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CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT STATUTORY EXEMPTION FOR RESTORATION PROJECTS
CONCURRENCE NO. 21080.56-2025-071-R1

Project:	McKenzie Meadows Restoration Project Phase 1
Location:	Lassen County
Lead Agency:	Honey Lake Valley Resource Conservation District
Lead Agency Contact:	Kelsey Marks; kmarks@honeylakevalleyrcd.us

Background

Project Location: The McKenzie Meadows Restoration Project Phase 1 (Project) is the first phase of a larger 698-acre multi-phased restoration effort to restore McKenzie Meadows and is part of the 101 Ranch property that is privately owned and completely within the boundaries of a conservation easement held by the Feather River Land Trust. The Project is approximately 5.5 air miles northeast of the unincorporated town of Westwood, CA, in southwestern Lassen County, centered at 40.347719, -120.910114. Several tributaries to Goodrich Creek flow through the Project area, which drains into Mountain Meadows Reservoir and subsequently into the North Fork Feather River.

Project Description: The Honey Lake Valley Resource Conservation District (Lead Agency), in partnership with Plumas Corporation (Plumas Corp), 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. The Project is designed to benefit meadow birds, waterfowl, and other riparian dependent species.

The Project area historically was characterized by braided networks of seasonal and perennial streams vegetated with a mosaic of willows, cottonwoods, and aspen groves in a matrix of wet meadow, beaver ponds, and emergent wetlands. These plant communities, and their associated wildlife, are now absent or greatly reduced due to channel manipulation and road crossings, exacerbated by historic grazing and logging practices. Currently, McKenzie Meadows consists of incised channels with disconnected floodplains.

To address these issues, the Project will initiate the first phase and restore approximately 212 acres of meadow floodplain function by eliminating incised channels and re-establishing the channel-floodplain connection. This will be accomplished by using a variety of restoration treatments:

- Partial Channel Fill: Where channel bottoms will be inundated, native vegetation will be salvaged by removing any existing topsoil, sod, or other usable riparian vegetation. This will be followed by excavation of borrow material by widening existing gullies.

Then fill from excavation will be placed in-channel in a series of plugs, eliminating the incised channel. At two locations, plugs will be used to redirect stream flow into the network of historic remnant channels and swales. Plugs will be created to subgrade and brought to grade with the floodplain surface using stockpiled topsoil and sod. Larger vegetation will be planted at key locations to provide roughness and/or native habitat features.

- Railroad grade removal: Several sections of a remnant railroad grade that is impacting surface water movement in the meadow will be re-graded to meadow elevation and the material will be re-purposed as fill. Early-stage conifers, growing from the top of portions of the railroad grades, will be chipped and used to spread on bare plugs.
- Riffle creation: Approximately seven riffles will be established in a small tributary in the southwestern area of the meadow. Ten to twelve sod riffles will be strategically placed in the upper reach of the Fredonyer channel where incisions are less than 3 feet deep and in several small ditches within the meadow.
- Valley grade structure: A valley grade structure will be created of an earthen core armored with about 3 feet of rock sourced from a nearby quarry. The structure will be designed with a series of riffle-pool sequences to dissipate stream flow energy as it leaves the Project area. Existing native vegetation in the channel bottom will be transplanted onto the floodplain surface of the valley grade structure.

Project activities will also include revegetation of approximately 5 acres of disturbed soils as well as transplanting willows and sedge sod. Seeding will be done with a native wet meadow seed mix and planting will include an estimated 2,000 willow cuttings and 100 cottonwood saplings in the riparian area.

About 5,000 feet of cross fencing will be installed to protect the restoration features from livestock grazing. Post-restoration grazing is to be deferred for up to 3 years to allow vegetation recovery; subsequent livestock grazing will be guided by a Grazing Management Plan developed through the conservation easement on the property.

Following these initial restoration efforts the Project will be monitored for the first 5 years and evaluated for performance and desired conditions. Evaluations will determine whether adaptive maintenance is required and provide guidance for the necessary actions to be implemented.

Tribal Engagement: The Lead Agency has made efforts to engage with local tribes via emails, phone calls, and/or certified letters to tribal contacts provided by the Native American Heritage Commission (NAHC) in 2021, 2022 and 2024. Specifically, in 2022 and 2024, certified letters were sent to NAHC identified tribes and corresponding contacts, providing an opportunity for the tribes to engage in the Project. The NAHC Tribal Consultation list for this project included: Greenville Rancheria of Maidu Indians, Honey Lake Maidu, Mooretown Rancheria of Maidu Indians, Susanville Rancheria, Tsi Akim Maidu, Berry Creek Rancheria of Maidu Indians, Estom Yumeka Maidu Tribe of the Enterprise Rancheria, Pakan'yani Maidu of Strawberry Valley Rancheria, and the Wadatkuta Band of the Northern Paiute of the Honey Lake Valley. Based on this effort, the Concow-Maidu of Mooretown Rancheria has indicated interest in the Project.

Interested Party Coordination: The Project is part of a broader landscape-scale restoration effort in the Mountain Meadows basin, a 7,000-acre meadow and stream complex

surrounding Mountain Meadows Reservoir, that along with the surrounding region, is one of the most important areas for migratory birds in North America. As part of this effort, Plumas Corp received 3 years of funding from the Intermountain West Joint Venture (2010-2012) to engage with the Mountain Meadows Conservancy to advance restoration. In addition, Plumas Corporation has been an active partner with the Trust for Public Lands, Point Blue Conservation, and the Feather River Land Trust in developing the conservation easement plans and baseline monitoring for the 101 Ranch and the adjacent Home Ranch property. Periodic updates on these restoration efforts were provided to local watershed collaboratives, including the July 2019 State of the Lake Forum (Lake Almanor Basin) and meetings of the South Lassen Watershed Group. Additionally, a field tour of the Project site was conducted in April 2022 that included agency representatives from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's (CDFW) Cutting the Green Tape program and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

Anticipated Project Implementation Timeframes: Start date: August 2025
Completion date: December 2033

Lead Agency Request for CDFW Concurrence: On April 18, 2025, the Director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW Director) received a concurrence request from the 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 14, 2025 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: (A) 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; (B) the Project may have public benefits incidental to the Project's fundamental purpose; (C) 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 (D) 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 eliminate channel incision and reactivate historic flow paths on the meadow surface, by planting native plant species in the riparian corridor, and by implementing grazing management changes to restore habitat for mountain meadow species. The restored hydrology and improved floodplain function will promote more vigorous growth of mesic and wet meadow plant species, enhance summer flow conditions, and improve water quality by eliminating eroding banks and filtering flood flows on the meadow floodplain surface. The restoration of meadow habitat will promote abundance and diversity of avian species such as greater sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis tabida*), yellow warbler (*Setophaga petechia*), and willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*). Ponded water and abundant willows created by this Project will create suitable habitat for American beaver (*Castor canadensis*) to expand into the Project area as well.

B. Pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.56, subdivision (b), the CDFW Director concurs with the Lead Agency that the Project may not have incidental public benefits, such as public access and recreation.

   The site is privately owned, and beyond what is specified in the conservation easement, does not allow public access and recreation. Furthermore, the Project does not include any public access or recreation features. As a result, the Project is not expected to include any incidental public benefits.

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.

   <u>Long-term Net Benefits to Climate Resiliency</u>: Reconnecting the incised channels and swales with the meadow floodplain will allow flows to spread out, attenuating peak velocities and reducing opportunities for flood events downstream. As flows disperse across the floodplain, water is absorbed into meadow soils, providing increased water

retention and replenishment of the shallow groundwater aquifer. The increased groundwater retention in turn compensates for the reduced snowpack and projected declines in spring runoff by slowly filtering and releasing water into stream channels later into the summer months. Extending the availability of surface water in the meadow and to downstream water courses provides resiliency to drought climate impacts on habitats for a multitude of both terrestrial and aquatic wildlife species.

Meadows with restored hydrologic/floodplain connectivity are naturally able to retain more water in their soils over multi-year droughts and can withstand catastrophic wildfire by providing valuable refugia during post-fire recovery of surrounding ecosystems.

The Project will also promote climate resiliency through a two-fold effect on carbon storage: (1) restoring the meadow will prevent continued loss of carbon via oxidation from drying meadow soils; and (2) restoring the meadow will act as a net carbon sink as the meadow soils begin to re-sequester carbon through increased aboveground and belowground biomass. Thus, the Project will mitigate climate impacts by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing carbon sequestration.

Long-term Net Benefits to Biodiversity: The Project will result in long-term net benefits to biodiversity by enhancing and increasing meadow and wetland habitat, which will benefit waterfowl and other riparian dependent species. The improved ecological condition of meadow and riparian habitat will enhance and expand vegetation used by meadow birds. The deeper pooled water created by the Project will provide cover and encourage beaver colonization further up into the meadow. The hydrologic improvements are expected to help ensure the meadow stays wet longer, allowing native habitat to be available for species that have reduced habitat under drier conditions.

The Project will further expand the contiguous restoration footprint in the larger 7,000-acre Mountain Meadow basin, providing resilience to fragmentation. In conjunction with neighboring restoration efforts, this Project will increase the overall patch size of meadow habitat, countering the effects of fragmentation in a critically important migratory bird corridor and in the home range of the Lassen Pack gray wolf (*Canis lupus*). Expansion of meadow habitat would improve habitat quality and allow for long-term net benefits to biodiversity for specific native species such as willow flycatcher, greater sandhill crane, pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*), Townsend's big-eared bat (*Corynorhinus townsendii*), western red bat (*Lasiurus frantzii*), and allow for the further expansion of Rocky Mountain elk (*Cervus canadensis nelsoni*).

Long-term Net Benefits to Sensitive Species Recovery: The Project will enhance and expand habitat used by meadow birds. Restored riparian shrub habitat will also support breeding of two special status meadow bird species: willow flycatcher, listed as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) and greater sandhill crane, which is known to be present in the Project area and listed as threatened under CESA.

Long-term vegetation changes due to restoration of meadow floodplain function will increase the amount of wet meadow habitat within treated areas and reduce sediment input due to erosion. High winter and spring flows will spread across the restored and vegetated meadow floodplain, naturally filtering sediment, saturating meadow soils, and raising groundwater levels, which in turn will provide increased and/or extended duration of base-flow later in the season within the treated meadow stream systems. Increased vegetation and habitat near breeding ponds and increased number of temporary pools of water provide breeding sites, benefitting amphibian species, such as foothill yellow-legged frog (*Rana boylii*), listed as threatened under CESA and the federal Endangered Species Act, and long-toed salamanders (*Ambystoma macrodactylum sigillatum*).

American goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), listed as endangered under CESA, are expected to benefit due to the expansion of pooled water habitat along with increased prey diversity and abundance in and around the Project area. Sandhill cranes, and other migratory birds, are expected to benefit due to the expected improvement and expansion of ponded water and wet meadow habitat for resting, foraging and potential nesting cranes.

Sierra Nevada mountain beaver (*Aplodontia rufa californica*) will benefit from meadow soils retaining moisture longer, supporting herbaceous and willow vegetation in the meadow and providing deep ponds for protection that are lacking in existing channels.

Procedures for the Protection of the Environment: Avoidance and minimization measures include but are not limited to the following:

1. Project will be implemented during the dry season when flows are minimal or absent (August 1 through October 30).
2. Existing vegetation (meadow sod and riparian shrubs) in disturbance areas will be salvaged and replanted in appropriate locations throughout the Project area.
3. All work will be conducted in accordance with the Construction General Permit and a site-specific Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan. Fugitive dust will be controlled with the continuous operation of water trucks throughout the work area.
4. A spill kit will be kept in proximity to active work areas.
5. Surveys for nesting and migratory birds will be conducted if work is planned to begin prior August 31.
6. Protocol level surveys will be conducted by qualified Plumas Corp staff for Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (SNYLF) and southern long-toed salamander (SLTS) prior to construction. If any SNYLF or SLTS are detected, the Lead Agency and Project proponent will ensure the permitting agencies are notified so that State and Federal consultation can proceed prior to Project implementation.
7. Incidental wolf sightings shall be reported to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.
8. If an active den or rendezvous site for wolves is observed, all vegetation disturbing activities within a 0.25-mile radius and all operations within 200 ft of the Project shall be suspended and the Landowner or Landowner's representative shall contact the California Department of Fish and Wildlife for consultation.

9. All staging areas shall be surveyed for noxious weeds and treated prior to work. Instances of weeds will be flagged for avoidance and vegetation will be removed (hand pulled or dug with heavy equipment) and buried deep in the channel fill.
10. Vehicles and other equipment operating in the Project area shall be cleaned before entering the Project according to standard vehicle washing guidelines.
11. Known invasive plant like Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) or newly identified populations will be located, flagged where possible, and mapped for this Project. Locations will be displayed on contract maps. Canada thistle sites within or adjacent to the Project area containing isolated patches with small plant numbers will be treated (hand pulled or dug and buried deep under channel fill) prior to Project implementation.

Ongoing Management for the Protection of the Environment: Project performance monitoring site visits will be conducted annually during peak runoff in late winter/early spring 2025 and 2026 to identify the potential need for post-restoration maintenance intervention. This information will be provided to Project partners to aid in developing short- and long-term adaptive management decisions. Monitoring will focus on ensuring the structural integrity of the Project continues to meet desired conditions. If erosion is affecting the Project's structural integrity, maintenance and/or management actions may be taken.

Annual photo point documentation will supplement performance site visits in identifying potential maintenance and/or adaptive management needs. Established photo points will be used to create a visual comparison of changes in meadow condition over time. Photos have been taken pre-restoration and will be repeated annually for 5 years following post-restoration work.

Plumas Corp will continue to participate in annual grazing management plan evaluations with the landowner, the livestock grazer, and Feather River Land Trust to ensure that grazing does not adversely affect the restoration or the desired restoration results.

Plumas Corp will also monitor monthly continuous groundwater elevation data, soil carbon analysis, California Rapid Assessment Method (CRAM) Wetland Assessment, water temperature, avian surveys, and Project performance monitoring to evaluate the need for maintenance and inform long-term adaptive management needs.

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 sole purpose of the Project is to implement floodplain habitat restoration and protect sensitive biological resources. Floodplain restoration will in part be accomplished by using heavy equipment, which may include scrapers, excavators, bulldozers, skiploaders, dump trucks, and a water truck; and will entail filling the incised gullies through excavation and/or movement of fill material. On-site fill will be generated primarily from in-channel borrow areas, creating ponds as the groundwater

table recovers. Additional fill will be generated from the railroad grade removal and several off-channel borrow sites. The approximately 64,800 cubic yards of fill will be used to create the Project's partial channel fill plugs and the core of the valley grade structure, as well as placement in the upland for eroded segments of channel outside of mapped wetland areas. At several key locations, fill placement will redirect stream flows into remnant channels or swales on the meadow surface, further distributing flow across the floodplain. Additionally, an estimated 1,400 cubic yards of locally sourced rock will be used to construct the valley grade structure and rock riffles.

Scope and Reservation of Concurrence

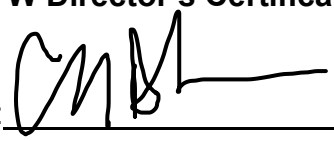
This Concurrence is based on the proposed Project as described by the Lead Agency Determination and the Request. If there are any subsequent changes to the Project that affect or otherwise change the Lead Agency Determination, the Lead Agency, or any other public agency that proposes to carry out or 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.

In its request for a concurrence, the Lead Agency set forth numerous potential bases for a determination that the Project will result in long-term net benefits to climate resiliency, biodiversity, and sensitive species recovery. Although the CDFW Director agrees with the Lead Agency that the Project will provide such long-term net benefits, this Concurrence is not intended to be and should not be construed as an endorsement of every argument set forth in the Lead Agency's concurrence 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: 5/23/25

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