DRAFT
Finding of No Significant Impact

National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Program
Riverside Ranch Restoration Project

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to enter into a grant agreement with the California State Coastal Conservancy (SCC) to fund, in part, the Riverside Ranch Restoration Project (RRRP) on the Salt River, Humboldt County, California. This project will restore a functional tidal ecosystem, restore habitat for special status species, and reduce flooding by restoring tidal prism, sediment transport, and floodplain connectivity. The project area is protected in perpetuity, and will be managed by the California Department of Fish and Game as part of the Eel River Wildlife Area.

The RRRP is Phase 1 of the two-phased Salt River Ecosystem Restoration Project (SRERP), which intends to restore ecosystem functions and values throughout the entire 47-square mile Salt River watershed. The project has been developed through a partnership of watershed residents and local, state, and federal agencies. The SRERP will restore the lower Salt River tidal prism through the RRRP, restore hydraulic connectivity and habitat function within the middle stretch of the Salt River channel by means of channel excavation and riparian restoration, work with private landowners to implement erosion control and sediment reduction activities in the upper watersheds, and implement an adaptive management plan to reduce sediment input to the main Salt River channel. Recovering estuarine habitat and hydrologic functions through the RRRP is the first step in this comprehensive watershed restoration program, and is the focus of the Service's proposed grant agreement with SCC.

This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was prepared by the Service in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). The following sections describe the restoration activities and environmental analyses addressed by this document.

Proposed Activities Under Grant Agreement

Grant funding for a subset of restoration activities under the RRRP will be provided through the Service's National Coastal Wetlands Conservation (NCWC) Program. Grant funds and matching State funds wil be used by SCC to:

- <u>Restore historic Salt River channel</u> — The Salt River's tidally influenced area will be restored through removal of sediment in the channel adjacent to the Ranch up to river mile 2.5, in order to accommodate flow from both the new tidal wetland area and future upper channel efforts to be completed in phase 2 of the SRERP. The expanded channel will more closely resemble the historic channel width of approximately 200 feet. The expanded channel will enhance tidal

exchange within the newly created wetlands on Riverside Ranch, thereby enabling the habitat restoration, as well as preventing the development of anoxic conditions within newly created salt marsh habitat. The excavated channel material will be used to construct setback berms and to provide gradual elevation gradients for transitional ecotone habitat.

- Lower the Riverside Ranch Levee — Portions of the outboard Riverside Ranch levee adjacent to the Salt River will be lowered to create high marsh habitat and restore the high tide hydraulic connection between the river and the project area. Lowering of the outboard levee also removes barriers to the deposition of debris and wrack as evidenced in more natural systems. The remaining portions of the ranch levees will be retained in order to preserve existing coastal scrub habitat. The majority of tidal exchange will still be directed into the designed breach locations to maximize scour and sediment transport in the Salt River channel.
- Refurbish setback berm — Approximately 3,500 linear feet of the existing berm along the northern boundary of Riverside Ranch will be refurbished from material excavated from the Salt River channel and from interior channel excavations. This "ecoberm" will have a very gentle interior slope to help reduce wave erosion as well as create an upland-salt marsh ecotone. The berm will have a crest height of about 14 feet above sea level and top width of at least 12 feet, and its outboard slope would be 4:1. The design provides for inclusion of culverts, future transport of livestock, maintenance access, and potential floodways for Eel River flooding. Excess material generated from the Salt River cleaning will be used to selectively create broader sloped areas along the berm to increase upland transition zones.
- Enhance marsh plain — Selected elevated areas within Riverside Ranch will be lowered and filled in order to enhance marsh plain within the tidal area. Two internal areas totaling 35 acres will be enhanced to tidal elevations.
- Plan and design project — Extensive project planning, modeling, and ecosystem assessment has been undertaken for the project. Close coordination with local stakeholders, adjacent landowners, resource agencies, and the public has been an ongoing process for this project. Comprehensive hydrologic and salinity modeling has been completed, and conceptual engineering plans have been developed for the project. Salt River channel restoration upstream of Riverside Ranch has been modeled and designed by the Salt River Design Team composed of private consultants and technical expertise from several agency partners to maximize tidal prism, sediment transport, and fisheries habitat values.
- Education — Project partners will conduct educational programs and outreach to increase environmental awareness and develop support for coastal wetlands conservation.

Implementation of the grant agreement will restore and enhance a total of 334 acres of tidal salt marsh, riparian habitat, freshwater marsh, and aquatic/mudflat habitat at Riverside Ranch, and 2.5 miles of Salt River channel. This will contribute to the recovery of federally-listed and at risk fish and wildlife species, re-establish diverse coastal wetlands through tidal prism restoration, improve water quality by reducing sediment loads, provide recreation and environmental education, and sequester carbon through development of salt marsh.

Other activities also would occur under the RRRP using other sources of funding that are not part of the Service's proposed grant agreement. These include environmental compliance and permitting, construction of a new setback berm along the eastern project boundary, breaching of the Salt River Levee, excavation of new marsh channels, filling of existing ranch drainage ditches, retention of agricultural land and enhancement of cackling goose habitat, and education and public access. Likewise, activities in the upper watershed to be conducted as part of the larger SRERP would not use grant funds from the Service, but would rely on other sources of funding.

Environmental Assessment

Pursuant to Department of the Interior (DOI) guidance for Implementation of NEPA (2008), agencies are encouraged to use existing NEPA analysis, where appropriate, to avoid redundancy and unnecessary paperwork. An Environmental Assessment (EA) has been previously prepared by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) for purposes of issuing permits to the SRERP under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act and Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act. The project's preferred alternative (Full Ecosystem Restoration) was chosen for implementation. The Service's independent review determined that the Corps' EA sufficiently covers the Service's grant-funded activities and satisfies DOI and Service NEPA requirements for impact analysis. No changes have been made to activities proposed under the grant agreement that would affect results of the Corps' impact analysis. Therefore, the Service has adopted the EA prepared by the Corps to meet impact assessment needs for the grant agreement. The EA is a component of the Corps' Department of the Army Permit Evaluation and Decision Document, which is attached to this FONSI for reference.

The scope of the EA covers the entire SRERP, inclusive of all activities contained in Phases 1 and 2. Although restoration activities are described separately for Phases 1 and 2, some of the impact analyses are more broadly described in the EA for both phases as a whole. Nevertheless, none of the impacts identified for the SRERP were determined to be significant, and composite impact descriptions contained in the EA are descriptive and suitable for assessing effects of activities at Riverside Ranch under the grant agreement.

Environmental effects of the SRERP, in its entirety, also were assessed by the State lead agency, the Humboldt County Resource Conservation District (HCRCD), for the project under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The resulting Environmental Impact Report and Notice of Determination can be found on the HCRCD Web site at: http://humboldtrcd.org/index_files/salt_river_ecosystem_restoration_project.htm.

Environmental Impacts

As a restoration project involving earth moving and other alterations of the physical environment, some impacts will occur initially that would be considered adverse in the short term. However, project work was designed to be self-mitigating and it is anticipated that long-term impacts are beneficial. The following table summarizes potential environmental impacts of activities to be implemented under the grant agreement, as documented in the Corps' EA for the SRERP. Additional detail can be found in the attached EA.

Environmental Component	Impact Determination	Rationale
Physical Environment		
Substrate	Beneficial in long term	Substrates returned to natural state support natural community
Erosion and Sediment	Beneficial	Erosion and sediment accretion patterns are improved
Currents, Circulation, & Drainage	Beneficial	Improved tidal currents, tributary drainage, and sediment management
Water Quality	Beneficial	Fresh water flow plus improved tidal flow improve water quality
Flood Hazard & Floodplain Function	Beneficial	Sediment excavation and improved drainage reduce flooding
Wetland Functions	Beneficial	Increased wetland area attenuates sedimentation and increases flood storage
Baseflow	Beneficial	Expanded tidal prism improves watershed drainage
Biological Environment		
Wetlands	Beneficial	Wetland area, quality, and diversity increased
Mudflats	Beneficial in long term	Mudflat area increased
Vegetated Shallows	Beneficial in long term	Eelgrass habitat increased
Pool and Riffle Areas	Beneficial in long term	Reduced sediment, added habitat structure, and extensive riparian planting improve habitat
Wildlife Sanctuaries & Refuges	Beneficial in long term	Area to be managed as wildlife preserve increased
Threatened & Endangered Species & Critical Habitat	Beneficial in long term	Several fish species benefit from habitat restoration
Essential Fish Habitat	Beneficial in long term	Subtidal and intertidal estuarine and seagrass habitat improved
Riparian Vegetation	Beneficial in long term	Riparian vegetation increased 400 percent
Fish & Wildlife Habitat	Beneficial in long term	Habitat improved for fish, waterfowl, mammals, and other wildlife
Social-Economic Environment		
Air Quality	Adverse in short term	Dust and emissions from restoration work are minor and short term

Noise Conditions	Adverse in short term	Noise from restoration work would be minor and short term
Food and Fiber Production	Beneficial in long term	Production would not decrease; part of Riverside Ranch dedicated to continued production; losses from flooding in nearby areas reduced
Commercial and Recreational Fishing	Beneficial in long term	Opportunities for recreational fishing increased
Recreational Resources	Beneficial in long term	Recreational opportunities increase following construction
Aesthetic Quality	Beneficial in long term	Aesthetics would evolve over time
Traffic and Transportation	Adverse in short term	Increased traffic from restoration work would be minor and short term
Municipal and Private Water Supply and Conservation	Beneficial	Reduced contamination in surface and ground water due to increased hydraulic connectivity with the upgraded Ferndale Wastewater Treatment Plant
Public Health and Safety	Beneficial in long term	Improved water quality and reduced risk of flooding
Property Ownership	Beneficial	Private property rights shall be honored; private property will be protected from flooding
Cumulative Impacts	Beneficial	Restoration of environment to more natural conditions compliments other beneficial watershed management efforts

Conservation Measures

Special conditions were defined in the Corps' EA for inclusion in Department of the Army permits authorizing SRERP restoration activities. These conditions, as summarized below, will further avoid, minimize, and compensate for unavoidable adverse impacts to aquatic resources, and will be incorporated into the Service's grant agreement:

1. Compliance with mandatory terms and conditions associated with incidental take authorized by the biological opinions issued to the Corps by the Service and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).
2. Adherence to the schedule outlined in the approved "Salt River Ecosystem Restoration project Rare Plant Mitigation and Monitoring Plan."

3. Provision of a mid-term and final delineation of wetland sand other waters of the United States for SRERP Phase 1 and Phase 2 project sites.
4. The applicant will notify the Corps prior to maintenance activities for Phases 1 and 2 and report excavated volume and location post construction and in accordance with associated plans developed for the SRERP. The work shall be performed in conformance with the final approved plans.
5. Acquisition of an additional permit for maintenance activities, such as sediment removal and channel excavation, between Phase 1 construction and prior to Phase 2 construction.

Other Statutory Compliance Requirements

The Corps' EA describes completion of consultations under the Endangered Species Act, for which the Service and NMFS issued Biological Opinions (attached to the EA), and National Historic Preservation Act, for which the Service received concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Officer that project work at Riverside Ranch would not affect historic properties. Compliance with other federal laws also is described in the Corps' EA for the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act; Section 404 of the Clean Water Act; Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act; Wild and Scenic Rivers Act; Clean Air Act; Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act; Executive Order 11988, Floodplain Management; Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands; Executive Order 3112, Invasive Species; Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations; Executive Order 13175, Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments; Executive Order 13186, Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds; and Executive Orders 13212 and 13302, Actions to Expedite Energy-Related Projects. The Service concurs that the Corps' description of compliance with these measures is sufficient to meet the requirements of these laws.

Public Involvement

Extensive public involvement has occurred throughout development of the SRERP, including several public meetings and opportunities for public comment on draft planning documents (described in section 1.5 of the project EIR), and the Corps' Public Notice process for issuance of environmental permits. The Service is making this Draft FONSI available for public review for a period of 14 days, after which a final FONSI will be prepared.

Conclusions

Based upon findings and conclusions in the Corps' EA, we have determined that implementation of the activities at Riverside Ranch, as described under the grant agreement, will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The project is expected to have short and long-term benefits for coastal wetland ecosystems that outweigh the temporary adverse effects of project construction. All measures to avoid, minimize and compensate adverse effects would be included as special conditions in the grant agreement obligating NCWC funds.

Therefore, it is my determination that partial funding of the RRRP under the NCWC Program does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required.

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Regional Director, Southwest Region Date

References

Department of the Interior. 2008. Implementation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969: A rule by the Department of the Interior on 10/15/2008. Federal Register Vol. 73, No. 20, Section 46.120.

Humboldt County Resource Conservation District. 2011. Final Environmental Impact Report: Salt River Ecosystem Restoration Project. February 2012. Eureka, CA.