



State of California – Natural Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
South Coast Region
3883 Ruffin Road
San Diego, CA 92123
(858) 467-4201
www.wildlife.ca.gov

GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor
CHARLTON H. BONHAM, Director



April 8, 2019

Governor's Office of Planning & Research

Bronwyn Brown
County of San Diego Planning and Development Services
5510 Overland Avenue, Suite 310
San Diego, CA 92123
Bronwyn.Brown@sdcountry.ca.gov

APR 08 2019

STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

Subject: Comments on the Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the JVR Energy Park Project SCH# 2019039044

Dear Ms. Brown:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) has reviewed the above-referenced Notice of Preparation (NOP) for the JVR Energy Park Project Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding those activities involved in the Project that may affect California fish and wildlife. Likewise, we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments regarding those aspects of the Project that the Department, by law, may be required to carry out or approve through the exercise of its own regulatory authority under the Fish and Game Code.

DEPARTMENT ROLE

The Department is California's Trustee Agency for fish and wildlife resources and holds those resources in trust by statute for all the people of the State. (Fish & G. Code, §§ 711.7, subd. (a) & 1802; Pub. Resources Code, § 21070; California Environmental Quality Act [CEQA] Guidelines § 15386, subd. (a).) The Department, in its trustee capacity, has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species. (*Id.*, § 1802.) Similarly, for purposes of CEQA, the Department is charged by law to provide, as available, biological expertise during public agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect fish and wildlife resources.

The Department is also a Responsible Agency under CEQA. (Pub. Resources Code, § 21069; CEQA Guidelines, § 15381.) The Department may need to exercise regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code. As proposed, for example, the Project may be subject to the Department's lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority. (Fish & G. Code, § 1600 et seq.) Likewise, to the extent implementation of the Project as proposed may result in "take" as defined by State law of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) (Fish & G. Code, § 2050 et seq.), related authorization as provided by the Fish and Game Code will be required.

The Department also administers the Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) program. The County of San Diego (County) participates in the NCCP program by implementing its approved Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) and the planning agreement for the draft East County Plan of which the Mountain Empire Subregional Plan is a part.

Conserving California's Wildlife Since 1870

Project Location:

The 1,345-acre project site is located in the unincorporated Mountain Empire Subregion of the County. The site is adjacent to the community of Jacumba Hot Springs and the Jacumba Airport, and to the south of Interstate 8 (I-8). The U.S./Mexico international border is located along the southern boundary of the Project site. Primary access would be provided from I-8 with local access from Carrizo Gorge Road and Old Highway 80.

Project Description/Objective:

The JVR Energy Project would entail the operation and construction of a 90-megawatt (MW) solar energy facility and a 20-MW energy storage system. The Project would include approximately 300,000 photovoltaic modules on single axis trackers, an underground electrical collection system, a substation, an overhead gen-tie line, and access roads. The development footprint of the proposed facilities would be approximately 691 acres. The Project would require a General Plan Amendment, a Rezone, and a Major Use Permit. Eventual decommissioning would occur at the end of the Project's useful life. The site previously included agricultural operations.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department offers the following comments and recommendations to assist the County in adequately identifying and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife (biological) resources.

1. The Department has responsibility for wetland and riparian habitats. It is the policy of the Department to strongly discourage development in wetlands or conversion of wetlands to uplands. We oppose any development or conversion that would result in a reduction of wetland acreage or wetland habitat values, unless, at a minimum, project mitigation assures there will be "no net loss" of either wetland habitat values or acreage. Development and conversion include but are not limited to conversion to subsurface drains, placement of fill or building of structures within the wetland, and channelization or removal of materials from the streambed. All wetlands and watercourses, whether ephemeral, intermittent, or perennial, should be retained and provided with substantial setbacks that preserve the riparian and aquatic values and maintain their value to on-site and off-site wildlife populations. Mitigation measures to compensate for impacts to mature riparian corridors must be included in the DEIR and must compensate for the loss of function and value of a wildlife corridor.
 - a) The project area supports aquatic, riparian, and wetland habitats; therefore, a jurisdictional delineation of the creeks and their associated riparian habitats should be included in the DEIR. The delineation should be conducted pursuant to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service wetland definition adopted by the Department.¹ Please note that some wetland and riparian habitats subject to the Department's authority may extend beyond the jurisdictional limits of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

¹ Cowardin, Lewis M., et al. 1979. Classification of Wetlands and Deepwater Habitats of the United States. U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service.

- b) The Department also has regulatory authority over activities in streams and/or lakes that will divert or obstruct the natural flow, or change the bed, channel, or bank (which may include associated riparian resources) of any river, stream, or lake or use material from a river, stream, or lake. For any such activities, the project applicant (or "entity") must provide written notification to the Department pursuant to section 1600 *et seq.* of the Fish and Game Code. Based on this notification and other information, the Department determines whether a Lake and Streambed Alteration Agreement (LSAA) with the applicant is required prior to conducting the proposed activities. The Department's issuance of a LSAA for a project that is subject to CEQA will require CEQA compliance actions by the Department as a Responsible Agency. The Department as a Responsible Agency under CEQA may consider the local jurisdiction's (lead agency) Negative Declaration or Environmental Impact Report for the project. To minimize additional requirements by the Department pursuant to section 1600 *et seq.* and/or under CEQA, the document should fully identify the potential impacts to the stream or riparian resources and provide adequate avoidance, mitigation, monitoring and reporting commitments for issuance of the LSAA.²
2. The Department considers adverse impacts to a species protected by the California Endangered Species Act (CESA), for the purposes of CEQA, to be significant without mitigation. As to CESA, take of any endangered, threatened, or candidate species that results from the project is prohibited, except as authorized by state law (Fish & G. Code, §§ 2080, 2085). Consequently, if the Project, Project construction, or any Project-related activity during the life of the Project will result in take of a species designated as endangered or threatened, or a candidate for listing under CESA, the Department recommends that the project proponent seek appropriate take authorization under CESA prior to implementing the project. Appropriate authorization from the Department may include an incidental take permit (ITP) or a consistency determination in certain circumstances, among other options (Fish and G. Code §§ 2080.1, 2081, subds. (b),(c)). Early consultation is encouraged, as significant modification to a project and mitigation measures may be required in order to obtain a CESA Permit. Revisions to the Fish and Game Code, effective January 1998, may require that the Department issue a separate CEQA document for the issuance of an ITP unless the project CEQA document addresses all project impacts to CESA-listed species and specifies a mitigation monitoring and reporting program that will meet the requirements of an ITP. For these reasons, biological mitigation monitoring and reporting proposals should be of sufficient detail and resolution to satisfy the requirements for a CESA ITP.
 3. To enable the Department to adequately review and comment on the proposed project from the standpoint of the protection of plants, fish, and wildlife, we recommend the following information be included in the DEIR.

² A notification package for a LSA may be obtained by accessing the Department's web site at <http://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/LSA>.

- a) The document should contain a complete discussion of the purpose and need for, and description of, the proposed project, including all staging areas, collector systems, substation(s), battery energy storage systems, gen-tie lines, and access routes to the construction and staging areas.
- b) A range of feasible alternatives should be included to ensure that alternatives to the proposed project are fully considered and evaluated; the alternatives should avoid or otherwise minimize impacts to sensitive biological resources, particularly wetlands. Specific alternative locations should be evaluated in areas with lower resource sensitivity where appropriate.

Biological Resources within the Project's Area of Potential Effect

4. The document should provide a complete assessment of the flora and fauna within and adjacent to the project area, with particular emphasis upon identifying endangered, threatened, sensitive, and locally unique species and sensitive habitats. This should include a complete floral and faunal species compendium of the entire project site, undertaken at the appropriate time of year. The DEIR should include the following information.
 - a) CEQA Guidelines, section 15125(c), specifies that knowledge on the regional setting is critical to an assessment of environmental impacts and that special emphasis should be placed on resources that are rare or unique to the region.
 - b) A thorough, recent floristic-based assessment of special status plants and natural communities, following the Department's Protocols for Surveying and Evaluating Impacts to Special Status Native Plant Populations and Natural Communities (see <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Plants/Info>). The Department recommends that floristic, alliance-based and/or association-based mapping and vegetation impact assessments be conducted at the Project site and neighboring vicinity. The Manual of California Vegetation, second edition, should also be used to inform this mapping and assessment (Sawyer et al. 20083). Adjoining habitat areas should be included in this assessment where site activities could lead to direct or indirect impacts off-site. Habitat mapping at the alliance level will help establish baseline vegetation conditions.
 - c) A current inventory of the biological resources associated with each habitat type on site and within the area of potential effect. The Department's California Natural Diversity Data Base in Sacramento should be contacted at www.wildlife.ca.gov/biogeodata/ to obtain current information on any previously reported sensitive species and habitat, including Significant Natural Areas identified under Chapter 12 of the Fish and Game Code.
 - d) An inventory of rare, threatened, endangered and other sensitive species on site and within the area of potential effect. Species to be addressed should include all those which meet the CEQA definition (see CEQA Guidelines, § 15380). This should include

3 Sawyer, J. O., T. Keeler-Wolf and J.M. Evens. 2009. A Manual of California Vegetation, Second Edition. California Native Plant Society Press, Sacramento.

sensitive fish, wildlife, reptile, and amphibian species. Seasonal variations in use of the project area should also be addressed. Focused species-specific surveys, conducted at the appropriate time of year and time of day when the sensitive species are active or otherwise identifiable, are required. Acceptable species-specific survey procedures should be developed in consultation with the Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Analyses of the Potential Project-Related Impacts on the Biological Resources

5. To provide a thorough discussion of direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts expected to adversely affect biological resources, with specific measures to offset such impacts, the following should be addressed in the DEIR.
 - a) A Planning Agreement for the North and East County Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP; Planning Agreement) plans between the County, the Department, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was executed on May 16, 2014. The Planning Agreement guides the planning and preparation of both MSCP plans including, among other criteria, defining the parties' goals and commitments, defining the scope of the conservation planning areas and establishing an interim project review process intended to meet the preliminary conservation objectives and preserve options.

The Project is adjacent to an East County MSCP Focused Conservation Area. The Department recommends that the DEIR analyze the location, design, and compliance with the guidance provided in the Planning Agreement's Interim Review Process to facilitate the successful implementation of the Proposed Project and MSCP Plans.

- b) A discussion of potential adverse impacts from lighting, including polarized light reflected from the solar facility, noise, human activity, exotic species, and drainage should also be included. The latter subject should address: project-related changes on drainage patterns on and downstream of the project site; the volume, velocity, and frequency of existing and post-project surface flows; polluted runoff; soil erosion and/or sedimentation in streams and water bodies; and post-project fate of runoff from the project site. The discussions should also address the proximity of the extraction activities to the water table, whether dewatering would be necessary, and the potential resulting impacts on the habitat, if any, supported by the groundwater. Mitigation measures proposed to alleviate such impacts should be included.
 - c) Discussions regarding indirect project impacts on biological resources, including resources in nearby public lands, open space, adjacent natural habitats, riparian ecosystems, and any designated and/or proposed or existing reserve lands (e.g., preserve lands associated with a NCCP). The Project is adjacent to several conserved mitigation lands, Bureau of Land Management land and Anza Borrego Desert State Park. The DEIR should fully evaluate potential direct and indirect project impacts to wildlife corridor/movement areas, including impacts due to changes in human and vehicular access to undisturbed habitats in adjacent areas.
 - d) The zoning of areas for development projects or other uses that are nearby or adjacent to natural areas may inadvertently contribute to wildlife-human interactions. A discussion of possible conflicts and mitigation measures to reduce these conflicts should be included in the environmental document.

- e) A cumulative effects analysis should be developed as described under CEQA Guidelines, section 15130. General and specific plans, as well as past, present, and anticipated future projects, should be analyzed relative to their impacts on similar plant communities and wildlife habitats.

Mitigation for the Project-related Biological Impacts

6. The DEIR should include measures to fully avoid and otherwise protect Rare Natural Communities from project-related impacts. The Department considers these communities as threatened habitats having both regional and local significance.
7. The DEIR should include mitigation measures for adverse project-related impacts to sensitive plants, animals, and habitats. Mitigation measures should emphasize avoidance and reduction of project impacts. For unavoidable impacts, on-site habitat restoration or enhancement should be discussed in detail. If on-site mitigation is not feasible or would not be biologically viable and therefore not adequately mitigate the loss of biological functions and values, off-site mitigation through habitat creation and/or acquisition and preservation in perpetuity should be addressed.
8. For proposed preservation and/or restoration, the DEIR should include measures to perpetually protect the targeted habitat values from direct and indirect negative impacts. The objective should be to offset the project-induced qualitative and quantitative losses of wildlife habitat values. Issues that should be addressed include restrictions on access, proposed land dedications, monitoring and management programs, control of illegal dumping, water pollution, increased human intrusion, etc.
9. The Department recommends that measures be taken to avoid project impacts to nesting birds. Migratory nongame native bird species are protected by international treaty under the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) of 1918 (Title 50, § 10.13, Code of Federal Regulations. Sections 3503.5 and 3513 of the California Fish and Game Code prohibit take of all raptors and other migratory nongame birds and section 3503 prohibits take of the nests and eggs of all birds. Proposed project activities (including, but not limited to, staging and disturbances to native and nonnative vegetation, structures, and substrates) should occur outside of the avian breeding season which generally runs from February 1- September 1 (as early as January 1 for some raptors) to avoid take of birds or their eggs. If avoidance of the avian breeding season is not feasible, the Department recommends surveys by a qualified biologist with experience in conducting breeding bird surveys to detect protected native birds occurring in suitable nesting habitat that is to be disturbed and (as access to adjacent areas allows) any other such habitat within 300 feet of the disturbance area (within 500 feet for raptors). Project personnel, including all contractors working on site, should be instructed on the sensitivity of the area. Reductions in the nest buffer distance may be appropriate depending on the avian species involved, ambient levels of human activity, screening vegetation, or possibly other factors.
10. The Department generally does not support the use of relocation, salvage, and/or transplantation as mitigation for impacts to rare, threatened, or endangered species. Studies have shown that these efforts are experimental in nature and largely unsuccessful.

Bronwyn Brown
County of San Diego Planning and Development Services
April 8, 2019
Page 7 of 7

11. Plans for restoration and revegetation should be prepared by persons with expertise in southern California ecosystems and native plant revegetation techniques. Each plan should include, at a minimum: (a) the location of the mitigation site; (b) the plant species to be used, container sizes, and seeding rates; (c) a schematic depicting the mitigation area; (d) planting schedule; (e) a description of the irrigation methodology; (f) measures to control exotic vegetation on site; (g) specific success criteria; (h) a detailed monitoring program; (i) contingency measures should the success criteria not be met; and (j) identification of the party responsible for meeting the success criteria and providing for conservation of the mitigation site in perpetuity.

CONCLUSION

The Department appreciates the opportunity to comment on the NOP to assist the County in identifying and mitigating Project impacts on biological resources. Questions regarding this letter or further coordination should be directed to Eric Hollenbeck, Senior Environmental Scientist Specialist at (858) 467-2720 or Eric.Hollenbeck@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,



Gail K. Sevens
Environmental Program Manager

ec: Office of Planning and Research, State Clearinghouse, Sacramento
Eric Porter, USFWS

