

Wildlife and Habitat Conservation Coalition

Dedicated to the sustained conservation of native animal and plant species in the Southwest Bioregion.



April 2, 2020

Ms. Chelsea Oakes, Manager
Land Use and Environmental Planning
County of San Diego
Via: mscp@sdcounty.ca.gov

RE: WHCC comments on ICF report options for the North County Multiple Species Conservation Plan.

Dear Ms. Oakes:

The undersigned members of the Wildlife and Habitat Conservation Coalition would like to offer the following general comments on the ICF report. Individual organizations will have more specific and detailed comments, but we wanted to provide some overview recommendations on several questions posed by the ICF report. There are many recommendations made by ICF that we strongly support. These, also, are listed below.

1. We strongly support a primary focus for all future effort on Option 5: Revise and Adopt a North County MSCP (NC-MSCP).

Although we understand that under different conditions, some of the other options outlined in the ICF report may have merits, in our case we recommend we focus all energy on Option 5. A North County MSCP that meets both the HCP and NCCP standards is the only option which meets legal requirements under the General Plan and provides ecosystem-based conservation planning and management.

Further, any other option makes unlikely the assemblage of effective wildlife corridors between core habitat areas. Many species of wildlife require corridors and climate change will exacerbate this need. Without corridors, the County will experience increased risks of extinctions of sensitive and rare species west of the mountains. Last, a quality MSCP is our best strategy for ensuring that critical habitat is protected and housing is more easily constructed (reduced regulatory burden) in areas where it makes sense—urban infill and along or near transportation corridors.

2. Rancho Guejito and Warner Springs Ranch should be included.

As the largest, intact Mexican Land Grant in the state, all efforts should be made to include this area as an essential portion of the North County conservation plan. While the current landowner may not be willing to participate at this time, the County should include Rancho Guejito in the NC-MSCP as a “Major Amendment” area as an unplanned/unpermitted portion of the North County preserve area, subject to future negotiations. Such designation would be similar to how unresolved but essential portions of the South County MSCP were addressed

and would clarify the County's acknowledgment of the important conservation values of the property.

In addition, we recommend that County add Warner Springs Ranch to the NC-MSCP as this property would provide important habitat conservation and species coverage and could be included in advance of the East County plan completion.

3. Golden Eagle should be included in the NC-MSCP

It is important to include the golden eagle as it has landscape-level conservation implications, particularly because it needs large grassland areas and remote rocky nesting sites, and it has been dramatically declining in SD County and SoCal. The inclusion of Warner Springs Ranch would allow for better conditions for the golden eagle to be covered in the species list of the NC_MSCP. If not included, we would like to engage immediately in understanding of what regional or countywide recovery plan will be pursued and when.

4. Engelmann Oak should be included in the NC-MSCP

As we recall, the Engelmann oak was on the plan originally as a keystone species. While not a listed species itself (yet), the loss of oak woodlands in the North County MSCP would be catastrophic to other species. Our experience with once abundant species that quickly become extinct or endangered (e.g. American chestnut, American elm, Passenger Pigeon) should be reason for cause and care. Even our local, currently abundant Coast Live Oak may well be threatened due to drought and boring beetle infestations. If these established, anchor species are further reduced due to the many current stressors without rapid action they'll disappear due to the length of time it takes for them to reach reproductive maturity. It is for these reasons we believe the Engelmann Oak should be included as an indicator species in the MSCP.

5. We support an in-lieu fee if properly conditioned

An in-lieu fee program, if allowed, should have several conditions placed on it. It should be allowed for the acquisition of properties only in the North County planning area and only if the County places limitations on its use (e.g., constrained in time, restricted to the planning area, and used to purchase equivalent habitat). For example, there must be actual habitat land acquisitions commensurate with impacts (habitat mitigation in rough proportion to habitat and species impacts and consistent with mitigation ratios).

Further, any in-lieu fee program must not be allowed to accumulate funds in perpetuity but must verify appropriate habitat acquisitions on at least a biannual basis, allowing for the in-lieu funds to build to some acceptable level.

Last, if the County relies on mitigation banks, only those (both public and private banks) within the designated planning area boundary should be used. To facilitate this, the County should encourage the establishment of private mitigation banks within the designated planning area.

6. The impact of trails and recreation in sensitive habitat areas is a key concern and not adequately addressed in the ICF report.

The ICF report and the County's Preserve Trail Guidelines (2018) reflect a common assumption that non-consumptive recreation is compatible with the protection of biological resources. However, documented evidence indicates that this is a flawed assumption and that the majority of the documented effects on wildlife from non-consumptive recreation (nature and wildlife viewing and photography, hiking, biking, horseback riding, etc.) are negative.

Establishing areas in North County dedicated to recreation separate from areas conserved for the covered species would be the optimal way to achieve the plan's conservation objectives, particularly because (a) the North County planning area has fewer and smaller areas of "core habitat" and its natural connections (internally and externally) are more constrained than in other plan areas, and (b) the greater the proportion of a conserved area directly and indirectly affected by trails and recreational activities, the fewer options there are for wildlife to move to areas outside the recreationally affected areas, and the less likely it is that spatial buffers will protect the covered species from recreational disturbance.

Moving forward with the NC-MSCP, this matter warrants full consideration for habitats conserved primarily or solely for the perpetuation of viable populations of the covered species and under circumstances where there are insufficient resources to ensure that proper planning of recreational infrastructure (i.e. trails) and adequate monitoring, management, and enforcement of recreation will occur.

7. Issue resolution should include a stakeholder group.

The overall approach to problem solving and issue resolution is reasonably complete, but we see a need for regular involvement with stakeholders. We recommend that the County retain/establish a stakeholder advisory group and include it in the process at key intervals.

8. Funding remains key to success of the plan.

The costs to manage the preserve in perpetuity should reference that the 1998 MSCP Regional Plan envisioned the establishment of a regional funding mechanism.¹ While this has not yet been established, this remains a possible solution for the County and all other San Diego NCCP/HCPs. The potential of a SANDAG transportation funding program which integrates its transportation needs and the San Diego NCCP/HCPs is one potential way for the funding for this plan to be achieved.

9. Additional report recommendations we support

- Page 3-4. We strongly support the use and improvement of the best available scientific data to prepare habitat suitability and species distribution modeling that are used to assess potential take and conservation, and to develop preserve design, monitoring and management.

¹ <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/pds/mscp/docs/SCMSCP/FinalMSCPProgramPlan.pdf>.

- Page 3-7. We strongly support the recommendation: *“the biological goals and objectives need to, at a minimum, quantitatively establish the amount of habitat for each species (based on species distribution modeling) that will be included in the Preserve System through project mitigation or other additional conservation.”*
- Page 3-8. We strongly support the recommendation that all fuel management clearing occur within project footprints, and not be allowed to extend into the preserve.
- Page 3-12. We cautiously support the recommendation to have the North County plan prepared without undue influence from the South County plan’s approach. We will be interested in discussing further effective substitute mechanisms to the BMO and PAMA approach.
- Pages 3-15 and 3-16. The recommended changes to how to approach preserve assembly appear to be reasonable for this planning area.
- Page 3-20. We support an assigned staff and a separate and dedicated team for implementation. We do not think this program is best located within the Parks and Recreation Department, due to the competing objectives of a Preserve system for wildlife conservation and the Department’s mission to provide recreation for the public.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important effort and we look forward to working with the County on the North County MSCP.

Sincerely,

Frank Landis, California Native Plant Society

Dan Silver, Endangered Habitats League

Pamela Heatherington, Environmental Center of San Diego

David Hogan, The Chaparral Lands Conservancy

Cody Pettersen, San Diego Democrats for Environmental Action

NeySa Ely, San Pasqual Valley Preservation Alliance

Bill Tippetts, Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association

Mary Clarke, North County MSCP/MHCP Task Force, Sierra Club San Diego

Laura Hunter, Escondido Neighbors United

Diane Nygaard, Preserve Calavera

Joan Herskowitz, Buena Vista Audubon Society

Karen Zirk, Friends of Rose Creek

Jim Peugh, San Diego Audubon Society

George Courser, Sierra Club San Diego Chapter

Richard W. Halsey, California Chaparral Institute

cc.

Supervisor Dianne Jacob

Supervisor Nathan Fletcher

Supervisor Kristin Gaspar

Supervisor Greg Cox

Supervisor Jim Desmond

Brian Albright

Sarah Aghassi

Mark Wardlaw

Deborah Mosley

Jason Hemmens