



ECOS
ENVIRONMENTAL
♦ COUNCIL ♦
OF SACRAMENTO



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February 17, 2022

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Paul Lau
General Manager, Sacramento Municipal Utility District
6301 S Street
Sacramento, CA 95017

RE: Coyote Creek Agrivoltaic Ranch Project, SCH 2022010271

Dear Ms. Inman:

The Environmental Council of Sacramento, Habitat 2020, the Sacramento Group of the Sierra Club, and Sacramento Audubon offer the following comments with respect to the preparation of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the Coyote Creek Agrivoltaic Ranch Project.

Background. This large solar project was presented to the Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) last year, and SMUD signed a 30-year contract to purchase energy from the proposed solar project. We laud SMUD's desire to achieve the very ambitious goal of net zero carbon by 2030 and acknowledge the difficulties inherent in successfully meeting that goal.

Our concern is that Blue Oak Woodland is an imperiled habitat in California, and it was recently highlighted as such in the draft "Pathways to 30 x 30" document. Such an important and imperiled habitat would not have necessarily been a top pick for constructing such a facility if the habitat values involved had been considered in the context of other potential locations in our region. We acknowledge that there are limited options for the placement of such a facility, but we are not aware of a comprehensive analysis and compendium of suitable locations for solar farms prepared by SMUD for the region, so there is no resource to compare and contrast the Coyote Creek project.

We are disappointed that a more proactive approach to identifying the most appropriate placement for such facilities was not used, which would examine the region's geography based on considerations like days of clear skies, footprints of the available land, proximity to suitably sized transmission lines, and habitat values. We hope that SMUD will invest in identifying the most appropriate locations for solar farms in our region going forward, but for this project deciding on alternatives for analysis is complicated by not knowing what the most appropriate placement might be for such a facility within our region. At a minimum, though, these alternatives or additional concurrent options should be included and analyzed: 1) Accelerating and incentivizing rooftop solar within the urban landscape; 2) Utilizing a property within the Urban Development Area (UDA) – we understand that part of the Waegell Ranch was being considered at one point recently; and 3) Constructing the facility on more heavily utilized agricultural land with fewer habitat values, like a vineyard.

As concerning as this project placement is, the greater concern is that this will open the floodgates to other projects of this sort in this imperiled habitat type. The analysis of the growth inducement potential of this project needs to be very carefully considered, and measures and or mitigations put in place to address this large potential impact.

Project Comments

Williamson Act Compliance in Project Description. The project description maintains that the property currently complies with the Williamson Act and quotes supporting language in the statute. However, it makes a claim that solar projects would also comply with limited justification. The project description should indicate why this project is deemed to be consistent with the requirements of the Williamson Act.

Blue Oak Woodland Impacts. The impacts of the project on direct loss of blue oaks woodlands and the ability for blue oak regeneration due to loss of surrounding habitat suitable for seed germination should be analyzed.

Listed Plant Species. Careful consideration should be given to any listed plant species within the project area.

Evaluate Proposed Seeding Program. More details are needed regarding any proposed seeding as part of the project. The impacts of initial and ongoing reseeded in disturbed areas and under the solar panels need to be evaluated and appropriate limitations on seed composition and methods of application identified as mitigation.

Scope of Wildlife Impacts Analysis. Analysis of impacts should be included for the numerous other species that utilize Blue Oak Woodlands. A minimum list of potential species that utilize Blue Oak Woodlands can be found in the California Wildlife Relationships System (CWHR). The California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) should be used with caution and with the realization that it is not an indicator of the absence of a species in any given habitat. In addition, avian species occurrences in CNDDDB are predominantly nesting bird observations, while Blue Oak Woodlands are used for foraging or migration.

Raptor Analysis. The raptor analysis should include the potential for bird strikes on the solar panels, access to prey species below the panels, effects of glare from the panels on feeding and nesting behavior, effects of new lighting on feeding and nesting behavior, disturbance during construction, and disturbance from maintenance activities.

Badger Impacts. Impacts to American Badger should be carefully analyzed, especially habitat fragmentation and impacts to connectivity. This is a species with a large home range that utilizes the Blue Oak Woodlands or Blue Oak Savanna and therefore is very susceptible to habitat fragmentation.

Habitat connectivity is a major and growing concern, especially as climate change models increasingly indicate the probability of species having to relocate to cooler climates. The impact of this project on east west connectivity should be analyzed in the DEIR, and a viable connectivity corridor should be included as an avoidance and minimization measure, ideally using Coyote Creek and setbacks on either side of it that extend 150' from the center of the creek, which is consistent with South Sacramento Habitat Conservation Plan (SSHCP) stream setbacks for undeveloped waterways.

Impacts to the South Sacramento Habitat Conservation Plan The project is entirely within the boundary of the SSHCP and its consistency with the SSHCP needs to be analyzed. The SSHCP does not have any take of Blue Oak Woodlands covered in it, so no mandatory mitigations for the preservation of that habitat type are included. But the Plan recognizes the importance of preserving Blue Oak Woodlands and includes a 7,000 acres conservation target in Appendix J of the Plan, the "over and above" conservation targets. The regulatory agencies cited the importance and significance of the "over and above" targets in their approval of the Plan.

At a minimum, these impacts to the SSHCP should be analyzed: 1) Habitat fragmentation and potential loss of wildlife corridor on the eastern border of the Plan area; 2) Impact of this project on the ability of the SSHCP to achieve its target of 7,000 acres of Blue Oak Woodland conservation in the eastern portion of the Plan area; and 3) Determination if any of the parcels within the project area also within the Urban Development Area of the SSHCP and therefore part of the SSHCP

Growth inducement is a significant concern with this project, potentially resulting in numerous projects of this type in the Blue Oak Woodland of eastern Sacramento County. SMUD may not elect to purchase energy from other projects in this sensitive habitat, but other utilities from elsewhere in the state, and potentially further afield, may well be enticed to do so, particularly because the impacts associated with such a project would not be borne in their region. The DEIR should evaluate the potential that this project will induce additional projects of this type in the Blue Oak Woodlands south and east of the proposed project and the impact that potential growth inducement could have on 1) the 7,000-acre conservation target in Appendix J of the SSHCP; and 2) the “inventory area” of the SSHCP. The DEIR should indicate how this growth inducement will be avoided or at least fully mitigated. Dismissing the growth inducement potential of this project as speculative and/or unmitigable is neither warranted or justifiable.

Compatibility with Resource Conservation Overlay. Substantial acreage within the planned project is within the Resource Conservation Overlay of the Sacramento County General Plan Land Use Diagram. It is important that the document look at the consistency of this project with that designation, both in terms of the resource values meriting special designation on the plan map and the applicability of the overlay designation. While the General Plan Land Use Element text emphasizes the voluntary scope of the designation, the analysis should nevertheless address the degree to which the proposed project as a whole comports with the intent of the designation to protect and enhance the blue oak woodlands.

To summarize, we fully support and encourage SMUD’s efforts to achieve the very ambitious goal of net zero carbon by 2030. We recognize the necessity of pursuing large solar projects to achieve additional renewable energy capacity quickly. We encourage SMUD to concurrently pursue more challenging but less impactful options including rooftops and more heavily used agricultural land. We request that SMUD evaluate and identify locations for future solar farms that minimize impacts to wildlife habitat including blue oak woodlands.

And we ask that Sacramento County, fully evaluate and respond to our comments specific to the preparation of the DEIR for the Coyote Creek Agrivoltaic Ranch Project.

Sincerely,



Susan Herre
President
ECOS



Sean Wirth
Co-Chair
Habitat 2020



William Bianco
President
Sacramento Audubon



Barbara Leary
Chair, Sacramento Group
Sierra Club

CC:
SMUD Board Members
Kim Hudson, Executive Director, South Sacramento Habitat Conservation Plan