture and store runoff in soils and vegetation, substantially increase stream flow

volume over the summer base-flow season, and allow the stream to interact with its floodplain on an annual or semi-annual basis. The return of biogeomorphic processes that created the meadow will maintain and modify the meadow as precipitation patterns change. Functioning meadows also uptake and store carbon at high rates compared to degraded meadows, which can emit carbon. The improved hydrologic function of meadows in this area would be particularly beneficial, given the location within the somewhat drier eastern margin of the Sierra Nevada.

Long-term Net Benefits to Biodiversity:
Mountain meadows are highly diverse relative to their area, supporting dozens of meadow specialist and seasonally migratory bird species. In particular, 13 meadow specialist bird species are expected to benefit from the Project, including those that utilize open meadow, emergent vegetation, open water, riparian shrub, and aspen/ cottonwood forest habitats. Birds that will be monitored include song sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), yellow warbler (*Setophaga petechia brewsteri*), warbling vireo (*Vireo gilvus*), Wilson's snipe (*Gallinago delicata*), red-breasted sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus ruber*), and black-headed grosbeak (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*).

The Project will also benefit generalist mammals such as mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus californicus*) and elk (*Cervus canadensis*).

Additionally, this Project will add to several meadows that have already been restored in the area, contributing to a well-connected network of habitat for migratory species. This local redundancy adds long-term resilience to species that depend on meadow habitat for forage and refugia and increases regional genetic diversity.

Long-term Net Benefits to Sensitive Species Recovery:
This Project and the network of nearby restored meadows have a primary and long-term goal of increasing breeding and foraging habitat for the willow flycatcher. The Project also intends to support other birds of special concern, including yellow warbler, by increasing wet meadow and riparian habitat. Furthermore, endemic plants that the project will benefit includes but is not limited to Plumas Ivesia (*Ivesia sericoleuca*), which is listed as sensitive by the USFS.

Procedures for the Protection of the Environment:
The Project will institute procedures for the protection of the environment during and after implementation. General avoidance and minimization procedures include: use of existing and/or previously disturbed areas for staging and access, minimization of access routes across wetted habitat, and use of on-site fill from upland sources. Avoidance and minimization measures include: limitation of construction to the dry season, stabilization of spoils and topsoil, use of best management practices, retention of sediment on-site and prevention of waterway contamination, control of runoff to limit erosion, zero-discharge during in-channel work, minimization of ground and vegetation disturbance, remediation of any contaminated soil, rehabilitation of access routes, mulching and revegetation of disturbed areas, properly disposed waste and petroleum products, adherence to provisions in all Project permits, and completion of biological surveys prior to Project implementation.

Ongoing Management for the Protection of the Environment:
The Project will restore biogeomorphic function to the meadow, reducing the need for intensive ongoing management. USFS will implement a monitoring plan to ensure the meadow is functioning as intended. The monitoring plan will ensure that slopes are stabilized, revegetation is successful, other performance criteria are met, detail soil carbon uptake, and observe presence of species such as birds and native bees over a three-year period. Annual visual assessments will be conducted over a longer term. The USFS and its partners will use the monitoring data to determine if adaptive management is necessary, such as vegetation plantings or other interventions.

The USFS manages the broader watershed, which is considered a USFS Priority Watershed. The USFS will undertake other actions to support watershed health and sustainability, such as those outlined in the Ladybug Forest Health and Fuels Reduction Project and the East Zone Connectivity Project. The Ladybug Forest Health and Fuels Reduction Project aims to reduce the risk of high-intensity fire and improve forest condition upstream of Hoke Meadow. The East Zone Connectivity Project reduces sediment input from dirt roads and trails and includes meadow restoration actions that will support the Project biodiversity targets. Additionally, The Tahoe National Forest Plan (1990) and the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (2004) charge the USFS to manage the forest with the protection of meadows, stream environment zones, and riparian areas in mind. These broader plans and projects will ensure the protection of Hoke Meadow in perpetuity.

D. Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.56, subdivision (d), the CDFW Director concurs with the Lead Agency that the Project does not include any construction activities, except those solely related to habitat restoration. The Project-related construction activities described are all related to the overall goal of the Project to restore or enhance habitat in the Project area.

All Project activities are solely related to habitat restoration. These activities include:

- Mobilization and Site Preparation: Equipment will be mobilized to the Project area and staging areas and access routes will be staked in the meadow.
- Dewatering and diversion: Pumps and temporary coffer dams may be installed to isolate flow and pump water out of the active work area.
- Riffles: Riffles will be constructed of primarily 2-6” cobble screened from channel fill or derived from dismantling existing gabion structures currently on-site.
- Borrow areas: Once the necessary amount of fill has been obtained, borrow areas will be graded to blend with the adjacent hillside. Salvaged topsoil and organic material will be replaced. The disturbed areas will be additionally seeded with native seeds and mulched with on-site material (primarily pine needles).
- Culvert installation: Up to four culverts at the downstream end of the Project area will be installed to better accommodate the restored flow paths. The existing culvert will be improved by embedding cobble material to promote hydraulic connectivity upstream and downstream of the road and to aid aquatic organism passage.

- Road Decommissioning: After restoration is complete, the road along the northern edge of Hoke Valley will be decommissioned to improve hydrologic connectivity from the uplands to the meadow and reduce erosion.
- Revegetation: Within the channel fill areas, salvaged sod, topsoil, and willow clumps will be replanted using an excavator or loader. Additional willow staking and fascine installation on the fill will be completed by hand and will promote riparian habitat development and prevent erosion by increasing surface roughness.

Scope and Reservation of Concurrence

This Concurrence is based on the proposed Project as described by the Lead Agency Determination and the Request. If there are any subsequent changes to the Project that affect or otherwise change the Lead Agency Determination, the Lead Agency, or any other public agency that proposes to carry out or approve the Project, shall submit a new lead agency determination and request for concurrence from CDFW pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.56. If any other public agency proposes to carry out or approve the Project subsequent to the effective date of this Concurrence, this Concurrence shall remain in effect and no separate concurrence from CDFW shall be required so long as the other public agency is carrying out or approving the Project as described by the Lead Agency Determination and the Request.

Other Legal Obligations

The Project shall remain subject to all other applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations, and this Concurrence shall not weaken or violate any applicable environmental or public health standards. (Pub. Resources Code, § 21080.56, subd. (f).)

CDFW Director's Certification

By:_____ Date: 4/12/23

Charlton H. Bonham, Director
California Department of Fish and Wildlife