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**NOTICE OF PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT AND
NOTICE OF SCOPING MEETING FOR
BUTTE COUNTY – USDA ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH INSPECTION SERVICE -
WILDLIFE SERVICES COOPERATIVE SERVICE AGREEMENT**

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that BUTTE COUNTY as Lead Agency pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) has prepared a Notice of Preparation (NOP) for an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the following project: Butte County – USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service Wildlife Services Cooperative Service Agreement (proposed project).

Project Location and Setting:

The proposed project is located in Butte County, which is in north-central California at the northern end of the Sacramento Valley, approximately 70 miles north of Sacramento (Figure 1). The county occupies approximately 1,680 square miles, of which approximately 1,636 square miles is land area. Nearly 1,400 square miles of the county consists of lands not under federal or state or other public agency jurisdiction or management. Portions of the Plumas and Lassen National Forests (approximately 212 square miles) are in the county and comprise approximately 13 percent of the county's land area. The county contains a variety of habitats that support many common and special-status wildlife species.

Project Background and Overview:

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service-Wildlife Services (APHIS-WS) has an existing integrated wildlife damage management (IWDM) program that it implements throughout California and the rest of the United States to selectively remove individual animals that are non-native or cause damage to property, infrastructure, agricultural or livestock commodities, and public health and safety. The IWDM program does not seek to eradicate any species, regardless of legal status, or result in take that would substantially reduce species populations. APHIS-WS does not target certain species for reduction. For most wildlife damage management, once a damage situation is resolved, APHIS-WS Wildlife Specialists do not continue to remove additional animals unless a problem reoccurs, there are historical problems, and/or an additional request for assistance is made. Removal of animals by lethal methods is only used when other methods of control are not practical or have not been successful. Nonlethal methods are also used or may be recommended to a resource owner or manager.

The IWDM program in Butte County is implemented through a cost-share agreement (CSA) with USDA APHIS-WS, and is subject to Board of Supervisors' approval. Butte County has continuously maintained the IWDM program in its current form with APHIS-WS since at least 1939, with sporadic records for earlier years going back to 1924. It is implemented throughout Butte County, including incorporated cities. The latest annual Board-approved CSA is for fiscal year 2020-2021.

The APHIS-WS Wildlife Specialist(s) provide technical assistance only upon request to resource owners or managers. Technical assistance includes providing technical advice/assistance to resource owners on prevention and/or control techniques; informing and educating interested individuals on how to prevent and reduce wildlife damage on their own; investigating wildlife damage situations to determine the responsible species and evaluate the incident for applicability of prevention and/or control methods; and responding to incidents where wildlife species are threatening public health and safety. In the last 10 years, APHIS-WS performed approximately 1,400 technical assistance activities per year. Some of the response activities resulted in the removal by lethal methods of some common wildlife species that the Wildlife Specialist determined were responsible for agricultural losses or had caused damage to property (e.g., infrastructure) where such damage posed a risk to public safety. Common wildlife mammal species removed in the greatest numbers on an annual basis between 2010 and 2019, the period for which most recent annual data are available, include American beaver (approximately 76 per year), coyote (approximately 11 per year), raccoon (approximately 64 per year), and striped skunk (approximately 200 per year). Some black bear and mountain lion were also removed, but fewer than the aforementioned species (6 per year and 4 per year, respectively). Mountain lion is a specially protected species and may only be taken with a depredation permit from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Beaver removals were associated with damage to infrastructure for water conveyance and flood protection systems, which are not preferred beaver habitat. APHIS-WS does not remove beaver dams, lodges, or dens. During the last 10 years, some birds were removed. Pigeon, European starling, and brown-headed cowbird were removed in greatest number (a few thousand), and less than 250 blackbirds were taken. No threatened and endangered mammal or avian species were removed.

Project Objective:

The overall goal of the proposed project is to ensure that wildlife damage management in Butte County for purposes of protecting agricultural resources, public health and safety, and property is performed in a biologically sound, environmentally safe, and accountable manner and in accordance with applicable federal and state laws and regulations.

Project Description:

The proposed project is the ongoing implementation of the IWDM program throughout Butte County for fiscal year 2021-2022 (as operated by APHIS-WS and approved by signature of the CSA) to assist property owners, ranchers, farmers, businesses, private citizens, and local agencies in resolving wildlife damage problems. Activities performed under the IWDM program would be implemented by APHIS-WS Wildlife Specialists in accordance with the regulations, standards, and guidelines of the IWDM program, including its Wildlife Services (WS) Policy Manual, Directives, and standard operating procedures.

Under the proposed project, IWDM services would be provided solely by APHIS-WS personnel and only at the request of the resource owner or manager. As with previous and existing CSAs, Butte County would not decide whether a resource owner or manager should receive assistance, nor would the County be materially involved in conducting any of the IWDM technical assistance efforts or measures to control wildlife damage other than to cost share the financial portion of the program.

The following specific services are provided as a part of the CSA work plan:

- Nonlethal recommendations and technical assistance through demonstration and instruction of wildlife damage prevention and/or control techniques. This may be in the form of site visits by USDA Wildlife Specialists, recommendations for implementing

various nonlethal techniques, and/or providing official USDA pamphlets. Techniques commonly recommended by Wildlife Specialists include exclusion, habitat modification, scare devices, hazing (where safe and legal), and husbandry modifications.

- Direct control activities, which may include but are not limited to:
 - Monitoring, trapping, dispersal, and removal of wildlife known to cause damage to property, livestock, or agricultural crops;
 - Wildlife species identification and verification of property, livestock, crop, or natural resource damage;
 - Wildlife removal when property damage is verified and nonlethal methods have failed or are infeasible;
 - Response to wildlife disease concerns that may be transmitted to pets or livestock.
- Public safety response: When identified by local or state authorities, Wildlife Specialists will assist with trapping or control work targeting wildlife that may endanger public safety. Examples of public safety events where Wildlife Specialists may provide assistance include:
 - Predatory or territorial attacks on people;
 - Unusually behaving and/or otherwise diseased animals;
 - Invading homes by large wildlife;
 - Wildlife presence on school grounds;
 - Wildlife that have become hazards on roadways or landing strips.
- Wildlife Disease Sampling:
 - Wildlife Services conducts wildlife disease sampling surveillance statewide. Opportunistically, Wildlife Services collects disease samples from animals taken during control activities. These samples are tested for diseases that can be transmitted to humans, livestock, and pets.

The IWDM program analyzed in the EIR is not limited by the time frame of the annual CSA for 2021-2022. Potential future renewal of the IWDM program for subsequent terms, which may be annual or for a longer period, is considered a later activity of the proposed project, and is within the scope of the analysis in the Draft EIR. Any future discretionary actions taken by the County necessary to implement the program, as operated by APIHS-WS and approved by signature of the CSA, would need to be evaluated for consistency with the IWDM program and conformance with the analysis included in the EIR.

Probable Environmental Effects/EIR Scope:

The proposed project has the potential to affect wildlife species' populations, and the analysis in the Draft EIR will evaluate project and cumulative impacts on those species as well as habitat supporting both common and special-status species. The Draft EIR will also consider alternatives to wildlife damage management that do not involve the use of lethal methods to remove targeted species. Due to the limited nature of the proposed project, the Draft EIR will not evaluate in detail any of the other topics included in the CEQA Guidelines Appendix G environmental checklist other than biological resources.

Notice of Preparation Availability, Scoping Meeting, and Comment Period:

The NOP is available at the Butte County Agricultural Commissioner's Office (316 Nelson Avenue, Oroville, CA 95965), the Butte County Clerk-Recorder Office (155 Nelson Avenue, Oroville, CA 95965), and online at:

<http://www.buttecounty.net/agriculturalcommissioner/Documents>

There will be a scoping meeting at 3:00 PM on Thursday, March 11, 2021, during the 30-day review period for the NOP. The purpose of the meeting is to solicit the views of agencies as to the appropriate scope and content of the Draft EIR that are germane to your agency's statutory responsibilities or of interest to your organization in connection with the proposed project. County staff and its environmental consultant for the EIR will provide a brief overview of the project and the environmental review process. There will be an opportunity to provide oral comments regarding the scope of the Draft EIR at the scoping meeting.

To comply with COVID-19 restrictions, the meeting will be conducted virtually. To access the meeting online or by phone:

Attendee URL: <http://bit.ly/ScopingAttendee>

Event Password: Scoping

Meeting Number: 182 370 7641

Phone: 1-844-992-4726

Written comments on the NOP should be sent at the earliest possible date but received no later than **5:00 PM April 2, 2021**. Comments should be addressed to Louie B. Mendoza, Agricultural Commissioner, Butte County Agricultural Commissioner's Office, 316 Nelson Avenue, Oroville, CA 95965. Comments may also be submitted by email to ButteAg@ButteCounty.net. For questions or additional information, please contact Mr. Mendoza at (530) 552-4100.

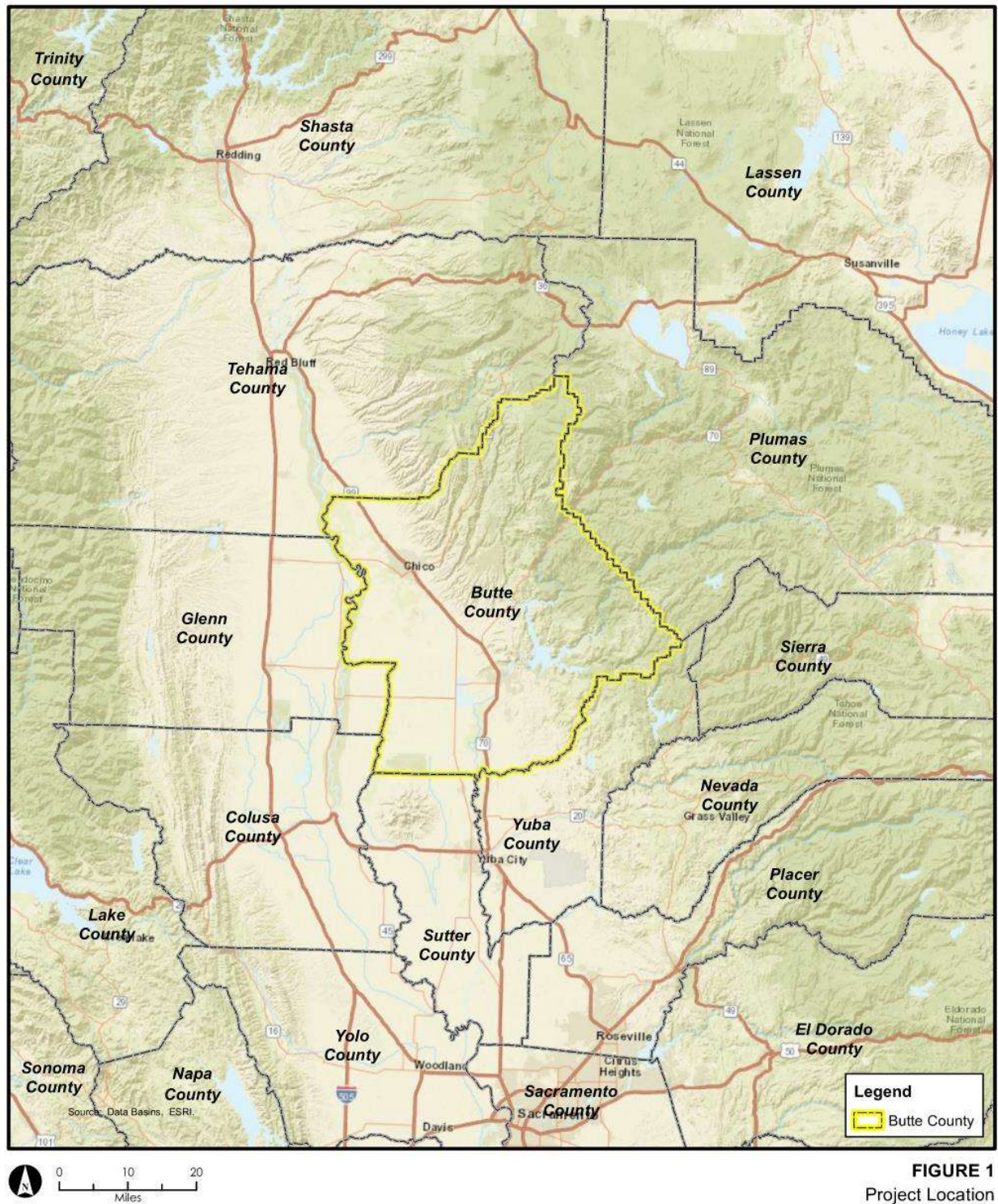


FIGURE 1
Project Location