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CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
DIRECTOR'S OFFICE
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CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY ACT STATUTORY EXEMPTION FOR RESTORATION PROJECTS
CONCURRENCE NO. 21080.56-2026-110-R4

Project: Reds Meadow Valley Restoration Project

Location: Madera County

Lead Agency: Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board

Lead Agency Contact: Brandon Salazar; Brandon.Salazar@waterboards.ca.gov

Background

Project Location: The Reds Meadow Valley Restoration Project (Project) includes multiple work sites within Inyo National Forest (INF), encompassing 83 acres, along approximately six miles of the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin River, in Reds Meadow Valley, Madera County, California. The center coordinate of each work site is depicted below in Table 1.

Table 1. Center Coordinates of Each Work Site and Project Element.

Work Site	Center Coordinate	Element
Agnew Meadows	37.68145, -119.08856	1
Reds Meadow	37.61923, -119.07269	1
Agnew Meadows Riparian Conservation Area (RCA) and Campground	37.68219, -119.08979	2
River Trail Parking Area	37.68203, -119.08651	2
Soda Springs RCA and Campground	37.65332, -119.07774	2
Pumice Flat RCA and Campground	37.64853, -119.07471	2
Pumice Flat RCA and Group Campground	37.64482, -119.07384	2
Minaret Falls RCA and Campground	37.63974, -119.08389	2
Reds Meadow RCA and Campground	37.61908, -119.07551	2

Project Description: The JMT Wilderness Conservancy (Project Proponent) 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 enhance and restore up to 70 (net) acres of wet meadow, fen, and riparian habitat (collectively, sensitive

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habitats) within the upper watersheds of the Middle Fork San Joaquin River. The Project includes Element 1 and Element 2, which will occur within various work sites and on separate schedules.

Element 1 consists of:

- Installation of low-tech process-based restoration (LTPBR) structures, such as beaver dam analogues and post-assisted-log structures, within approximately 6,200 linear feet of perennial stream, to arrest headcuts, aggrade sediment, and slow and spread water within sensitive habitats;
- Removal of conifers encroaching within meadow habitat, to reduce transpiration demand;
- Thinning of vegetation in the watershed above each meadow, to increase flow and promote aspen recruitment;
- Using traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) techniques, such as cultural burning, to further manage vegetation and reduce conifer incursions;
- Installation of wildlife-friendly fencing around two fens, to prevent impacts from stock grazing;
- Topographic recontouring, to restore disturbed habitat and establish slopes appropriate for each habitat type;
- Revegetation with locally native plant species via seeding and planting of plugs, live stakes, and container plants, to facilitate active recovery of sensitive habitats; and
- Adaptive management activities, such as installation of additional LTPBR structures or alterations to LTPBR structures, to support the achievement of Project goals.

Element 2 consists of:

- Relocation and restoration of recreational facilities (such as campsites, campsite roads, and parking areas) outside of sensitive habitats;
- Reorganization and delineation of facilities to reduce public and vehicular impacts to restored and existing sensitive habitats;
- Topographic recontouring, to restore disturbed habitat and establish slopes appropriate for each habitat type;
- Upgrading of culverts or replacement with low-water crossings, to improve flow conveyance capacity;
- Revegetation with locally native plant species via seeding and planting of plugs, live stakes, and container plants, to facilitate active recovery of sensitive habitats;
- Thinning of vegetation in sensitive habitats, to minimize the density of riparian stands and conifer encroachment; and
- Renovation of a campground access road that bisects Reds Meadow, to improve hydrologic connectivity between the upper and lower meadow.

Tribal Engagement: The Project Proponent contracted the services of the North Fork Mono Tribe (Tribe) to conduct botanical and archaeological resource assessments at the Project site, which were completed in September of 2024. The Tribe also assisted in the development of restoration treatment maps for Reds Meadow and Agnew Meadows. The Tribe may also participate in the implementation of the Project, by conducting habitat restoration techniques founded on TEK.

Docusign Envelope ID: 65295A80-16F7-85B3-829B-E1D919939C26

Interested Party Coordination: The Project Proponent has conducted outreach and coordination with the following interested parties: INF; California National Resources Agency; Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (Lead Agency); Whitebark Institute; Mammoth Lakes Tourism; Sierra Meadows Partnership; Trout Unlimited; and the California Process Based Restoration Network. The Project Proponent intends to also engage with the following interested parties before Project implementation: Mono County Board of Supervisors; Inyo County Board of Supervisors; Madera County Board of Supervisors; Town of Mammoth Lakes; City of Bishop; City of Madera; The Yosemite Conservancy; Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access; and Friends of the Inyo.

Anticipated Project Implementation Timeframes: Start date: Summer 2027
Completion date: Fall 2032

Lead Agency Request for CDFW Concurrence: On September 25, 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 September 24, 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

Docusign Envelope ID: 65295A80-16F7-85B3-829B-E1D919939C26

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.

   The purpose of the Project is to restore habitat within Reds Meadow Valley, and benefit California native wildlife endemic to the alpine regions of the Sierra Nevada. Conifer removal and thinning will expand meadow habitat, while LTPBR structures and topographic recontouring will restore and enhance the hydrological function of sensitive habitats so they better retain water and store carbon. Relocated and delineated recreational facilities will prevent public disturbance to restored areas and other sensitive habitats, which will decrease soil compaction and vegetation trampling. Enhanced drainage will prevent erosion within sensitive habitats and minimize sediment delivery downstream. Revegetation will establish native plant communities that are appropriate for the habitat type associated with each work site. These activities will ultimately improve the quality of habitat for wildlife, by retaining moisture for a longer period of time, enhancing water quality, and bolstering native biodiversity.

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.

   While the exclusive purpose of the Project is the restoration of habitat within Reds Meadow Valley, the Project will result in incidental public benefits. These incidental public benefits are largely associated with the removal (decommissioning) of existing recreational facilities, such as campgrounds and parking areas from within sensitive habitats, and the relocation of recreational facilities outside of sensitive habitats. Thus, the Project will maintain and enhance public access and recreation while restoring and enhancing meadow habitats. The Project is not intended to expand upon existing recreational opportunities; for example, the Project will result in four fewer campsites than originally existed, and the River Trail Parking Area will have a 15% reduction in size.

   The public is expected to experience the following incidental public benefits:
   - Facilities will experience less inundation, ensuring they remain useable for public visitors;
   - Facilities will require less maintenance;
   - Facilities will be delineated, to improve public access and safety, and protect the aesthetics of the meadow; and
   - Facilities will be upgraded with more durable, sustainable materials, prolonging the life of those facilities.

Docusign Envelope ID: 65295A80-16F7-85B3-829B-E1D919939C26

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 aims to retain moisture within meadows for longer periods of time, therefore improving water storage capacity, enhancing groundwater recharge, and promoting fire resilience. The Project includes the removal of vegetation and thinning of conifers, which will reduce fuel load; and revegetation, which will establish fire resistant native vegetation. The lush meadow and riparian corridor will offer refugia for wildlife during fires and climate change-driven temperature and weather fluctuations. Additionally, the decommissioning and relocation of recreational facilities outside of sensitive habitats will preserve and protect the climate resiliency benefits established by the Project by preventing anthropogenic degradation and confining recreational uses to more durable terrain.

Long-term Net Benefits to Biodiversity: The riparian corridors and meadows of the alpine regions of the Sierra Nevada host a diversity of native amphibians, mammals, birds, invertebrates, and plants. However, the Project currently contains riparian corridors and meadows degraded by conifer encroachment, anthropogenic modification, overgrazing, and fire suppression. By restoring, protecting, and adaptively managing these habitats, the Project will offer increased water and light availability and opportunities for improved forage and refuge, which will promote species diversity and richness.

Long-term Net Benefits to Sensitive Species Recovery: The Project site occurs within the range of, and in close proximity to, federally-designated final critical habitat for Yosemite toad (*Anaxyrus canorus*), a species listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) and a CDFW Species of Special Concern (SSC), and the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog (*Rana sierrae*), a species listed as endangered under the ESA and threatened under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). The Project will provide physical or biological features essential to the conservation of the species, which will support their expansion into suitable habitat for breeding, overwintering, and foraging.

The Project is expected to provide enhanced foraging opportunities for special-status avian species, including alpine inhabitants, summer breeders, and upslope migrants, such as the American goshawk (*Astur atricapillus*), a CDFW SSC, and the great gray owl (*Strix nebulosa*), a species listed as endangered under CESA.

The Project may also support the natural recruitment of Bolander's woodreed (*Cinna bolanderi*), a species designated with a California Rare Plant Rank of 1B.2 by the California Native Plant Society, due to its association with wet meadow habitat. The species occurs within Reds Meadow Valley but has not yet been documented at the Project site.

Docusign Envelope ID: 65295A80-16F7-85B3-829B-E1D919939C26

Procedures for the Protection of the Environment: The Project Proponent will implement various measures prior to and during the Project to avoid and minimize impacts on the environment. Measures include, but are not limited to, environmental awareness training for all Project personnel, pre-work surveys to identify sensitive resources, biological monitoring, and avoidance buffering around sensitive resources. Work will be restricted to various windows to minimize impacts on wildlife during critical life stage periods, and additional species-specific measures will be implemented as necessary. Disturbed areas will be stabilized with erosion control materials and revegetated with native species as appropriate. Prior to implementation of the Project, the Project Proponent will secure all local, state, and federal permits that may be necessary for the Project and will comply with the conditions of those permits. Permits may include, but not be limited to: State Water Resources Control Board Order for Clean Water Act Section 401 Water Quality Certification and Waste Discharge Requirements for Restoration Projects Statewide (Order No. WQ 2022-0048-DWQ); Programmatic Biological and Conference Opinion California Statewide Programmatic Restoration Effort (Service file No. 2022-0005149-S7), on the Statewide Programmatic Biological Assessment for Restoration: Multi-Agency Implementation of Aquatic, Riparian, Floodplain and Wetland Restoration Projects to Benefit Fish and Wildlife in California; and CDFW's Restoration Management Permit.

Ongoing Management for the Protection of the Environment: The Project Proponent will monitor the Project with methodologies outlined in the 2022 Sierra Meadow Partnership's *Sierra Meadows Wetland and Riparian Area Monitoring Plan* and Trout Unlimited's 2025 *Process Based Restoration Handbook*. Additionally, the Project will be monitored in a manner consistent with the Project Proponent's *Meadow Monitoring and Stewardship Plan*, and the 2019 INF *Land Management Plan for the Inyo National Forest*. Monitoring may include, but not be limited to, drone flights to measure Normalized Difference Vegetation Index and Normalized Difference Water Index; photographs to compare pre-Project and post-Project conditions; and site visits to collect data with field instruments. An Adaptive Management Plan will be provided to INF staff for approval before implementation each year, and annual reports will be provided to INF. Recreational features will be maintained by INF staff for public use, in a manner consistent with Project goals. Long-term recreational feature maintenance is outside of the Project scope.

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 use of heavy equipment and vehicles will be necessary to implement some Project activities, including, but not limited to, tree and vegetation removal; campground road decompaction and renovation; campsite removal and relocation; and campsite delineation. All other Project activities will be implemented with hand operated tools.

Docusign Envelope ID: 65295A80-16F7-85B3-829B-E1D919939C26

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

By: Signed by: 19042A1B72454D8... Date: 11/4/2026

Meghan Hertel, Director
California Department of Fish and Wildlife