

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
DIRECTOR'S OFFICE
POST OFFICE BOX 944209
SACRAMENTO, CA 94244-2090



**CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT STATUTORY EXEMPTION FOR
RESTORATION PROJECTS
CONCURRENCE NO. 21080.56-2025-077-R2**

Project: Crane Valley Meadow Restoration Project
Location: Butte County
Lead Agency: Butte County Resource Conservation District
Lead Agency Contact: Thad Walker; thad@bcrd.org

Background

Project Location: The Crane Valley Meadow Restoration (Project) is located near the headwaters of Big Kimshe Creek, a tributary of the West Branch Feather River, at Latitude: 39.9603, and Longitude: -121.449, in Butte County.

Project Description: The Butte County Resource Conservation District (Lead Agency), in partnership with Sierra Pacific Industries and Wilson Family Trust, proposes to conserve, restore, protect, or enhance approximately 100 acres of meadow habitat to support and assist recovery of native fish and wildlife species. The Project is designed to benefit Cascades frog (*Rana cascadae*), foothill yellow-legged frog (*Rana boylei*), fisher (*Pekania pennanti*), and California Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis occidentalis*). The Project would also prepare habitat for potential North American beaver (*Castor canadensis*) reintroduction. The Project includes the use of low-tech, process-based restoration practices to construct three types of woody structures – channel-spanning, bank-attached, and mid-channel – in degraded meadow channels. The Project will place Post-Assisted Log Structures (PALS), which are large wood jams made from branches and small to medium trees, and Beaver Dam Analogs (BDAs), which are used to mimic natural beaver dams using smaller wood and local materials like rocks and sediment, in incised channels. The structures will aid in restoring stream function by slowing water flow, promoting sediment deposition, and increasing habitat complexity. The Project also includes selective thinning of conifers throughout the 100 acres of predicted project impacts. The felled trees will be used to create the PALS and BDAs. Willow (*Salix*) planting will occur along stabilized banks to support riparian recovery and bank integrity.

Tribal Engagement: The Lead Agency conducted an in-person meeting with a representative of the Konkow Maidu Tribe on April 14, 2025, and a phone call on July 25, 2025. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) have initiated contact with interested tribes as part of compliance with the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. In coordination with the USFWS archaeologist, the Lead Agency's contracted archaeologist has

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 is designed to restore natural hydrologic function and improve habitat quality within a degraded Sierra Nevada meadow. Current meadow conditions include extensive channel incision, which has indirectly lowered the water table and disconnected the stream channel from its floodplain, facilitating conifer encroachment through the historic meadow system. The Project will restore the degraded meadow through the use of adaptive management approaches, including utilizing ecological and geomorphic processes. The restored meadow will result in healthier tree growth patterns, resulting in increased wood density, promotion of groundwater retention and wetted meadow conditions, increased pool formation, and meadow complex habitat improvements to prepare for potential beaver reintroduction. Selective tree thinning and fuel load management will support fire-resilient landscapes and prepare for potential prescribed burns. The improved hydrologic function and habitat complexity will better support sensitive species and improve forage and cover quality for native fish and wildlife species benefits.

- 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 safety benefits to surrounding residences and utility, transportation, and water supply infrastructure by reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire due to fuels reduction.

- 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 result in long-term climate resiliency by restoring habitat heterogeneity, restoring historic hydrologic processes, and increasing the meadow system's ability to buffer against changing climate conditions. The PALS and BDAs will improve surface-groundwater connectivity by promoting groundwater recharge, expanding wet meadow areas, and increasing

late-season baseflows. The PALS and BDA structures will facilitate reconnecting the stream with its historic floodplain, enabling the meadow to intrinsically moderate peak flows through groundwater percolation and aquifer saturation, and help sustain baseflows during drought conditions. Enhanced groundwater retention will also promote cooler soil and water temperatures, fostering higher dissolved oxygen level potentials, critical for many aquatic species' survival and fecundity. Additionally, PALS and BDAs will encourage stream channel habitat diversity by recruiting woody debris and supporting riparian vegetation growth which stabilizes banks, shades the stream, and adds organic matter back into the system. These combined structural and ecological processes add system climate resilience to wet and dry extremes.

Long-term Net Benefits to Biodiversity: The Project will result in long-term net benefits to biodiversity by increasing habitat heterogeneity and ecological gradients, which will promote biodiversity by creating a diverse array of vegetative, hydrologic, and geomorphic features that support terrestrial, avian, and aquatic species. The Project aims to facilitate a shift in the wetland morphology to promote greater surface water accumulation and floodplain inundation, resulting in greater subsurface water availability. Increasing water resources akin to historic levels will support development of a robust Montane Riparian plant community, dominated by Willow (*Salix spp.*), black cottonwood (*Populus trichocarpa*), and quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*). These plant assemblages will provide structure and habitat for a wide range of native and special status species, including the western toad (*Anaxyrus boreas*) and Sierra chorus frog (*Pseudacris sierra*), which will benefit from the enhanced hydrologic regime and increased pool frequency and depth. In addition to supporting amphibians, the vegetative and hydrologic complexity will offer critical nesting habitat for riparian birds, and abundant floral resources for pollinators.

The improved habitat heterogeneity will provide forage variety and seasonal refugia for terrestrial mammals and birds. Enhanced aquatic vegetation in reconnected side channels and floodplain wetlands will help stabilize food webs and improve shelter conditions for macroinvertebrates and fish.

Long-term Net Benefits to Sensitive Species Recovery: Restoration of a healthy and resilient meadow ecosystem will provide long-term benefits for the recovery and persistence of native meadow- and stream-dependent species, especially under the pressures of a rapidly changing climate. Improved hydrologic connectivity, increased groundwater retention, and enhanced habitat complexity will create the conditions necessary to support sensitive species in the long-term through seasonal and climatic extremes. California Endangered Species Act (CESA) listed threatened foothill yellow-legged frog (*Rana boylei*), CESA candidate Cascades frog (*Rana cascadae*), CESA listed endangered fisher (*Pekania pennanti*), and CESA listed endangered gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) are regionally present sensitive species that are expected to benefit from habitat heterogeneity and stream system expansion on the Project site.

The installation of PALS and BDAs will not only restore natural hydrologic function but may also prepare the meadow for a potential future relocation of the keystone species, North American beaver (*Castor canadensis*), which were historically present in the

watershed. Beavers would likely enhance long-term ecological function by maintaining and expanding instream structures, increasing habitat heterogeneity, and contributing to the long-term recovery of additional sensitive species.

Procedures for the Protection of the Environment: The draft Concept Design Report outlines procedures for conducting restoration work with measures to protect sensitive resources. Avoidance and conservation measures include, but are not limited to:

- Access to the site will be achieved by trucks and All-Terrain Vehicles and will be restricted to dry period.
- Work will be conducted using hand tools and low-tech processes, and heavy machinery use will be prohibited.
- Best management practices will be implemented for erosion control, watercourse protection, and prevention of release of sediment into watercourses.
- Sensitive resources will be identified, marked, and protected prior to Project implementation.

Ongoing Management for the Protection of the Environment: Sierra Pacific Industries and Wilson Family Trust, as sole landowners of the property, are committed to the long-term ecological protection of the Project site. Sierra Pacific Industries and Wilson Family Trust will coordinate to protect the health and integrity of the meadow by limiting unauthorized access and minimizing potential disturbances.

The Project will be revisited through successive phases of implementation to respond to changes in geomorphology, vegetation, and hydrology. Planned ongoing management relies on adaptive strategies that progressively allow the Project site to gradually reach homeostasis and gain compounded resiliency over time. An Effectiveness Monitoring Plan is being developed to support this approach. At a minimum, the Effectiveness Monitoring Plan will include vegetation assessments to document shifts in community composition and structure, cross-sectional channel surveys to track geomorphic development, and soil carbon sampling to evaluate improvements in carbon sequestration and soil health. The Project includes maintenance activities that focus on identifying and reinforcing successful PALS and BDAs and supporting native plant establishment through targeted planting and selective thinning. The Project intentionally minimizes use of mechanized equipment to reduce vegetation disturbance and protect sensitive meadow soils. By using an evolving, site-driven approach, the Project reduces the need for intensive human intervention over time, promoting ecosystem self-sustainability while safeguarding biodiversity and sensitive species habitat.

- 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.

All Project construction activities support the Project goal to restore meadow habitat heterogeneity and improve meadow conditions.

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: 8/27/2025

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