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CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT STATUTORY EXEMPTION FOR RESTORATION PROJECTS
CONCURRENCE NO. 21080.56-2026-107-R2

Project: Castle and Round Valley Meadows Restoration

Location: Nevada County

Lead Agency: Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board

Lead Agency Contact: Carter Cook; carter.cook@waterboards.ca.gov

Background

Project Location: The Castle and Round Valley Meadows Restoration (Project) is located within Nevada County, north of Interstate 80 Exit 176, near Donner Summit, and northeast of Soda Springs near the headwaters of the South Yuba River. The Project is a combined 270 acres and includes two noncontiguous meadows. The Castle Valley Meadow area is approximately 202 acres, centered at 39.3488191, -120.3551359, and can be accessed via the Castle Valley North Road. The Round Valley Meadow area is 68 acres and located about a kilometer north of the Castle Valley Meadow, at approximately 39.3703388, -120.3650558. The Round Valley Meadow may be accessed via the Pacific Crest Trail. The Project area is located within the Tahoe National Forest (TNF) and managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS).

Project Description: The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (Lead Agency), in partnership with South Yuba River Citizens League (SYRCL) 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 restore approximately 270 acres of meadow and meadow-edge habitat, including 7.32 miles of restored riparian habitat. As a result, the Project will directly contribute to the restoration and enhancement of suitable habitat for Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (SNYLF, *Rana sierrae*).

Assessment of the Project area has identified incised channels, formation of gullies, redirection/concentration of stream flows due to roads and Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) trails, conifer encroachment, historic grazing and logging impacts, and ditching. This has led to degradation of meadow function, such as erosion and aggradation, and compromised meadow and wetland hydrology. To address these impacts, the Project includes the following actions:

- Restoring meadow, wetland, and stream habitat by installing low-tech, hand-built

stream structures such as beaver dam analogs (BDAs) and post-assisted log structures (PALS) throughout incised channels in both meadows. These structures are designed to slow water, reconnect streams to their floodplains, reduce erosion and headcuts, spread water into remnant channels and swales, and raise groundwater levels to improve wet meadow conditions and aquatic habitat.

- Placing woody material and logs in gullies and channels to promote sediment deposition and channel recovery.

- Removing encroaching conifers to improve meadow and forest health.

- Repairing and upgrading existing roads and OHV trails with drainage features, such as rolling dips, water bars, low-water crossings, a culvert replacement, road rocking, and outsloping to reduce erosion and reconnect natural hydrology across the meadow system.

Following initial restoration activities, an adaptive management strategy will be implemented to ensure proper function of restoration features. Potential strategies include rebuilding and adding BDAs/PALS and repairing road and OHV trail features. The Project also includes post-restoration monitoring through 2035 to track expected benefits to surface water, groundwater, vegetation, and carbon storage.

Tribal Engagement: On December 22, 2025, January 26, 2026, and February 25, 2026, SYRCL emailed the Washoe Tribe of Nevada & California regarding the proposed Project to request comments and consultation. Then, on April 28, 2026, the Lead Agency emailed both the United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria and Wilton Rancheria to discuss the Project.

On March 31, 2026, a representative for the Washoe Tribe of Nevada & California responded by email to discuss the Project, and a follow-up meeting was held on April 23, 2026.

Interested Party Coordination: SYRCL has communicated regularly with TNF since the inception of the Project. On July 7, 2025, a site visit was conducted to discuss design and permit considerations with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), TNF, Swift Water Design, and SYRCL. The Lead Agency published a public notice of the 401 Water Quality Certification application pursuant to the California Code of Regulations, title 23, section 3858 from April 3, 2026, to April 24, 2026. TNF plans to conduct formal communications with the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA) to inform the organization of the Project and receive any concerns or requests that the PCTA may have about the Project.

Anticipated Project Implementation Timeframes: Start date: July 1, 2026
Completion date: December 31, 2035

Lead Agency Request for CDFW Concurrence: On May 1, 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 May 1, 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.

   The Project is designed to restore and enhance meadow and meadow-edge habitats in the South Yuba River watershed through stream channel restoration, conifer treatments, and road and OHV trail drainage improvements. Implementation of the 270-acre project will result in 98 acres of restored meadow habitat, 19 acres of healthy meadow-adjacent forest habitat, and 7.32 miles of restored riparian habitat. By

restoring hydrologic function at both meadows, the Project expects to increase habitat complexity and heterogeneity, ultimately improving wildlife habitat.

Meadow habitats in the Sierra Nevada are reliant upon surface and subsurface soil moisture; therefore, greater interannual variability of precipitation and increased temperatures associated with expected climate predictions are likely to increase vulnerability of sensitive habitats and the species that rely on them. By restoring hydrologic function at both meadows, the Project will increase habitat complexity and heterogeneity, ultimately improving quality, quantity, and resilience of wildlife habitat. Using BDAs and PALS to mimic natural processes, the Project is expected to prolong inundation and increase surface water and groundwater interactions. With increasing periods of drought, providing wet habitat for high elevation aquatic species and migratory birds, along with high quality forage for terrestrial wildlife, is increasingly important to support wildlife adaptation in a changing climate.

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 will not add any new public access or recreational features within the Project area, but it may have incidental recreational public benefits in the form of improved roads and OHV trails. The Project area is a popular year-round recreation area. Poor and dysfunctional road and OHV trail infrastructure is contributing to meadow habitat fragmentation, altered timing and location of water discharge to meadow habitat, and incised and eroded channels. To address these issues and improve hydrology and habitat conditions, the Project includes drainage improvements to roads and OHV trails. These restoration activities may also incidentally improve recreational opportunities by increasing road and trail stability and durability for future users.

As part of the restoration of the meadows, the Project includes removing encroaching conifers to improve meadow and forest health. According to the Lead Agency, removal of conifers may also have the incidental public benefit of reducing wildfire risk.

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: Wetland restoration has been identified as a key strategy for mitigating climate change, specifically by restoring hydrology, reducing emissions, and sequestering carbon. Wetland restoration actions reduce high flow events commonly associated with rain-on-snow and spring snowmelt events, which are expected to intensify under a changing climate. Summer or late season flow is anticipated to improve as a result of the Project delaying peak season flow and extending low flows later into the year. By restoring high-functioning wetland habitat and improving hydrologic function in the site, the Project will enhance habitat for

numerous plant and animal species. Restoration actions will also provide refuge for species needing wetter conditions in drought prone areas, both by expanding wetted habitat and by sustaining inflow later in the season. The restoration actions will ensure the persistence of migratory and seasonal movement corridors for species and may facilitate a shift in range in response to a warming climate by providing "steppingstone" transitional habitat between elevations that would improve population resiliency to climate change.

Long-term Net Benefits to Biodiversity: Meadows are commonly known as biodiversity hotspots, a habitat type with high biodiversity that has experienced significant loss due to human activity. Restoring the meadow and meadow-edge habitats in the Project area will produce an overall net benefit to the biodiversity of the region. The Project area has also witnessed significant conifer encroachment in part due to disrupted hydrologic processes. The Project will increase and enhance biodiversity by removing encroaching conifers, preventing further conifer encroachment, and supporting riparian vegetation re-growth. The Project will achieve net benefits to biodiversity by restoring hydrologic function within these meadows and improving the complexity and quality of wetland habitat, thus allowing for the natural increase of species presence over time, including willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*), garter snake (*Thamnophis sp.*), and Sierran treefrog (*Pseudacris sierra*), as well as many nesting and foraging birds.

Long-term Net Benefits to Sensitive Species Recovery: By restoring hydrologic function, the Project will increase habitat complexity and heterogeneity, ultimately improving amphibian species habitat. Restoration actions will result in a mosaic of wet habitats, offering a variety of water depth and temperature, and providing suitable habitat for various aquatic sensitive species, including SNYLF (listed as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act [CESA] and endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act [ESA]), Sierra Nevada red fox (*Vulpes vulpes necator* pop. 2), wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), listed as threatened under ESA and CESA, and Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis*) (listed as threatened under ESA). These species are regionally present and are expected to benefit from habitat heterogeneity and stream system expansion. Additionally, the Project has the potential to benefit several sensitive species that rely on meadow and meadow-edge habitat for their lifecycle, such as great gray owl (*Strix nebulosa*), listed as endangered under CESA, greater sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis tabida*), listed as threatened under CESA, and fringed myotis (*Myotis thysanodes*) and pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*), CDFW Species of Special Concern.

Procedures for the Protection of the Environment: The Project includes comprehensive environmental protection and monitoring measures to ensure construction activities do not negatively impact water quality, natural resources, or sensitive species. Water quality monitoring will follow a plan approved by the Lead Agency, while Project design criteria developed by USFS specialists and partners will ensure compliance with the Tahoe National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and other environmental regulations. Protective measures include avoiding sensitive botanical and cultural resources, preventing the spread of invasive species through equipment cleaning and weed-free materials, implementing erosion and sediment control best management

practices, stabilizing disturbed areas, properly managing hazardous materials, and restoring temporary access routes and staging areas after construction.

The following are a sampling of a broader suite of the Project's comprehensive protective measures:

- Prior to ground disturbance, environmental awareness training will be given to all construction personnel by the Project biologist to brief them on how to recognize SNYLF and other sensitive aquatic species with potential to occur within the Project area. Personnel will be made aware of the measures that will avoid potential impacts and what to do if a SNYLF is encountered.

- If SNYLF is encountered, personnel will stop all activities in the surrounding area that may have the potential to result in the harassment, injury, or death. A USFS Biologist or USFWS approved biologist shall be notified before work resumes and the situation will be assessed in order to select a course of action that will minimize adverse effects to the individual. Work that may affect SNYLF will not be resumed until Section 7 consultation is completed. Only permitted USFS or USFWS biologists may handle, capture, or move the listed amphibian.

- All equipment (e.g., field gear, pumps) used in a water body during Project implementation shall be inspected and free of invasive species prior to implementation. Equipment will be disinfected after exiting one aquatic habitat and before entering the next aquatic habitat, unless the waters are hydrologically connected to one another. Equipment should be free of all soil and plant material and should be dried prior to moving to a different riparian area.

- All water drafting vehicles will be checked and repaired as necessary to prevent leaks of petroleum products from entering water. Any petroleum spill into water will be immediately contained and reported to USFS dispatch. Operators of water drafting vehicles will have access to petroleum spill kits and training in effective spill kit deployment. Absorbent pads will be disposed of in accordance with a Hazardous Response Plan approved by the USFS.

Additional Project requirements focus on minimizing impacts to recreation, wildlife, and aquatic habitats. Wildlife protections include seasonal restrictions on construction activities, nesting bird surveys, species-specific buffers, and limited operating periods around active nests or dens. Aquatic resource protections emphasize safeguards for the SNYLF and other sensitive species through worker training, habitat restoration, spill prevention, invasive species controls, careful water drafting procedures, and seasonal restrictions on ground disturbance near riparian areas and breeding habitat.

Ongoing Management for the Protection of the Environment: SYRCL, TNF, and the University of Nevada Reno will complete monitoring of the following Project attributes through 2032 to track expected benefits to surface water, groundwater, vegetation,

carbon storage, and pool and frog habitat features. Long-term monitoring of hydrology and plant data will continue through 2035.

A Project monitoring plan has been developed. Results will be analyzed to evaluate Project effectiveness. The Project is designed to result in a self-sustaining wetland and meadow ecosystem that requires little human intervention over a 25-to-50-year time frame. Adaptive management is often necessary in even the most effective restoration projects to ensure that projects meet objectives and goals. Large storm events, fires, unauthorized recreation activities, and poorly managed grazing practices can cause damage that would require additional actions to ensure the Project is functioning as desired. Through 2035, SYRCL and TNF are committed to implementing long-term Project monitoring and adaptive management to ensure the efficacy of the low-tech process-based Project installations over time. This monitoring and adaptive management will be funded by Earthwatch and other foundational grants. Beyond 2035, TNF will implement Project monitoring for at least 25 years.

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 are solely related to habitat restoration. All stream channel restoration work will be done by hand, using loppers, shovels, chainsaws, grip hoist, man-portable hydraulic post driver or non-mechanized post pounders to build BDAs and PALS; and a 500cc ATV and a 5x8 foot trailer may be used to transport building materials and tools.

Conifers will be removed in designated treatment areas using hand and mechanized equipment including, but not limited to, feller bunchers, chippers, chainsaws, tracked and rubber-tired machinery, and other typical ground-based logging machinery. Conifers will be chipped and left on site by broadcasting chips on the ground. Trees may be felled by hand and placed on slopes and channels to reduce stream velocity and erosion and aggrade mobilized sediment.

Improvements to address the hydrologic concerns of existing OHV trails will include adding and bolstering water bars and rolling dips, outsloping the road surface to promote sheet flow water rather than concentrated flow, adding low water crossings, replacing a failing culvert, raising the road surface with rock to allow water to flow through it, and lining the road with logs and rocks to keep vehicles on the road surface and protect natural resources. Equipment used for these improvements will include various sizes of excavators to create and shape road drainage features, hand and plate compactors to compact roadbed material where necessary, and haul trucks to transport rock fill material.

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

Signed by:
By: 19042A1B72454D8... _____ Date: 6/9/2026

Meghan Hertel, Director
California Department of Fish and Wildlife