

significance threshold is biologically appropriate. According to the State Board,⁸ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,⁹ NMFS,¹⁰ and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife,¹¹ existing conditions in the San Joaquin River basin are not adequate to protect aquatic life. All three fisheries agencies identified salmon and steelhead populations as declining under current flow conditions. The DEIS does not provide sufficient support for the conclusion that this further reduction in flow would not adversely affect these species or other native aquatic species.

The DEIS indicates that, under the proposed project, the many waterways in the project area are likely to experience higher flows during some portions of the year but lower flows during wetter periods. There are many benefits to maintaining flood flows in rivers in wet years as they inundate floodplains and initiate ecosystem processes that support aquatic life. Juvenile salmon will rear on seasonally inundated floodplains when available. This has been found to increase growth and survival in the Central Valley, specifically in the Yolo Bypass and the Cosumnes River floodplain.^{12, 13} These benefits to the ecosystem would be lost if peak flows and flood pulses are suppressed, and contribute increased stress on fish populations that are already adversely affected by flow diversions (e.g., loss of spawning gravels, reduced foraging habitat, loss of cold water).

Recommendation: More thoroughly analyze the project's potential impacts on native ecosystems, including sensitive and endangered species, from changes in streamflow. Clearly define, in the FEIS, the criteria used for defining harm to species. Where significant impacts are found to occur, the FEIS should discuss potential mitigation measures.

The idling of cropland has the potential to result in increased sediment runoff to local waterbodies. The document contends that this impact is expected to be less than significant due to the crust-like surface formed on rice fields after they are drained and the assumption that farmers idling upland crops will employ soil retention measures (p. 3.2-29). The DEIS does not discuss the possible benefits of planting cover crops toward preventing sediment runoff, especially where landowners choose not to employ other erosion control techniques.

⁸ State Water Resources Control Board, 3 Aug. 2010, Development of Flow Criteria for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Ecosystem Prepared Pursuant to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Reform Act of 2009, (2010 Flows Report), available at http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/deltaflow/docs/final_rpt080310.pdf

⁹ "Interior remains concerned that the San Joaquin Basin salmonid populations continue to decline and believes that flow increases are needed to improve salmonid survival and habitat." USFWS May 23, 2011 Phase I Scoping Comments: http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/bay_delta_plan/water_quality_control_planning/cmmnts052311/amy_aufdemberge.pdf

¹⁰ "Inadequate flow to support fish and their habitats is directly and indirectly linked to many stressors in the San Joaquin river basin and is a primary threat to steelhead and salmon." NMFS Feb. 4, 2011 Phase I Scoping Comments: http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/bay_delta_plan/water_quality_control_planning/cmmnts020811/010411dpowell.pdf

¹¹ "...current Delta water flows for environmental resources are not adequate to maintain, recover, or restore the functions and processes that support native Delta fish." Executive Summary of California Department of Fish and Game, November 23, 2010, Quantifiable Biological Objectives and Flow Criteria for Aquatic and Terrestrial Species of Concern Dependent on the Delta.

¹² T. R. Sommer, M.L. Nobriga, W.C. Harrell, W. Batham, and W.J. Kimmerer. 2001. Floodplain rearing of juvenile Chinook salmon: evidence of enhanced growth and survival. *Can. J. Fish. Aquat. Sci.* 58: 325-333.

¹³ C. A. Jeffres, J. J. Opperman, and P. Moyle. 2008. Ephemeral floodplain habitats provide best growth conditions for juvenile Chinook salmon in California river. *Environmental Biology of Fishes*. Published online June 6, 2008: www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/deltaflow/docs/exhibits/usdoi/spprt_docs/doi_jeffres_2008.pdf

Recommendations: Discuss, in the FEIS, the feasibility and benefit of planting or encouraging the growth of cover vegetation for reducing soil erosion and sediment runoff into waterways.

Fisheries

Chapter 3.7 of the DEIS assesses the project's potential impacts upon fisheries. EPA finds that the analysis performed lacks the resolution necessary to identify the full range of potentially significant adverse impacts the project may have upon fisheries, including potential impacts on special status species. The modeling performed for this analysis relied upon the flawed assumptions that a transfer action would have no adverse impact upon fisheries if modeled flow reduction were of less than one cubic foot per second (cfs) or less than a ten percent change in mean flow by water year type (p. 3-7-20). These assumptions inappropriately limit the scope of the impact analysis and undermine the accuracy of the conclusions reached.

The DEIS contends that any change in flow of less than ten percent falls within the "noise of model outputs and beyond the ability to measure actual changes" (pg. 3-7-20). It is not logical nor acceptable for purposes of this analysis to conclude that biological impacts are limited to the range of flow changes capable of being represented by the model employed. Research has examined the effects of implementing freshwater flow prescriptions for rivers and estuaries that mimic the pattern of the natural hydrographs in order to protect aquatic species with life histories adapted to such flow patterns.¹⁴ For example, work performed by Richter, et. al.¹⁵ on riverine systems in Florida, Michigan, Maine, and the European Union found that the maximum cumulative depletion of flows allowable to ensure adequate protection of aquatic species ranged from 6 - 20% year-round or in low-flow months and 20-35% in higher flow months. These scientists recommended the equivalent of no less than 90% of natural flow to achieve a high-level of ecological protection, and no less than 80% of natural flow to achieve a moderate level of ecological protection. Central Valley watersheds experience a much higher proportion of flow alteration than these scenarios. For example, during a median year in the San Joaquin River system, only 31% of the natural flow is allowed to remain in the river channel.¹⁶ In a system that is so severely impacted with regard to streamflow, additional reductions in flow of less than ten percent have the potential to cause significant adverse impacts.

Similarly, because streams and stream flows vary greatly at the reach scale due to environmental heterogeneity, changes of less than 1 cfs can have significant adverse effects on fishes and amphibians, depending on the specific reach affected and the conditions in that reach at the time of impact. Fishes, especially special status species, rely on high quality reaches as refugia for population persistence. Any degradation of reach quality has the potential to affect population vitality.

According to the DEIS, the Central Valley Project Improvement Act of 1992 requires that a transfer "will not adversely affect water supplies for fish and wildlife purposes" (p. 1-11). Based upon the

¹⁴ "Major researchers involved in developing ecologically protective flow prescriptions concur that mimicking the unimpaired hydrographic conditions of a river is essential to protecting populations of native aquatic species and promoting natural ecological functions". (Sparks 1995; Walker et al. 1995; Richter et al. 1996; Poff et al. 1997; Tharme and King 1998; Bunn and Arthington 2002; Richter et al. 2003; Tharme 2003; Poff et al. 2006; Poff et al. 2007; Brown and Bauer 2009). SED. Appendix C, p. 116

¹⁵ Richter, B. D., Davis, M., Apse, C., and Konrad, C. P. 2011. A presumptive standard for environmental flow protection. River Research and Applications. DOI: 10.1002/rra.1511. <http://eflownet.org/downloads/documents/Richter&al2011.pdf>

¹⁶ EPA Comments on the Bay Delta Water Quality Control Plan, Phase I SED. March 28, 2013.

Available at: <http://www2.epa.gov/sites/production/files/documents/sfdelta-epa-comments-swrbc-wqcp-phase1-sed3-28-2013.pdf>

information provided in the DEIS, it is not clear that this provision would be met if the “Full Range of Transfer Measures” project alternative (the preferred alternative) is implemented as currently described.

Recommendations: Perform additional modeling and analysis to more accurately assess potential impacts of the project upon fisheries. We recommend discarding the flawed assumptions that underpin the analysis performed for the DEIS. The FEIS should disclose when model resolution is too coarse to capture flow changes with the potential to adversely impact fisheries, and identify measures that would avoid or mitigate adverse impacts to fisheries and the aquatic environment in connection with actions authorized by the proposed project. Explain how and when the need for implementation of such measures would be determined.

The bulk of the analysis presented in section 3.7 of the DEIS focuses primarily upon the proposed project’s potential impacts upon a short list of “species of management concern”. It is unclear why the numerous other native fishes potentially affected by the proposed project are not more thoroughly examined. For example, page 3.7-9 provides a list of waterways that do not contain special-status fish species, followed by the statement, “as a result, no further biological analysis was conducted in these waterways”. It is not clear why the DEIS concludes that potential impacts to non-special-status species are inherently less than significant. Numerous native species may inhabit these waterways and may be exposed to adverse conditions as a consequence of this project. Furthermore, the DEIS does not demonstrate that potential impacts to fish assemblages or communities were considered, only impacts upon individual species. While protection of individual special status species is important, the project’s potential impacts upon fisheries at the ecosystem scale may be equally significant and worthy of consideration.

Recommendations: Discuss, in the FEIS, the proposed project’s potential impacts upon all native species, rather than focusing solely upon “species of management concern”; this should include analysis of potential impacts upon waterways previously eliminated from analysis for fisheries impacts. We recommend that the FEIS analyze potential impacts to multi-species communities, rather than focus solely on single-species impacts.

The DEIS explains that native fishes assemblages in the deep-bodied fishes zone have been replaced largely by non-native assemblages, citing “Moyle (2002)” (page 3.7-6). While this is generally true for the San Joaquin River, it is not an accurate characterization for the Sacramento River system. Many more recent studies of fishes in the Sacramento River system have been produced since 2002 that more accurately characterize the current condition of fisheries in that system.

Recommendations: A review of available scientific literature related to the fish assemblages of the Sacramento River should be conducted and the most current reliable data should be employed for defining existing conditions and determining potential project impacts. Based on this review, clarify the potential for the proposed project to adversely affect native fish assemblages in the deep-bodied fishes zone. EPA would be willing to assist BOR in acquiring the relevant literature, if needed.

The DEIS understates potentially significant impacts to anadromous fish species by focusing on peak habitation times and locations, without regard for the potentially substantial number of individuals who may occur in waterways outside of peak times. For instance, water transfers, which would occur from July through September, would coincide with the spawning period of winter-run Chinook salmon. The DEIS states that “spawning occurs upstream of the areas potentially affected by the transfers. Due in

part to elevated water temperatures in these downstream areas during this period, emigration would be complete before water transfers commence in July.” (pg. 3.7-12) While most winter-run emigration is completed between Sept-June, not all emigration is complete by the end of June, and this is important for such a diminished species because every individual counts. Depending on the water year and river conditions, some fish continue to emigrate beyond June. Therefore, the conclusion that no potential effect to winter-run Chinook salmon emigration would occur is not supported. Similarly, the DEIS indicates that impacts to spring-run Chinook salmon would be less than significant because “the bulk of upstream migration (March-September, peaking May-June) and emigration (November-June) would be complete before water transfers commence in July” (pg. 3.7-13 to 14).

While most migration may occur outside the proposed transfer period, the DEIS does not discuss in sufficient detail the potential adverse effects of the proposed project upon those migrating or emigrating fish that would be present in waterways affected by transfer actions. Furthermore, the DEIS contends that, while summer rearing of Central Valley steelhead would overlap with water transfers in the Seller Service Area, “the majority of rearing...would occur in the cooler sections of rivers and creeks above the influence for the water transfers.” (page 3.7-15). This statement requires a citation if it is to serve as the basis for concluding that potential adverse effects on Central Valley steelhead summer rearing is unlikely to occur. Again, while most of the rearing may occur outside the area to be adversely affected by water transfers, the DEIS suggests that this is not the case for all rearing, and this potential adverse effect is not quantified or analyzed in sufficient detail.

Recommendation: The FEIS should accurately characterize the potential impact upon winter-run Chinook salmon and Central Valley steelhead. Where adverse impacts are likely to occur, potential mitigation measures should be proposed and analyzed.

The discussion of potential impacts to steelhead and hardhead understates potential impacts and ignores the potential consequence for these populations where consecutive dry or critically-dry water years occur. The DEIS states that, although juvenile steelhead and hardhead could be present in some rivers affected by reductions in flows, those reductions occur “only one month and one water year type in one month,” and therefore this impact is not expected to have a substantial effect on these species (page 3.7-28), but the potential adverse effects on these species during this one month period are not clearly characterized. If mortality is possible due to adverse stream conditions, then the brief duration of this impact does not necessary ensure minimal harm. Furthermore, if a dry or critically-dry year follows one of the same, the adverse effects during this one month period could be compounded.

Recommendations: Clearly explain the criteria used to conclude that these potential effects on steelhead and hardhead would be less than significant. The cumulative effect analysis should encompass consecutive dry and critically-dry years.

Migratory Birds

With the large-scale conversion of Central Valley riparian forests and wetlands to agriculture and suburban development, birds and other wildlife have become increasingly dependent on agricultural lands for food and cover. Ricelands serve as essential breeding and wintering habitat for nearly 187 species of birds, 27 species of mammals, and 15 species of reptiles (of which 30 are considered special-status species)¹⁷. The DEIS focuses almost exclusively on the proposed project’s potential adverse

¹⁷ “Wildlife Known to Use California Ricelands,” 2011. Prepared for California Rice Commission <http://calrice.org/pdf/wildlife/Species-Report.pdf>

effects upon special status species while potentially significant adverse effects upon migratory birds are either discounted or ignored altogether. Ricelands provide a high-value food source from the 75,000 tons of grain estimated to remain on the ground each year due to harvesting inefficiencies. As a result, wintering waterfowl are estimated to gather more than 50% of their nourishment from ricelands.

The DEIS contends that a reduction in acres of flooded agricultural fields in the Delta resulting from the idling of cropland and the shifting of crops would not affect species migrating to the project area during spring because these species would simply select suitable habitat upon arrival (Section 3.8.2.4.1). But the proposed project could remove up to 51,473 acres (p. 3.8-64) of valuable farmed wetlands from the landscape and the DEIS' apparent conclusion that migratory bird populations can quickly adapt to a radically altered mosaic of fallowed fields and farmed wetlands seems flawed and not supported by scientific documentation. Furthermore, the DEIS appears to incorrectly assume that all other factors will be held equal while cropland idling and water transfers take place. This is not the case. The critically-dry water years in which the maximum amount of water transfers are likely to take place are also the years when Delta farmers are most likely to fallow their lands, either voluntarily or due to water shortage, and these outcomes could greatly compound the adverse effects of the proposed project. For instance, the California Rice Commission reports that while farmers flood between 150,000 and 350,000 acres of ricelands annually in the Southern Sacramento Valley and Delta, farmers planted ~20% fewer acres during 2014 and may flood as little as 50,000 acres of ricelands in the 2014-2015 season due to the ongoing drought and water shortages.¹⁸

Recommendations: The FEIS should thoroughly characterize the potential reduction in resting and forage habitat for migratory bird species resulting from cropland idling and crop shifting. The FEIS should consider these potential impacts in the context of current trends regarding habitat availability and anticipated future conditions resulting from climate change and changes in farming practices. The FEIS should discuss means for ensuring that sufficient wetted habitat (natural wetland or flooded field) is available for migrating bird species.

Riparian Communities

The project has the potential to have significant adverse effects on riparian systems, but the DEIS discounts these potential effects, in part because “changes in stream flow attributable to the Proposed Action would fall within historical ranges” (page 3.8-52). It should be recognized, however, that water management practices administered by federal and State agencies and local irrigation districts have already caused great stress on riparian systems and their associated fish and wildlife species. Recent consumptive patterns involving surface water diversions and groundwater pumping have, in effect, simulated, for fish and wildlife, severe and prolonged drought conditions whether or not drought conditions are actually present. The shift in hydrological conditions has caused a shift in species composition as native fishes have been overwhelmed and replaced by introduced and invasive aquatic species. Additional stress on these aquatic ecosystems could reinforce these adverse effects and potentially cause permanent, unmitigable impacts. The DEIS identified impacts to Cache, Stony, Coon, and Little Chico creeks that would be significant, with Little Chico Creek going to zero flow under some project scenarios. By their nature, no-flow conditions can lead to long-term and irreplaceable losses of ecosystem function.

¹⁸ “Wintering Waterfowl Habitat Concerns Looms Large,” California Rice Commission, September 16 2014, <http://calrice.org/blog/?id=1410890340&author=California+Rice+Commission>

Recommendation: Revise the EIS to more accurately characterize potential impacts to riparian communities. Identify robust mitigation measures that would ensure that the proposed project would not diminish instream flows in waterbodies affected by the proposed project.

The DEIS identifies GW-1 as a mitigation measure for off-setting the potential adverse effects on stream flows from groundwater substitution, but the proposed measure may not provide full compensation for the potential significant adverse effects on riparian systems. Based on the information provided in the DEIS, it appears that the proposed project does not contain provisions for preventing the complete dewatering of smaller streams near groundwater pumping zones. As mitigation measure GW-1 is designed to be reactionary, dewatered stream conditions might persist for extended periods before natural recharge to aquifers could restore base flows. This could result in serious indirect costs, such as the loss of mature riparian vegetation essential to the structure and function of riparian systems. Even if measures are taken to restore the riparian forest, the genetic losses could be permanent and full restoration may not be possible.

Recommendations: Revise measure GW-1 to address potentially irreversible adverse effects to riparian systems and related habitats from the implementation of the proposed project. Include, in the proposed monitoring plan, monitoring of any small tributary streams near the point of groundwater extraction. We recommend that specific mitigation triggers be established identifying the percent reduction in flow outside the natural range that would require a cessation of pumping.

Range of Alternatives

In the development of project alternatives, BOR employed a screening criterion that all alternatives must be immediate, flexible, and provide new water to the buyers' service area. The requirement that all project alternatives provide water was used to screen out potential project components involving the conservation or transfer of water within the seller service area (Table 2-1). It is unclear why this screening criterion was deemed necessary and how it relates to the project "need" of immediately implementable and flexible water supplies to alleviate shortages (p. 1-2). The restriction imposed that the alternatives need to "provide water" screens out all alternatives that would promote reducing demand in the buyer area and having water rights holders operate within the limits of their existing legal water rights. Some of the alternatives screened out by this criterion might be found to be environmentally and economically preferable. For example, retirement of drainage impaired areas that leach selenium into the San Joaquin River has been documented to have environmental and economic benefits in a National Economic Development Analysis conducted as part of the San Luis Drainage Feature Re-evaluation FEIS.¹⁹ It is unclear why within basin transfers in the buyers service area, considered in conjunction with demand reducing measures, such as conservation and land fallowing, would not meet the underlying project need to supply water to meet shortages. It is also unclear why groundwater storage ("Build new facilities to recharge and extract groundwater for use in buyer service area") in the buyers service area was deemed as not providing new water supply. If aquifers are recharged in wet years, then that water is pumped and used in dry years, it seems this alternative would offer "new supply" in circumstances similar to those when pumping of groundwater from the seller's service area would enable groundwater substitution transfers.

¹⁹ San Luis Drainage Feature Re-evaluation Final EIS (2007) available at: http://www.usbr.gov/mp/nepa/nepa_projdetails.cfm?Project_ID=61

Recommendation: Explain how the screening criteria were developed and why the requirement that a project component provide new water was deemed appropriate and necessary. A number of the measures eliminated from further consideration in Table 2-1 warrant further consideration and discussion. The FEIS should explain why measures to limit demand and enable within basin exchange of water in the buyers service area, considered in conjunction with one another, would not meet the screening criteria identified.



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SA01



December 1, 2014

Frances Mizuno
Assistance Executive Director
San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority
842 6th Street
Los Banos, CA 93635

Dear Mr. Mizuno:

**LONG-TERM WATER TRANSFERS ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT
STATEMENT/ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT; SCH NO. 2011011010**

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has reviewed the Bureau of Reclamation and San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority (SLDMWA) Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR) for the Long-Term Water Transfers Project (Project). Thank you for providing CDFW the opportunity to address its area of statutory responsibility in the EIS/EIR (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, §§ 15086 & 15088).

The goal of the Project is to reduce Central Valley Project (CVP) supply shortages caused by dry hydrologic years by transferring water from entities upstream from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to SLDWMA Participating Members and other CVP water contractors south of the Delta. Water would be made available for transfer through groundwater substitution, cropland idling, crop shifting, reservoir release, and conservation. The EIS/EIR evaluates potential impacts of water transfers over a 10-year period, 2015 through 2024.

CEQA Role

CDFW is a Trustee Agency as defined in the Guidelines for the Implementation of the California Environmental Quality Act (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, § 15000 et seq.; hereafter CEQA Guidelines) with responsibility for commenting on projects that could affect fish and wildlife resources (CEQA Guidelines, § 15386). CDFW has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and the habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species (i.e., biological resources). As a Trustee Agency, CDFW is responsible for providing, as available, biological expertise to review and comment upon environmental documents and impacts arising from project activities, as those terms are used under CEQA (Fish & G. Code, § 1802).

1

CDFW anticipates that it may use the final EIS/EIR and act as a Responsible Agency as part of possible future consideration and issuance of discretionary approvals, described below.

Discretionary Approvals

State Threatened, Endangered, and Candidate Species: CDFW has discretionary authority over activities that could result in the “take” of any species listed as candidate, threatened, or endangered pursuant to the California Endangered Species Act (CESA; Fish & G. Code, § 2050 et seq.). CDFW considers most adverse impacts on CESA-listed species, for the purposes of CEQA, to be significant without mitigation. Take of any CESA-listed species is prohibited except as authorized by state law (Fish & G. Code, §§ 2080 & 2085). Consequently, if Project activities result in take of CESA-listed species, CDFW recommends that the Project proponent seek appropriate authorization prior to Project implementation. This may include an incidental take permit (ITP) or a consistency determination in certain circumstances (Fish & G. Code, §§ 2080.1 & 2081 subd. (b)).

Rivers, Lakes, and Streams: An entity may not: substantially divert or obstruct the natural flow of; substantially change or use any material from the bed, channel, or bank of; or dispose of any debris, waste, or other material into, any river, stream, or lake unless certain conditions are met. For such activities, the entity must provide written notification to CDFW. Based on the written notification and site specific conditions, CDFW will determine if the activity may substantially adversely affect an existing fish or wildlife resource and issue a Lake or Streambed Alteration (LSA) Agreement to the entity that includes reasonable measures necessary to protect the resource (Fish & G. Code, § 1600 et seq.).

Note that CDFW must comply with CEQA prior to issuance of an ITP or LSA Agreement for a project. As such, CDFW may consider the Lead Agency’s CEQA documentation for the project. To minimize additional requirements by CDFW and/or under CEQA, the final EIR should fully disclose potential Project impacts on CESA-listed species and any river, lake, or stream, and provide adequate avoidance, minimization, mitigation, monitoring and reporting measures for issuance of an ITP or LSA agreement.

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Project Description

Section ES.2.2, Page ES-6, Table ES-2:

The EIS/EIR states that Merced Irrigation District (ID) is a Potential Seller of 30,000 ac-ft of water. However, Merced ID is seeking a new license from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) for continued operation of the Merced River Hydroelectric Project, and in July 2014, CDFW submitted to FERC recommended mitigation measures for the new license, including significant changes to instream flow releases and reservoir operations. In September 2014, Merced ID responded to CDFW's recommendations in a document filed with FERC as part of the FERC Project No. 2179 administrative record titled, "Merced ID's Reply to Comments, Recommendations, Preliminary Terms and Conditions, and Preliminary Fishway Prescriptions." On pages 106-107 of this document, Merced ID predicted that compliance with CDFW flow recommendations "increases the average annual water supply shortage by more than 100,000 ac-ft and creates shortages in most year types. [CDFW's] recommendation reduces average annual carryover capacity storage by...73,000 ac-ft compared to the Merced ID's Proposed Project." Analogous recommendations by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and other agencies to modify flow releases and reservoir operations received similar responses from Merced ID, all indicating significant water supply shortages and reduced carryover volumes if the recommended mitigation measures were implemented. There appears to be a substantive disconnect between these kinds of water supply evaluations in the FERC administrative record and the Project EIS/EIR which lists Merced ID as a willing seller of up to 30,000 ac-ft annually.

2

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR scope reference the ongoing FERC relicensing and incorporate the water supply and carryover volume analyses submitted by Merced ID to FERC. A Draft Environmental Impact Statement prepared by FERC for Merced ID's Hydroelectric Project is estimated to be issued in March 2015 and finalized in August 2015.

Section ES.3.2, Page ES-9, Table ES-3:

This section states, "[i]n the No Action/No Project Alternative the Buyer Service Area would experience shortages and could increase groundwater pumping, idle cropland, or retire land to address those shortages." However, this may not be an accurate description of this alternative because the Buyer Service Area currently utilizes short-term transfers to address their water needs. Further, due to existing transfers, the Central Valley Project Improvement Act Refuge Water Supply Program, which maintains and improves wetland habitat areas, is currently experiencing water transfer

3

capacity issues concerning its already limited water supply, even without implementation of the Project. For example, this year at the Volta Wildlife Area, the last known population of giant garter snake (*Thamnophis giga*, GGS) in the western San Joaquin Valley was threatened with incidental take pursuant to CESA due to surface water supply limitations and likely operational constraints of conveyance systems needed to provide water needed for habitat. Cumulative impacts from short-term transfers and long term transfers proposed by the Project may have a significant impact on fish and wildlife that utilize refuges by resulting in a substantial adverse impact on sensitive species or interfering substantially with the movement of native migratory species.

3

CDFW recommends that that EIS/EIR describe the relationship between the existing short-term water transfers and long term transfers proposed by the Project, including an analysis of cumulative impacts from these activities, and any potentially significant impacts on fish and wildlife resources. Mitigation should be proposed if warranted.

Environmental Setting

Section 2.3.2.4, Page 2-30:

This section references, but does not clearly define, “protected aquatic habitats.” Project activities could result in substantial adverse impacts on aquatic habitats that are not clearly designated as “protected aquatic habitats.”

4

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR expand the definition of “protected aquatic habitats” to include public lands under conservation easement, State wildlife areas and ecological reserves, federal refuges, and private managed wetlands because management efforts to protect GGS occur on these lands. Also identify how and to whom the seller will demonstrate that any impacts to special-status species have been addressed, including through coordination with CDFW and USFWS.

Section 2.3.2.4, Page 2-30:

This section states that the determination of Priority GGS habitat will be made through coordination with GGS experts, Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis of habitat proximity to historic tule (*Schoenoplectus* sp.) marsh, and GIS analysis of suitable habitat. However, this may not be sufficient to ensure appropriate identification of GGS habitat or areas that should be “prioritized” for species conservation. This could result in a substantial adverse impact on the species should appropriate habitat be overlooked.

5

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR state that consultation with CDFW and USFWS is required to ensure appropriate identification of GGS habitat and to evaluate which fields

to fallow, through review of the CDFW's California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB), review of rice fields which will be in production, and fallowing away from canals in a patchwork fashion to maximize habitat connectivity.

5

Section 2.4, Page 2-41, Table 2.9:

This table states that use of transfer water in the Buyer Service Area may result in increased irrigation on drainage impaired lands in the Buyer Service Area which could affect water quality, but that this impact is less than significant. However, significant environmental damage to fish and wildlife resources has occurred in the past from discharge of drainage from impaired lands. Many federal, state, and private managed wetland areas in the Central Valley are located at the lower end of watershed drainage areas and receive irrigation return flows as part of their water supply.

6

CDFW recommends the EIS/EIR analyze potentially significant impacts from increased irrigation on drainage impaired lands on Central Valley managed wetland public trust fish and wildlife resources.

Table 2.9 of this section states that cropland idling/shifting could alter the amount of suitable habitat for natural communities and special-status wildlife species associated with seasonally flooded agriculture and associated irrigation waterways. This impact is identified as less than significant. However, cropland idling/shifting could have a significant impact on habitat availability for shorebirds, resident and migratory waterfowl, and special-status species in the Central Valley, especially if shifting reduces the amount of seasonally flooded post-harvest rice and corn. Seasonal flooding of post-harvest rice and corn provides a substantial percentage of habitat and food supplies for migratory waterfowl. The 2006 Central Valley Joint Venture Implementation Plan estimates that 170,000 acres of post-harvest rice is needed for wintering waterfowl and wintering shorebirds in order to meet bird conservation goals.

7

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR address potentially significant impacts of cropland/idling shifting on fish and wildlife resources. Impacts could be mitigated if buyers of transfer water created equivalent habitat or habitat values to those that would be lost.

Section 3.1.2.1, Page 3.1-14:

SACFEM2013 was used to model streamflow depletion from groundwater substitutions. Outputs from this model were used in a post-processing tool to simulate transfers and delta exports in order to analyze potential impacts to surface water supplies. However, it is unclear why monitoring data collected from 2007-2010 transfers were not used to support the models.

8

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR explain what type of data (i.e., surface flow depletions from groundwater substitution pumping) were collected by the Sellers from all years that transfers took place, and specifically from the recent four consecutive years of transfers (2007-2010). The document should discuss why these data were not used in the analysis of impacts to streamflow from groundwater substitution pumping.

8

Section 3.3.4.1, Page 3.3-88 to 3.3-91:

Groundwater substitution transfers can create time delays between additional groundwater pumping and potential impacts on stream systems. These delays may have significant impacts on timing and availability of surface flow to resident and anadromous fish species, special status species, and other fish and wildlife resources. The Department of Water Resources has been studying stream flow depletions as they relate to Sacramento Valley groundwater substitution transfers for several years.

9

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR include the results of the Department of Water Resources studies and analyze potential impacts on fish and wildlife resources resulting from time delays.

Section 3.7.1.3.2, Page 3.7-9:

This section lists the names of five creeks where no sampling information is available to indicate the presence of special-status fish species. Presence was assumed and further biological analyses were conducted in these waterways. However, this section inconsistently lists four of the five same creeks (along with 15 others) and states that a review of field sampling data and reports indicates that there is no evidence of the presence of special-status fish species in these waterways and, as a result, no further biological analysis was conducted.

10

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR clarify whether these five creeks may support special-status fish species.

Section 3.8, Page 3.8-20, Table 3.8-1:

The EIS/EIR includes western pond turtle (*Actinemys marmorata*, WPT) as a "listed" species. However, WPT is a Species of Special Concern (SSC), and is not CESA-listed or listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. Pacific pond turtle is used throughout the EIS/EIR in reference to WPT.

11

CDFW recommends that WPT be described as an SSC and moved to the following rows that describe SSC in Table 3.8-1. The species should be consistently referred to as "western pond turtle (WPT)" throughout the EIS/EIR.

Impacts

Section 1.3.2.4, Page 1-14:

This section addresses impacts on fish and wildlife resources, and states that Water Code sections 1725 and 1736 require the State Water Resources Control Board to make a finding that proposed transfers would not result in unreasonable impacts on fish and wildlife or other instream beneficial uses prior to approving a change in post-1914 water rights.

CDFW recommends adding the following information to Section 1.3.2.4 for regulatory consistency and clarity: California Code of Regulations Title 23 section 794 requires the petitioner to 1) provide information identifying any effects of the proposed changes on fish, wildlife, and other instream beneficial uses, and 2) request consultation with CDFW and the Regional Water Quality Control Board regarding potential effects of the proposed changes on water quality, fish, wildlife and other in stream beneficial uses. The petition for change will not be accepted by the State Water Resources Control Board unless it contains the required information and consultation request. Early communication with CDFW would streamline the consultation process through "up front" coordination regarding assessment of the potential impact to fish and wildlife resources. The State Water Resources Control Board will use this information in making their finding that proposed transfers do not result in unreasonable impacts on fish and wildlife or other instream beneficial uses

12

Section 2.3.2.1, Page 2-10:

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR clarify if water transferred via forbearance agreements were analyzed as part of the Project. If not, impacts from potential increases in groundwater pumping by seller agencies forbearing CVP water should be analyzed as a reasonably foreseeable future action/probable future project in the cumulative impacts analysis of each section.

13

Section 2.3.2.4, Page 2-29 to 2-30:

It is common for CDFW to review proposed water transfer CEQA documents, typically Negative Declarations, which do not address Environmental Commitments. Data may not be available to support the transfer request relative to potential impacts to fish and wildlife.

14

CDFW recommends that all proposed water transfers address Environmental Commitments and potential impacts on fish and wildlife. Include analysis of any previous transfers, monitoring, and mitigation efforts, and identification of how much water was actually transferred in previous years. Annual review of mapped acreage,

diverted acre feet of water and monitoring and reporting results would provide a basis to develop baseline information on potential impacts of future proposed transfers.

This section states that Bureau of Reclamation would provide maps to USFWS in June of each year showing the parcels of riceland that are idled for the purpose of transferring water for that year.

14

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR state that these maps would also be provided to CDFW and the GGS interagency management team in order to provide coordination for conservation and management of Central Valley GGS populations.

Section 3.7.1.3.3, Page 3.7-15:

Summer rearing of Central Valley steelhead would overlap with water transfers occurring in the Seller Service Area (July-September), both in the Sacramento and San Joaquin River and their tributaries. Thus, water transfers have the potential to impact steelhead. The majority of rearing, however, would occur in the cooler sections of rivers and creeks above the influence for the transfers. Earlier in the Draft EIS/EIR, it is stated that water made available from groundwater substitution transfers may start as early as April (Page 2-10).

15

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR clarify when groundwater substitution transfers could begin and, if necessary, analyze impacts on Central Valley steelhead that may be impacted by groundwater transfers occurring in April, May and June.

Section 3.7.2.1.3, Page 3.7-20:

For smaller tributaries, the impact analysis compared modeled groundwater depletion flow rates to available data on mean flow rates for the historical period of record and identified changes to these monthly average flow rates that would result from water transfer actions. Significant impacts on fisheries resources due to stream flow depletions are more likely to occur during low-flow periods of any given month.

16

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR analyze the impacts from groundwater pumping on the low-flow period of each month, rather than the average stream flow for the entire month, in order to determine the significance of impacts on fisheries resources and special-status fish species during this sensitive period.

This section states that development of the impact analysis involved literature review, review of known occurrences of special-status species based on the CNDDDB, USFWS regional species lists, information from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association fisheries website, and results of hydrologic modeling.

17

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR also include a discussion of how monitoring plans and monitoring data from previous years were used to show that transfers did not adversely affect fisheries resources.

17

This section states that historical stream flow information for small streams were gathered where available and used as the measure of baseline flow. For locations for which historical flow data were limited or unavailable, a qualitative discussion of potential impacts is included for these locations.

18

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR include a table or an appendix to show which streams used available historic flow data, what this data included, and which streams lacked historic data and were subject to a qualitative analysis. This information will guide where additional stream flow efforts are needed relative to fisheries resource needs.

Section 3.7.2.4.1, Page 3.7-26 - 3.7-27:

Eastside/Cross Canal and Salt Creek have the potential for impacts on special-status fish species due to flow reductions, although no data were available to determine the proportional reduction in base flows (i.e., if a greater than 10 percent reduction would occur). This section states that these waterways are 1) "generally" not immediately adjacent to groundwater substitution transfers; 2) other "nearby" small waterways are not experiencing flow decreases that are causing significant impacts to aquatic resources; and 3) flow reductions would be observed at monitoring wells in the region and any adverse effects would be mitigated by implementation of Mitigation Measure GW-1. The mitigation plan would include curtailment of the pumping until natural recharge corrects the environmental impact. Therefore, the impacts on fisheries resources would be less than significant. However, it is unclear what the trigger for pumping curtailment would be and how cessation of pumping to allow natural recharge to "correct the environmental impact" mitigates this impact to a less than significant level if the impact has already occurred.

19

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR define "generally not immediately adjacent," explain how the determination was made that other "nearby" small waterways are not experiencing flow decreases that are impacting aquatic resources, and how these surrogate waterways relate to the potentially impacted streams. Additionally, the EIS/EIR should identify 1) how the placement and use of monitoring wells would be able to observe instream flow reductions, 2) how the trigger for curtailment of pumping that causes an adverse impact was derived, and 3) if the time from observation of streamflow reductions that result in adverse impacts to the cessation of groundwater pumping would be responsive enough to mitigate for impacts (Barlow and Leake 2012). This recommendation also applies to Section 3.7.6.1.1, which analyzes the cumulative impacts on fisheries resources and special-status fish species in Cache Creek, Stony

Creek, Coon Creek, Little Chico Creek, Bear River, Eastside/Cross Canal and Salt Creek and Section 3.8.2.4.1, which analyzes the effects of substantially reduced stream flows as a result of groundwater substitution pumping on the riparian natural communities in Cache and Stony Creeks.

19

This section lists 21 waterways where the Project would have a less than significant impact on fisheries resources and special-status fish species. The basis for this determination is that modeled flow changes would be small and no substantial effect on water quality would result from implementing the Proposed Action.

CDFW recommends that "water quality" in the previous sentence be replaced with "fisheries resources" and tables similar to Tables 3.8-5 and 3.8-7, which show the average monthly flow by water year type in Cache Creek and Stony Creek, respectively, under the No Action/No Project alternative (using historical data) and the Project (using the groundwater model's prediction of reduced flows from the Proposed Action), be included for all streams that have the potential to be impacted by the Proposed Action. As stated above, CDFW recommends that the analysis of potential impacts from groundwater pumping use data from the low-flow period of each month, rather than the average stream flow for the entire month, to determine the significance of impacts to fisheries resources and special-status fish species during this sensitive period.

20

Section 3.7.2.4.1, Pages 3.7-28 to 3.7-29:

This section states that due to incomplete baseline flow data, modeling results were compared to only three years (2003-2005) of existing stream gage data for Coon Creek, indicating that there would be one water year in one month in which flows could potentially be reduced by more than 10 percent. This modeled reduction to baseline flows is stated to be a "worst case scenario" because flows used in this calculation are at the low end (20 cfs) of existing flow data range (20-40 cfs). Modeling shows that flows in all other months and water year types would be reduced by less than 10 percent of baseline flows and, therefore, impacts on fisheries resources would be less than significant. Omitted from this analysis is that the Water Year types for 2003, 2004 and 2005 were categorized as above normal, below normal, and above normal, respectively. It is unclear how this analysis of reductions is considered a "worst case scenario" if the low end of the baseline flow data range (20 cfs) was observed in either an above normal or below normal water year. Regardless of available gage data, it is rational to expect lower flows in Coon Creek in a dry or critically dry year, which would result in the Project reducing baseline flows by more than 10 percent.

21

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR explain how stream gage data taken from only above normal and below normal water years, which is then used as baseline flows for comparing to model results, captures the full extent of the potential impacts to fisheries resources in Coon Creek that may occur in dry or critically dry years. This explanation

should also be included for impacts on natural communities and wildlife species habitat (Page 3.8-59).

21

This section states that pursuant to model results, Little Chico Creek flows would be reduced by more than 10 percent in multiple water year types from July to October. Although this reduction could be as much as 100 percent of instream flows, the Project would not have a substantial impact on fisheries resources. The reason being that it's not uncommon for natural flows to be very low during these months (0.5 cfs and below), which causes an increase in temperature and reduced dissolved oxygen levels intolerable for over-summering adult spring-run Chinook salmon, so the fish would not be present anyway. Also, depletions from groundwater pumping would cause levels to be within the flow range normally experienced by any juvenile steelhead and hardhead species have experienced low-to-no flows in the past, project impacts that reduce flows to this level would not harm them.

22

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR analysis focus on the impacts that low flow periods in Little Chico Creek have on special-status fish species and fisheries resources in general, what an increase to the frequency of these low flow events caused by the Project means to these species, and how do the periods were the Project completely dewateres the creek (i.e., reductions of "up to 100 percent of instream flows") affect stream connectivity, species movement, and the overall health of the species.

Section 3.8.2, Page 3.8-35:

This section states that the distribution of water year types within the action period is unknown. Additionally, the exact locations of cropland idling/shifting actions would not be known until the spring of each year, when water acquisition decisions are made. The contribution to instream flows from agricultural return flows would be reduced in areas where cropland idling occurs. However it is unclear how this reduction was accounted for in the analysis of impacts on fish and wildlife resources and instream flows if the locations are unknown at this time.

23

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR explain how reduced agricultural return flows due to cropland idling/shifting were factored into the impact analysis.

Section 3.8.2.1.4 Page 3.8-38 to 3.8-40:

This section states that the magnitude and frequency of streamflow depletion in small streams were derived from a groundwater model (SACFEM2013) and then used to evaluate potential impacts to natural communities and special status vegetation and wildlife, since Central Valley Project and State Water Project operations could not be altered to offset any changes in small streams. However, the impacts of groundwater substitution on larger rivers and Central Valley Project/State Water Project reservoirs

24

are carried from the groundwater model to the transfer operations model, which incorporates other changes in hydrology associated with cropland idling/shifting, reservoir releases and water conservations. This implies that changes in small stream hydrology associated with cropland idling/shifting were not included in the SACFEM2013 model.

24

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR explain how reduced agricultural return flows in small streams were accounted for in the SACFEM2013 groundwater model.

Section 3.8.2.4.1, Page 3.8-47:

This section describes impacts on natural communities in shallow groundwater areas in the North Delta; however it does not address impacts on wildlife. Some sensitive wildlife species require shallowly flooded areas (e.g., GGS and WPT) and impacts on these areas may substantially adversely affect such species.

25

CDFW recommends that the impact analysis not be solely based on whether vegetation will change. In shallowly flooded areas, a reduction of groundwater that lowers surface water elevation of wetlands should also be described, and impacts on wildlife that rely on shallow water analyzed. Mitigation should be provided if warranted.

In this section, the Assessment/Evaluation Methods for groundwater substitution transfers states that potential impacts of groundwater substitution on natural communities in upland areas was considered potentially significant if it resulted in a consistent, sustained depletion of water levels that were accessible to overlying communities (groundwater depth under existing conditions was 15 feet or less). A sustained depletion would be considered to have occurred if the basin did not recharge from one year to the next (Page 3.8-33). In a few locations in the North Delta associated with wetlands, groundwater elevations under existing conditions are less than 15 feet below ground surface and natural communities reliant on groundwater are more likely to be impacted. In these areas, the maximum reductions would be 0.3 to 0.8 feet, with full recharge. The Project would have a less than significant effect on natural communities and special-status plants because increases in drawdown would be too small to cause a substantial effect on vegetation that relies on groundwater. However, the EIS/EIR doesn't identify where these "few locations in the North Delta" are located or the natural communities that occur in these areas. Also, the less than significant determination is based upon the assertion that full recharge of the groundwater basin would always occur, thus only reducing groundwater levels by a maximum of 0.3-0.8 feet.

26

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR identify and discuss the areas in the North Delta and the natural communities associated with those areas in greater detail. Since the less than significant determination is based upon the assertion that full recharge of the groundwater basin will always occur, thus resulting in a max reduction of 0.3-0.8 feet

(too small to cause substantial effects), supporting historic groundwater elevation data should be provided.

26

Section 3.8.2.4.1, Page 3.8-60:

For Little Chico Creek, this section states, "[b]ecause flow reductions would be small and only during months when the creek is essentially dry, changes in stream flow would not substantially reduce natural communities or wildlife species habitat." However, taking water from a creek that is nearly dry could result in significant impacts on wildlife because some animals may not be able to tolerate prolonged episodes of dryness (e.g., WPT).

27

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR include an analysis of how the reduction of water during already dry times does not substantially reduce the availability of habitat for, or movement ability of, sensitive species.

Appendix I, Table I-1:

The Project proposes to fallow alfalfa and other row crops which Swainson's hawks (*Buteo swainsoni*, "SWHA"), a State-listed species, utilize to forage. However, the EIS/EIR does not disclose which croplands within foraging distance of SWHA nest trees will be fallowed, or the composition of these areas. Long term fallowing of these fields may result in a change or loss of pray base, prompting SWHA to leave the nest tree for longer periods to forage in other areas, which could negatively affect the species' reproductive effort. Therefore, the long term loss of foraging habitat could result in significant impacts on nesting SWHA by substantially reducing the number of an endangered, rare, or threatened species, and/or substantially adversely affecting a special status species (CEQA Guidelines, §15065 & Appendix G).

28

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR disclose which croplands in foraging distance of SWHA nest trees would be fallowed and the composition of these areas, analyze whether resultant impacts on SWHA could be significant, and provide for mitigation if warranted.

General:

Bureau of Reclamation contracts for Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA) Refuge Water Supply (RWS) delivery to USFWS, CDFW, and Grassland Water District managed wetlands all contain language in Article 7 allowing Project Water to be transferred, reallocated or exchanged to other refuges. CVPIA section 3406 subdivision (b)(3) requires development and implementation of a program to identify how the Secretary intends to utilize improvements in or modifications of project operation, including transfers, to fulfill the Secretary's obligations to deliver RWS.

29

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR identify the total amount of RWS available from all sources north of Delta, and how these transfers are integrated into project operation. The program should address annual and long-term water transfer impacts that may adversely affect managed wetland water supply including endangered species recovery needs at managed wetlands; lack of sufficient dedicated water storage; timing of water delivery and use on shared conveyance systems; and potential increased groundwater use. CDFW is available to assist Bureau of Reclamation with any and all efforts to maximize use of water transfers in the furtherance of overall CVPIA RWS program objectives. These efforts should be coordinated with USFWS, Grassland Water District, and the Central Valley Joint Venture.

29

Mitigation Measures

Section 2.3.2.4, Pages 2-29 to 2-30:

Much of this section involves Environmental Commitments to protect GGS. These same commitments were largely used for 2014 transfers, and to a lesser degree, in previous years. Efforts to develop and refine the Environmental Commitments are ongoing, and studies to better understand GGS life history and distribution continue.

30

CDFW recommends incorporating any monitoring and analysis available from 2014 and previous transfer years where these and similar commitments were in place, and adaptively incorporating feedback as more information becomes available each year, including drought year impacts, as well as the following: incorporate results from ongoing studies on GGS population dynamics and distribution analysis; continue development of a long-term strategy and research framework; continue interagency coordinated efforts and investigate partnerships with water districts, non-governmental organizations, and academia; and include coordinated and collaborative development, including CDFW, to address GGS long-term conservation needs.

Section 3.1.4.1, Page 3.1-21:

This section states that a streamflow depletion factor (SDF) would be applied to mitigate potential water supply impacts from additional groundwater pumping due to groundwater substitution transfers. This is intended to offset the streamflow effects of the added groundwater pumping. The exact percentage of the SDF would be determined based on hydrologic conditions, groundwater and surface water modeling, monitoring information, and past transfer data. However, it is unclear what monitoring information and past transfer data has shown, and if previous percentages been adequate to mitigate for impacts.

31

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR include information on previous monitoring efforts; for example, what they entailed, past transfer data, the type of post-transfer analysis

that was done, and what this analysis showed with respect to impacts on streamflow from increased groundwater pumping.

31

Section 3.3.4, Pages 3.3-88 to 3.3-91:

It is unclear whether mitigation measure GW-1 "Monitoring Program and Mitigation Plans" would reduce impacts on wildlife to less than significant because it appears that only wells would be monitored (as opposed to streams, wetlands, or sensitive species), and that impacts to wildlife would be reported by an outside entity. Monitoring would be coordinated with well operators and "other decision makers." The section states that if the seller's monitoring efforts indicate that the operation of wells for groundwater substitution pumping are causing substantial adverse impacts, the seller will be responsible for mitigating any significant environmental impacts that occur. However, it is unclear how this determination would be made.

32

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR analyze the need for monitoring of other water features and resources and include discussion of the types of monitoring and mitigation efforts conducted for past transfers, what will be duplicated for the Proposed Project, and any new/revised activities to ensure impacts on fish and wildlife resources are reduced to less than significant. The EIS/EIR should clarify who the "other decision makers" are and include representatives from CDFW and USFWS. Mitigation should also state that CDFW and USFWS would have authority to deem a monitoring and mitigation plan adequate or not for the purposes of issuing a water transfer agreement. The EIS/EIR should identify an entity with appropriate expertise to determine if Project activities are resulting in substantially adverse impacts and an adequate level of mitigation.

There are several EIS/EIR sections that conclude impacts on wildlife would be reduced to less than significant levels based on implementation of mitigation measure GW-1, which is intended to take corrective actions once substantial adverse impacts have been identified. However, these impacts appear to be based almost exclusively on changes in vegetation, which are not necessarily appropriate proxies for wildlife populations. Animals may starve or be exposed to greater predation well before signs of substantial impacts on riparian and wetland vegetation become evident. In addition, because there is no requirement for monitoring of vegetation changes, those signs would apparently have to be identified by agencies and organizations outside of the water transfers; therefore, there are no assurances they would be identified. Further, increases in flows are not always beneficial. For example, if flows are over 200 percent of normal during summer months, WPT nests could be flooded out, significantly reducing recruitment.

33

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR include a more comprehensive approach to evaluating impacts on fish and wildlife based on the habitat components required by

each affected species including, but not limited to, plant community requirements. Mitigation should be proposed if warranted.

33

This section states the objectives of the monitoring and mitigation plan. However, these objectives are not fully consistent with the Draft Technical Information for Preparing Water Transfer Proposals (Bureau of Reclamation and Department of Water Resources 2013) and Addendum (Bureau of Reclamation and Department of Water Resources 2014).

34

CDFW recommends that the above statement be consistent with the specific mitigation and monitoring requirements of the aforementioned Draft Technical Information for Preparing Water Transfer Proposals and Addendum.

This section states that water transfer proponents would provide a final summary report to Bureau of Reclamation evaluating the impacts of the water transfer. The final report would identify transfer-related impacts on groundwater and surface water during and after pumping. However, past water transfer activities could inform anticipated impacts on fish and wildlife resources.

35

CDFW recommends that the EIS/EIR include the impacts past reports have shown in order to inform analysis of future transfers regarding impacts on the environment, and to avoid or mitigate any significant effects of proposed transfers.

General:

Water Code section 1018 states that landowners "shall be encouraged" to cultivate or retain non irrigated cover crops or natural vegetation to benefit waterfowl, upland game bird, and other wildlife habitat. The Department of Water Resources is currently addressing guidance and implementation regarding this language. CDFW recommends incorporating this information into the EIS/EIR so those proposing transfers would be compliant with these provisions.

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San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority
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FUTURE COORDINATION

Questions regarding this letter or further coordination should be directed to Cathie Vouchilas, Environmental Program Manager, at (916) 651-1190 or Cathie.Vouchilas@wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,



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