

Memorandum

To: Board of Forestry and Fire Protection,
Management Committee

Date: November 4, 2014

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From: 
Angela Bernheisel, Forest Manager
Soquel Demonstration State Forest (SDSF)
California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE)

Subject: Response to California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) comment letter on the proposed SDSF IS/ND, SCH #2014092029, Santa Cruz County

CDFW provided comments to the proposed SDSF, General Forest Management Plan (GFMP) Update, Negative Declaration. The letter dated October 7 (attached) was received by the Clearinghouse on October 10, one day after the end of the public review period. The letter highlights three items that are recommended for subsequent environmental review for future activities that may have potential impacts. CDFW, in a telephone conversation with Ms. Randi Adair, confirmed that the comments in their letter were not to request any changes to the GFMP, but to draw attention to potential impacts for future projects on SDSF. These items are further described and responded to below for consideration by the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Santa Cruz Kangaroo Rat

The Santa Cruz kangaroo rat (*Dipodomys venustus venustus*) is a California species of special concern and endemic to the Santa Cruz Sandhills. No Santa Cruz Sandhills habitat type exists at SDSF or adjacent to SDSF, although the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) indicates that a population of Santa Cruz kangaroo rat potentially exists along the southwest boundary with the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park. The south facing slope across the ridge that separates the state park with the state forest supports chaparral habitat. Only a very small and scattered amount of chaparral exists along the ridge or within in SDSF. Recent research by Dr. Janet Foley, University of California Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, on small mammals and blood borne pathogens has been conducted at SDSF since 2009. This research includes evaluation of population size and diversity of small mammals, in particular woodrats and chipmunks. Dr. Foley conducts small mammal trapping and evaluations

several times per year at SDSF. No kangaroo rats have been observed since this work started in 2009 for trapping small mammals in key locations across SDSF, including the upper helipad and along the Ridge Trail which borders the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park (Foley, 2011). Special consideration will be given to determining whether or not the kangaroo rat exists in this area through Dr. Foley's research. Any future projects that may occur in the area (e.g. timber harvesting, fuelbreaks or trail construction) will address potential impacts to the Santa Cruz kangaroo rat.

Marbled Murrelet

Suitable habitat for the marbled murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) exists at SDSF near Badger Spring in an 11-acre old-growth redwood stand. This seabird is listed as state endangered and federal threatened. No marbled murrelets were detected in past surveys and no marbled murrelets have been detected in the Soquel Creek Watershed. The GFMP includes information about corvids and their potential negative impacts to marble murrelets. Camping is not allowed at SDSF on a regular basis and SDSF does not supply garbage cans that could attract corvids. Future marbled murrelet surveys or potential impacts from projects will be evaluated and planned in consultation with CDFW. All old-growth redwood trees that exist at SDSF are protected consistent with AB 1965, and areas have been designated to promote late-seral habitat.

Grassland Habitat

Approximately four acres of SDSF are comprised of grassland and mixed chaparral habitat which is scattered across the forest. Since this habitat type is so limited and unique at SDSF, special consideration will be given to any future projects to occur in or near these areas. The largest area of grassland is at the lower helipad and will be maintained as grassland for safety and emergency access for helicopters. Brush and trees are controlled by mowing and hand cutting as necessary at the lower helipad. Additional work to maintain grassland areas at SDSF will be considered with CDFW input as projects occur in proximity to these areas.

The Management Guidelines and Planned Actions for the Biota Chapter of the GFMP (see pages 38 and 39) address ongoing monitoring for listed and special status species, old-growth protection and areas designated to promote late-succession stands of trees, CNDDDB reporting and monitoring, preharvest surveys for special status birds, and conducting biological assessments incrementally in new project areas.

References:

Foley, J. 2011. Summary, Davis Tick-Borne Disease Activities through Spring 2011.

Memorandum

Date: October 7, 2014

To: Mr. Matt Dias
State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection
Post Office Box 944246
Sacramento, CA 94244

From: 
Scott Wilson, Regional Manager
California Department of Fish and Wildlife – Bay Delta Region, 7329 Silverado Trail, Napa, California 94558

Subject: Proposed Soquel Demonstration State Forest Management Plan, Initial Study of a Negative Declaration, SCH #2014092029, Santa Cruz County

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has reviewed the Initial Study/Negative Declaration (IS/ND) for the proposed Soquel Demonstration State Forest Management Plan (Project).

As Trustee for the State's fish and wildlife resources, CDFW has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and their habitat for the benefit and use by the people of California. As a Responsible Agency, CDFW administers the California Endangered Species Act (CESA), the Lake and Streambed Alteration Agreement (LSAA) Program and other provisions of the Fish and Game Code that afford protection to the state's fish and wildlife public trust resources. Pursuant to our jurisdiction, CDFW submits the following comments on the IS/ND regarding potentially significant impacts to sensitive resources associated with the proposed Project.

Project Location and Description

The proposed Project area is located in central Santa Cruz County. Soquel Demonstration State Forest (SDSF) comprises 2,681 acres of which 2,677 acres are forest or woodland vegetation. SDSF is situated approximately eight miles northeast of Santa Cruz and 18 miles south of San Jose. The Forest of Nisene Marks State Park adjoins a majority of SDSF's southern boundary. The northeast corner of SDSF shares a common corner with lands owned by Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. The remaining perimeter of SDSF is bounded by a myriad of smaller, privately owned parcels. The nearest community is Soquel, about seven miles to the south.

The Project includes implementation of the following five primary components and programs: resource protection and enhancement, demonstration and education, research, timber management, and recreation. SDSF management goals will be achieved by meeting a series of specific objectives, listed within the General Forest Management Plan, for Biota, Fisheries, Watershed Assessment, Demonstration and Education, Timber Management, Research, Recreation, Resource Protection, Archeology, and Roads.

Santa Cruz Kangaroo Rat

The Santa Cruz kangaroo rat (*Dipodomys venustus venustus*), a California species of special concern, is a small rodent that is endemic to the Santa Cruz Sandhills. The California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) indicates that a population of Santa Cruz kangaroo rat potentially exists within or adjacent to the Project boundaries. The IS/ND does not include Santa Cruz kangaroo rat as a species that may occur in the Project boundaries, and it is unclear from the IS/ND whether chaparral habitats present within the SDSF property were assessed for the presence of this species. CDFW recommends that subsequent environmental documents prepared for the activities described in the Management Plan indicate whether on-site chaparral habitats are suitable for this species and address any potential impacts associated with activities in this habitat.

Marbled Murrelet

The marbled murrelet is a state endangered seabird which, in California, uses coastal coniferous forests from Del Norte to Santa Cruz County during the breeding season (March 24 to September 15). Marbled murrelets have been documented nesting in mature, old-growth forests as well as younger forest stands with late-seral elements such as large trees with moss-covered limbs >6 inches wide or limb defects (McShane *et al.* 2004). Mature conifer stands often have a complex tree crown structure with gaps in the canopy which allow access by adult murrelets to and from nest platforms during parental incubation exchanges and chick feeding (Ralph *et al.* 1995).

According to CDFW records, suitable marbled murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*) habitat exists within the Project boundaries, and occupied behavior has been observed in adjacent watersheds. Large diameter mature trees are often part of a highly fragmented landscape, and retention of these legacy trees maintains and promotes the development of structural complexities that provide nesting, shelter, and foraging habitat to a variety of wildlife species. CDFW recommends that subsequent environmental documents prepared for the activities described in the Management Plan analyze and mitigate for any impacts to marbled murrelets and their habitat. While murrelets may not have been recently encountered in the Project area, future occupancy is possible based on the presence of suitable habitat within the Project area and the proximity of occupied stands.

Grassland Habitat

Environmental Setting, page 12 states the following:

Approximately four acres of SDSF are comprised of grassland and mixed chaparral communities. SDSF's grasslands primarily contain wild oats and annual fescue grasses. Most grasslands are being encroached upon by coyote brush, lupine, poison oak, and Douglas-fir.

CDFW recommends that subsequent environmental documents prepared for the activities described in the Management Plan address impacts to grassland and mixed chaparral habitat and provide mitigation to minimize disturbance to these plant communities.

If you have any questions, please contact Ms. Julie Coombes, Environmental Scientist, at (707) 944-5529; or Ms. Randi Adair, Senior Environmental Scientist (Supervisory), at (707) 944-5596.

cc: State Clearinghouse

Literature Cited

McShane, C., T. Hamer, H. Carter, G. Swartzman, V. Friesen, D. Ainley, R. Tressler, K. Nelson, A. Burger, L. Spear, T. Mohagen, R. Martin, L. Henkel, K. Prindle, C. Strong, and J. Keany. 2004. Evaluation report for the 5-year status review of the marbled murrelet in Washington, Oregon, and California. Unpublished report. EDAW, Inc. Seattle, Washington. Prepared for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 1. Portland, Oregon.

Ralph, C.J., G.L. Hunt, Jr., M.G. Raphael, and J.F. Piatt. Technical Editors. 1995. Ecology and Conservation of the Marbled Murrelet. U.S. Forest Service, Gen. Tech. Rep. PSW-GTR-152, Pacific Southwest Research Station, Albany, California.