

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
DIRECTOR'S OFFICE
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**CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT STATUTORY EXEMPTION FOR
RESTORATION PROJECTS
CONCURRENCE NO. 21080.56-2026-097-R4**

Project: San Benito Wildlife Crossing
Location: San Benito County
Lead Agency: California Department of Transportation, District 5
Lead Agency Contact: Morgan Robertson; Morgan.Robertson@dot.ca.gov

Background

Project Location: The San Benito Wildlife Crossing (Project) is located at postmile 1.4 on U.S. Route 101 (US-101) in San Benito County; centered at approximately 36.859972, -121.606944; Section 00, Township, 12 South, Range 3 East; U.S. Geological Survey map San Juan Bautista. The Project occurs within a critical habitat linkage between the Santa Cruz Mountains and Gabilan Range (Critical Linkage).

Project Description: The southern end of the Santa Cruz Mountains has important ecological connections to both the Gabilan Range to the south and the Diablo Range to the east, facilitating movement, dispersal, and migration of wildlife. The habitat in the region is threatened with residential development and habitat fragmentation, making it more difficult for wildlife to disperse and migrate between mountain ranges. Restoring ecological connectivity between areas of intact habitat in these mountain ranges is a high priority for regional conservation efforts.

California Department of Transportation, District 5 (Caltrans), in partnership with the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (LTSCC) (collectively, Project Proponents), 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, and restore or provide habitat for California native fish and wildlife. The Project includes the construction of an approximately 191-foot-wide, 355-foot-long overcrossing bridge on US-101, and the installation of wildlife directional fencing on each side of US-101. The overcrossing will include abutment wing walls and retaining walls, concrete barrier rails, and sound walls. Soil will be placed on top of the deck of the structure to a depth of approximately four feet, and native vegetation will be seeded and planted. Boulders and woody debris may also be installed on the overcrossing. Approximately 1.4 miles of wildlife directional fencing will be installed to the east of the overcrossing, and 0.9 miles of fencing will be installed to the west. Escape ramps will be installed throughout the directional fencing, on the highway side of the fence. Electromats and/or cattle guards will be installed where highway intersects with roads. These activities will

enable wildlife to safely access intact habitats within the Critical Linkage that are bisected by US-101.

The Wildlife Conservation Board has funded Project planning up to the 60% design stage. Project Proponents will seek funding for the remainder of the Project, including final designing, permitting, and construction. It is expected that minor changes to the Project may occur as planning progresses to the 100% design stage.

Tribal Engagement: The Project area occurs within the ancestral territory of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and Amah Mutsun Land Trust serve on the advisory team that developed the Santa Cruz Mountains to Gabilan Range Linkage Conservation and Enhancement Plan. The Plan identifies the need for the Project. Project Proponents have partnered with the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band and Amah Mutsun Land Trust during Project planning.

In an effort to further engage with California Native American tribes, Caltrans contacted the Native American Heritage Commission in November 2024 to request a list of tribal contacts that may be culturally or traditionally affiliated with the Project area. Caltrans subsequently attempted to engage with these tribal contacts via letters, phone calls, and meetings. Tribal contacts were also invited to participate in a public meeting hosted by the Project Proponents on January 29, 2026.

Interested Party Coordination: To plan the Project, Project Proponents have partnered closely with: California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), the Wildlife Conservation Network (WCN), Pathways for Wildlife, the Peninsula Open Space Trust, and the University of California (UC) Davis and Santa Cruz. Additional support has been received from technical advisors such as The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Land, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. UC Davis and UC Santa Cruz have conducted wildlife studies that helped inform the Project location and design. CDFW and UC Davis have placed radio collars on mountain lions (*Puma concolor*), in an effort to track their movement.

Project Proponents have also conducted efforts to engage with other interested parties. Engagement has included, but is not limited to:

- LTSCC and WCN have hosted a series of seven stakeholder meetings with over 60 interested parties, including conservation organizations, local landowners, and state and federal resource agencies.
- Informational public websites have been created by Caltrans and LTSCC.
- Various press releases have been published by news agencies including, but not limited to, the Los Angeles Times, Santa Cruz Hilltromper, and KION News.
- Caltrans presented the Project to the San Benito County Board of Supervisors at board meetings in October 2022, February 2023, and August 2023.
- Project Proponents participated in a local informational forum organized by Green Foothills and Terra Cultura, with approximately 60 attendees.
- Podium presentations were given by Project Proponents and various partners at the 2023 and 2025 International Conference on Ecology and Transportation, as well as the 2025 California Wildlife Corridor Summit.

Anticipated Project Implementation Timeframes:

Start date: Spring 2030

Completion date: Winter 2034

Lead Agency Request for CDFW Concurrence: On February 13, 2026, 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 February 12, 2026, 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.

US-101 is a significant contributor to habitat fragmentation within the Critical Linkage. The Project is exclusively intended to provide wildlife safe access to areas of the Critical Linkage bisected by US-101. This will remediate a passage chokepoint that currently experiences high rates of wildlife-vehicle collisions. The overcrossing will contain habitat features such as boulders, woody debris, and vegetation that will serve as functional habitat. Wildlife directional fencing will prevent wildlife from entering US-101 and direct wildlife toward the overcrossing for safe passage. Escape ramps will be installed on the highway side of directional fencing to allow any wildlife that may enter the roadway an opportunity to escape from the fenced area. Electromats and cattle guards will also be installed along highway intersections with roads to prevent animals from entering US-101. The Project ties well with several other grant awards made by the Wildlife Conservation Board to fund land conservation (easement and fee title acquisition projects) within the Critical Linkage. Therefore, the Project will improve habitat connectivity between conserved lands, which will assist in the recovery of California native wildlife.

- 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.

Roadkill surveys and camera trap studies on the state highway system have identified the Project area as a hot spot for wildlife-vehicle collisions. This concentration of wildlife-vehicle collisions is associated with the high volume of traffic present on US-101, as an arterial route between the San Francisco Bay area, the Monterey Peninsula, and the Salinas Valley. By providing safe passage for wildlife within the Critical Linkage, the Project will produce the incidental benefit of reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions, therefore improving driver safety and reducing the risk of monetary damage to property.

- 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 2022 CDFW Restoring California's Wildlife Connectivity Report identified the Project area as a high priority habitat linkage barrier (barrier W041) due to its impeding movement of wildlife from one side of US-101 to the other. This barrier has resulted in habitat fragmentation and genetic isolation. Genetic flow is necessary to maintain sustainable wildlife populations. Without genetic flow, wildlife will become less capable of adapting to a changing climate. Habitat connectivity is necessary to enable genetic variation amongst populations.

At a landscape level, the Project will connect over 200,000 acres of diverse habitats along the Santa Cruz Mountains and Gabilan Range that are otherwise disconnected

by US-101. By connecting these habitats, the Project would provide habitat permeability. This permeability will allow for dispersal in response to a range of climate change scenarios, which will provide opportunities for genetic variation.

Long-term Net Benefits to Biodiversity:

The Project will support biodiversity by restoring habitat connectivity, which will allow species to forage, reproduce, and migrate more successfully. Specifically, the overcrossing has been designed to facilitate the movement of mountain lion, mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), and bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), though it is expected that many other wildlife species will benefit from the habitat connectivity provided by the Project. Wildlife will also experience reduced wildlife-vehicle collisions within the Critical Linkage.

To further enhance biodiversity, the Project includes the planting of native grasses and shrubs on and adjacent to the overcrossing structure. These species may include, but are not limited to, California rose (*Rosa californica*), sticky monkeyflower (*Diplacus aurantiacus*), coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*), and purple needle grass (*Stipa pulchra*). Boulders and woody debris may also be installed on the surface of the overcrossing, to provide refugia for wildlife as they utilize the overcrossing.

Long-term Net Benefits to Sensitive Species Recovery:

The Project will facilitate movement of the southern California/central coast evolutionarily significant unit (ESU) of mountain lion. At its February 11-12 meeting, the California Fish and Game Commission voted to list this ESU as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). It has been determined that the ESU is at risk of extirpation due to a lack of gene flow with neighboring populations, which is largely attributed to the habitat fragmentation caused by US-101. Habitat permeability in the Critical Linkage is essential to the long-term persistence of mountain lion, as it will allow for genetic exchange critical to the long-term health of the population.

Pollinators such as Crotch's bumble bee (*Bombus crotchii*), a candidate for listing under CESA, may benefit from the native floristic resources the Project will provide on and adjacent to the overcrossing.

Caltrans has determined there are 19 ponds that occur within 1.24-miles of the Project area that may host suitable breeding habitat for California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*), a species listed as threatened under CESA and the federal Endangered Species Act. Currently, US-101 is considered a total barrier to California tiger salamander dispersal. The Project will provide a safe dispersal opportunity for California tiger salamander, which would allow for genetic variation valuable to species recovery.

Procedures for the Protection of the Environment:

The following studies were performed during the Project planning phase, to inform the development of a Project-specific Natural Environmental Study (NES): protocol floristic surveys; mapping of vegetation and land cover types; delineation of waters of the United States and waters of the state; desktop review of natural resource databases; and reconnaissance-level wildlife surveys.

Caltrans prepared the NES to document their analysis of the effects of the Project on special-status species and habitats. The NES outlines measures that will be followed during Project implementation to avoid and minimize impacts on the environment. Avoidance and minimization measures include, but are not limited to:

- A worker environmental awareness training will be provided to Project personnel.
- Temporary fencing will be installed throughout the Project area to limit construction activities within and around environmentally sensitive areas.
- The overcrossing will be designed and constructed to avoid work within streams, as feasible. Activities within riparian areas will be limited to June 1 – October 31, unless otherwise coordinated with state and federal regulatory agencies.
- A Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan will be created prior to implementation of the Project. Areas of disturbance will be stabilized with mulch, hydroseed, fiber rolls, and other erosion control methods.
- Native vegetation will be preserved to the maximum extent feasible, though tree removal and trimming will be necessary to implement the Project. The species most likely to be affected by tree removal is non-native blue gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*). To compensate for impacts to vegetation, the Project will include revegetation with native species.
- Qualified biologists will conduct pre-construction surveys for wildlife, and will implement buffers, monitoring protocols, and relocation plans as necessary.

Ongoing Management for the Protection of the Environment:

Upon completion of the Project, monitoring will be performed to evaluate Project success. Revegetated areas will be routinely monitored to document plant establishment. Additional revegetation activities may be performed if monitoring results portray success criteria has not been or will not be met. Wildlife cameras will be installed to monitor wildlife utilization of the Project area. Additional monitoring and reporting may be necessary pursuant to Project-specific permits or approvals that will be acquired prior to implementation. The Project will be routinely inspected and maintained by Caltrans, 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 purpose is to restore habitat linkage. All construction activities, including any necessary maintenance activities, are solely related to this purpose. The Project does not include facilities or infrastructure intended to serve the public. All structures and facilities necessary for the Project will be without connection to any existing or future Caltrans projects. A pathway will be constructed on each side of the bridge to facilitate access for maintenance of the overcrossing and wildlife directional fencing. This access will not be available for the public.

Scope and Reservation of Concurrence

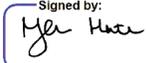
This Concurrence is based on the proposed Project as described by the Lead Agency Determination and the Request. If there are any subsequent changes to the Project that affect or otherwise change the Lead Agency Determination, the Lead Agency, or any other public agency that proposes to carry out or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

Signed by:
By:  _____
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Date: 3/25/2026

Meghan Hertel, Director
California Department of Fish and Wildlife