CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
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CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT STATUTORY EXEMPTION FOR RESTORATION PROJECTS
CONCURRENCE NO. 21080.56-2024-053-R1

Project:	Prairie Creek at Elk Meadow Cabins Habitat Enhancement Project
Location:	Humboldt County
Lead Agency:	California State Coastal Conservancy
Lead Agency Contact:	Su Corbaley; Su.Corbaley@scc.ca.gov

Background

Project Location: The Prairie Creek at Elk Meadow Cabins Habitat Enhancement Project (Project) is located on private land operated as the Elk Meadow Cabins Resort and on National Park Service property, 60 miles south of the California/Oregon border and 4 miles north of the town of Orick, in Humboldt County. The Project is located just off Highway 101, at Milepost 124 in Humboldt County, at the intersection of Valley Green Camp Road and US Highway 101, a quarter of a mile north of Davison Road. The Project reach begins just off the highway, 2.5 stream miles upstream from the confluence of Prairie Creek with Redwood Creek.

Project Description: The Yurok Tribe, in partnership with the California State Coastal Conservancy (SCC), proposes to conserve, restore, protect, or enhance, and assist in the recovery of California native fish and wildlife, and the habitat upon which they depend and restore or provide habitat for California native fish and wildlife. The Project is designed to benefit Coho Salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*), Chinook Salmon (*O. tshawytscha*), Pacific Lamprey (*Entosphenus tridentatus*), and other native fish and wildlife species. The Project includes installing unanchored large wood features and removing invasive plant species. A total of 41 pieces of large wood will be installed throughout roughly 3,000 linear feet of channel. Additionally, invasive species such as Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus)* will be opportunistically removed, and disturbed areas will be revegetated with locally native grass and herbaceous species.

Tribal Engagement: The Yurok Tribe is the project proponent and has been a core partner since Project inception, with Yurok Tribe Fisheries Department staff participating in the planning and design and decision making for all Project elements. The Yurok Tribe will provide personnel to implement the Project to restore important habitat for culturally significant salmonids within Yurok Ancestral Territory.

Interested Party Coordination: The Project Partner Team is composed of representatives

from National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Redwood National and State Park (RNSP), Anthropocene Institute, the Elk Meadow Cabins private landowner, and the Yurok Tribe Fisheries Department – Design and Construction Program. Additionally, interest has been expressed in providing natural resource educational opportunities for Elk Meadows Cabins guests, to increase awareness about native habitats and species. The landowner of Elk Meadow Cabins has also reached out to engage neighboring private landowners.

Anticipated Project Implementation Timeframes: Start date: June 2024
Completion date: December 31, 2025

Lead Agency Request for CDFW Concurrence: On April 26, 2024, the Director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW Director) received a concurrence request from the California State Coastal Conservancy (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 April 25, 2024, 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 purpose of the Project is to restore approximately 3,000 feet (.57 mi) of degraded stream that is deficient in riparian habitat and lacks complex instream habitat. This will be achieved by removing invasive and nonnative plants from banks and installing large wood structures (locally harvested whole trees) in the stream. Large wood will provide immediate predation cover and shade, promote pool formation and accumulation of nutrients, and create the setting for additional wood accumulation over time. Currently, Lower Prairie Creek lacks stream complexity and coarse substrate, and experiences increased water velocity due to lack of instream structure. Through the strategic placement of large wood, the Project will create pools, riffles, and encourage the deposition of spawning gravels to provide native fish with increased habitat for spawning and rearing.

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.

   By providing rearing and refugia habitat, the Project may help to improve the area's recreational and commercial fishing opportunities for the public.

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: The Project will provide long-term net benefits to climate resiliency by helping to secure what is already one of the most reliably cool streams on the North Coast, Prairie Creek, as a continuing source of cool water, given climate change. The majority (approximately 98%) of Prairie Creek is protected as National or State Park, with much of the middle and upstream sections providing late seral redwood forest and mature riparian habitat that in turn creates shady conditions, with cool, and generally clear water. However, the lower sections of Prairie Creek were degraded by past land use practices, and the wide shallow conditions currently found in the Project's reach are vulnerable to warming without intervention. The large wood additions will create habitat complexity and deep pools that will provide a continued source of cool water, helping to secure the entire sub-watershed as one of the most important climate strongholds in the region.

   Long-term Net Benefits to Biodiversity: The Project will result in long-term net benefits to aquatic species utilizing Prairie Creek by immediately increasing stream complexity

and will also have long-term net benefits to biodiversity by restoring the processes that create habitat over time. The added large wood will provide structure that the stream can work with to create pools and riffles, accumulate coarse spawning substrate, and provide cover and nutrients that will enhance salmonid feeding opportunities. The Project will also rack additional large wood during storm events, creating more geomorphic change, and long-term habitat improvement that will help recover listed salmonid species. In addition to salmonids, Prairie Creek also supports Pacific Lamprey, Western Brook Lamprey (*Lampetra richardsoni*), Prickly Sculpin (*Cottus asper*), Coast Range Sculpin (*C. aleuticus*), Threespine Stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*), and Sacramento Sucker (*Catostomus occidentalis*).

Long-term Net Benefits to Sensitive Species Recovery: This Project will result in long-term net benefits to sensitive species recovery by increasing spawning and rearing habitat for Coho Salmon, Chinook Salmon, steelhead, and Pacific Lamprey in one of the most important salmon streams in the State. Prairie Creek is a salmon and climate stronghold; the NMFS Southern Oregon/Northern California Coast Evolutionarily Significant Unit of Coho Salmon Recovery Plan and Coastal Multispecies Recovery Plan both include the following recovery action: improve habitat in the reaches of Prairie Creek where habitat is degraded to secure Prairie Creek as an ongoing stronghold for salmon and steelhead recovery. There is currently a significant focus on stream and floodplain restoration activities directed at the lower reaches of Prairie Creek, and the goals of this Project are to support native fish species recovery within the Project reach and are well aligned with similar goals for the rest of Prairie Creek.

Procedures for the Protection of the Environment: Specific avoidance and minimization measures will be taken to protect the environment during implementation. The Project design team has identified the Project's limits of disturbance for restoration activities. Specific avoidance and minimization measures include but are not limited to:

- Large wood placement in-stream will occur in September 2024, when streamflow is low, and well after the peak outmigration of listed salmonids has occurred.
- Staging areas, equipment storage sites, roadway, and construction footprint will be selectively placed on roadways or within the construction site away from aquatic habitat.
- All machinery must be in good working condition, showing no signs of fuel or oil leaks.
- Any disturbed ground that is used to access the Project will have erosion control, will be regraded, and mulched.
- All fuel and chemical storage, servicing, and refueling will be done in an upland staging area or other suitable location with secondary containment to prevent spills from traveling to surface water.
- Vehicle and equipment maintenance should be performed off-site whenever practical.
- The Yurok Tribe will make adequate preparations, including training and providing equipment, to contain oil and/or other hazardous materials spills.
- Silt curtains may be installed as required to prevent the delivery of turbid water to open water areas connected to the Project area.

- Disturbance of existing vegetation will be minimized to only that which is necessary to complete the work.

Ongoing Management for the Protection of the Environment: The Project is designed to be self-maintaining as practicable, with ongoing management provided by the Elk Meadow Cabins landowner and RNSP, depending on location within the Project footprint. RNSP's management objectives are guided by the Natural Resources Element of the General Management Plan (General Plan), which outlines strategies to restore and maintain RNSP's ecosystems and perpetuate ongoing natural processes.

Also, SCC will require as a condition of its grant to the Yurok Tribe that there be an agreement that allows the Tribe access to perform the work and observe the Project post completion.

A pre- and post-construction assessment of riparian condition following the California Rapid Assessment Methodology (CRAM) will be conducted to document riparian habitat condition and function. The following post-construction monitoring to observe function and use will occur:

- Observation of wood racking / accumulation and habitat creation.
- General Project observations will occur opportunistically by Elk Meadow Cabins landowners and RNSP staff.
- Post-construction riparian assessment CRAM will be conducted two-years post construction.

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 SCC has determined that the Project does not include any construction activities, except for construction activities solely related to habitat restoration. The following activities are required to restore and protect habitat in the Project area:

- Using an excavator, large wood will be placed into the creek and guided in place by a Yurok Tribe crew to assure proper placement and structure configuration.
- Removal of invasive and nonnative plants using manual methods.
- All areas disturbed by the Project's restoration activities will be seeded using native herbaceous species and mulched with straw or wood chips post-construction.

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: 05/28/24

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