



State of California – Natural Resources Agency  
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE  
Central Region  
1234 East Shaw Avenue  
Fresno, California 93710  
[www.wildlife.ca.gov](http://www.wildlife.ca.gov)

**GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor**  
**CHARLTON H. BONHAM, Director**



June 16, 2025

Jonnie Lan, Principal Planner  
City of Merced Planning Division  
678 West 18<sup>th</sup> Street  
Merced, California 95340  
(209) 385-6858  
[lanj@cityofmerced.org](mailto:lanj@cityofmerced.org)

Subject: **UC Villages Project (Project)**  
**Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR)**  
**SCH: 2024031198**

Dear Jonnie Lan:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) received a DEIR from the City of Merced (City) for the Project pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and CEQA Guidelines.<sup>1</sup>

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding those activities involved in the Project that may affect California fish and wildlife. Likewise, CDFW appreciates the opportunity to provide comments regarding those aspects of the Project that CDFW, by law, may be required to carry out or approve through the exercise of its own regulatory authority under the Fish and Game Code.

## **CDFW ROLE**

CDFW is California's **Trustee Agency** for fish and wildlife resources and holds those resources in trust by statute for all the people of the State. (Fish & G. Code, §§ 711.7, subd. (a) & 1802; Pub. Resources Code, § 21070; CEQA Guidelines § 15386, subd. (a)). CDFW, in its trustee capacity, has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species. (*Id.*, § 1802). Similarly for purposes of CEQA, CDFW is charged by law to provide, as available, biological expertise during public

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<sup>1</sup> CEQA is codified in the California Public Resources Code in section 21000 et seq. The "CEQA Guidelines" are found in Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, commencing with section 15000.

Jonnie Lan  
Principal Planner  
June 16, 2025  
Page 2

agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect fish and wildlife resources.

CDFW is also submitting comments as a **Responsible Agency** under CEQA. (Pub. Resources Code, § 21069; CEQA Guidelines, § 15381). CDFW expects that it may need to exercise regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code. As proposed, for example, the Project may be subject to CDFW's lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority. (Fish & G. Code, § 1600 et seq.) Likewise, to the extent implementation of the Project as proposed may result in "take" as defined by State law of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) (Fish & G. Code, § 2050 et seq.), the project proponent may seek related take authorization as provided by the Fish and Game Code.

**Fully Protected Species:** CDFW has jurisdiction over fully protected species of birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles, and fish, pursuant to Fish and Game Code sections 3511, 4700, 5050, and 5515. Fully protected species may not be taken or possessed at any time and no licenses or permits may be issued for their take except as follows:

- Take is necessary for scientific research,
- Efforts to recover a fully protected, endangered, or threatened species, live capture, and relocation of a bird species for the protection of livestock, or
- They are a covered species whose conservation and management is provided for in a Natural Community Conservation Plan (Fish & G. Code, §§ 3511, 4700, 5050, & 5515).

**Unlisted Species:** Species of plants and animals need not be officially listed as Endangered, Rare, or Threatened (E, R, or T) on any State or Federal list to be considered E, R, or T under CEQA. If a species can be shown to meet the criteria for E, R, or T, as specified in the CEQA Guidelines section 15380, CDFW recommends it be fully considered in the environmental analysis for the Project.

**Nesting Birds:** CDFW has jurisdiction over actions with potential to result in the disturbance or destruction of active nest sites or the unauthorized take of birds. Fish and Game Code sections that protect birds, their eggs and nests include sections 3503 (regarding unlawful take, possession, or needless destruction of the nest or eggs of any bird), 3503.5 (regarding the take, possession, or destruction of any birds-of-prey or their nests or eggs), and 3513 (regarding unlawful take of any migratory nongame bird).

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION SUMMARY**

**Proponent:** UC Villages LLC

Jonnie Lan  
Principal Planner  
June 16, 2025  
Page 3

**Objective:** The Project proposes an approximately 35-acre development of mixed-use commercial and housing located across from the University of California, Merced (UC Merced) campus. The Project would include up to 700 multi-family and/or student housing residential units with approximately 18,000 square feet (sf) of amenity buildings, approximately 30,000 sf of commercial/retail, and an approximately 75,000 sf hotel.

**Location:** The Project site is located in unincorporated Merced County, to the northeast of the City of Merced's city limits. The site is at the southwestern corner at the intersection of Bellevue Road and Lake Road. The Project site is comprised of Assessor's Parcel Numbers (APNs) 060-590-016, -017, -019, -025, -026, and 060-020-016.

## COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CDFW offers the comments and recommendations below to assist the City in adequately identifying and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife (biological) resources. Editorial comments or other suggestions may also be included to improve the DEIR prepared for the Project.

CDFW submitted a comment letter on May 06, 2024 (CDFW NOP Letter) (Attachment 1), in response to the Project's Notice of Preparation (NOP), which provided recommendations identifying and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct and indirect impacts on biological resources.

The DEIR acknowledges that the Project site is within the geographic range of special-status species and proposes specific mitigation measures for some species to reduce impacts to less than significant. CDFW has concerns about the ability of some the proposed mitigation measures to reduce potential impacts to less than significant and avoid unauthorized take for special-status species including, but not limited to: the State endangered and State fully protected bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*); the State threatened Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*); the State and federally threatened California tiger salamander – central California DPS (*Ambystoma californiense pop. 1*); the State fully protected golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*); the State candidate western burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*); and the State candidate Crotch's bumble bee (*Bombus crotchii*).

### Fully Protected Raptors

The DEIR's Biological Resource Assessment (BRA) states that bald eagle (BAEA) and golden eagle (GOEA) are absent from the Project site (due to a lack of suitable nesting habitat) and, therefore, wouldn't be impacted by Project implementation. CDFW doesn't

Jonnie Lan  
Principal Planner  
June 16, 2025  
Page 4

concur that BAEA and GOEA are absent from the Project site and would not be impacted by Project activities as it does not appear that focused surveys were conducted within the Project site and vicinity for these species as recommended in the CDFW NOP Letter. Additionally, a BAEA historical occurrence was documented at Lake Yosemite, ½-mile north of the Project site (CDFW 2025), and aerial imagery notes potentially suitable nesting trees adjacent to Lake Yosemite and along the eastern and northern Project boundaries, including where the Project's May 2024 reconnaissance survey documented suitable foraging habitat (e.g., California ground squirrels and burrows observed near the Lateral Canal). As it does not appear that focused surveys following the CDFW NOP Letter recommendations were conducted and no mitigation measures for GOEA and BAEA included in the DEIR, CDFW recommends the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) include the following:

**Recommended Mitigation Measure 1: BAEA Surveys and GOEA Surveys**

CDFW recommends that focused BAEA surveys follow the Bald Eagle Breeding Survey Instructions (CDFW 2010) and GOEA surveys use the Interim Golden Eagle Inventory and Monitoring Protocols; and Other Recommendations guidelines (Pagel et al. 2010) and be conducted by qualified biologists prior to Project implementation.

**Recommended Mitigation Measure 2: BAEA and GOEA Avoidance Buffer**

If a BAEA or GOEA nest is found prior to, or during construction, CDFW recommends implementing a minimum ½-mile no-disturbance buffer around the nest. CDFW advises that this buffer remain in place until the breeding season has ended or until a qualified biologist has determined that nesting has ceased and the birds have fledged and are no longer reliant upon parental care for survival. In the event that a BAEA or GOEA nest is detected during surveys, and a ½-mile no-disturbance buffer is not feasible, consultation with CDFW is warranted to discuss how to implement the Project and avoid take .

**Swainson's Hawk**

The DEIR notes that a Swainson's hawk (SWHA) individual was observed soaring over the Project site during the May 2024 reconnaissance survey and that potentially suitable SWHA nesting and foraging habitat occurs onsite. Mitigation Measure (MM) 3.4-3(a) proposes mitigation for potential impacts to SWHA and requires protocol-level surveys prior to construction. The measure states if an active nest is identified, "... an avoidance and minimization plan should be developed for approval by CDFW prior to the start of construction." In addition, the measure may include establishment of a 200-yard avoidance buffer but states, "If work will occur within 200 yards of the nest, then construction will be monitored by a qualified biologist to ensure that no work occurs within 50 yards of the nest during incubation or within 10 days after hatching (Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee 2000)."

Jonnie Lan  
Principal Planner  
June 16, 2025  
Page 5

CDFW doesn't concur that MM 3.4-3(a) is sufficient to reduce impacts to less than significant and avoid unauthorized take of SWHA. First, CDFW does not recommend the development of an *avoidance and minimization plan* that incorporates minimization strategies or the buffer distances identified above without an Incidental Take Permit (ITP) as implementation of these measures may result in unauthorized take of the species. Additionally, while CDFW recommends the methodology developed by the SWHA Technical Advisory Committee (SWHA TAC 2000) to survey for SWHA nests, CDFW does not recommend relying on the table at the end of this document ("Determining a Project's Potential for Impacting Swainson's Hawks") to reduce significant impacts or avoid take. CDFW asserts that even the activities the document associates with low to medium impact risk may result in potentially significant impacts and unauthorized take of SWHA. As such, similar to the buffer recommendations for BAEA and GOEA, CDFW recommends a ½-mile buffer be established and maintained around each active SWHA nest. To reduce Project impacts to less than significant and avoid unauthorized take of SWHA, CDFW recommends the FEIR include the following measures:

**Recommended Mitigation Measure 3: SWHA Avoidance Buffer**

If Project-specific activities will take place during the SWHA nesting season (i.e., March 1 through September 15), and active SWHA nests are present, CDFW recommends a minimum ½-mile no-disturbance buffer be delineated and maintained around each nest, regardless of whether it was detected by surveys or observed incidentally. These buffers would remain in place until the breeding season has ended or until a qualified biologist has determined that the birds have fledged and are no longer reliant upon the nest or parental care for survival, to prevent nest abandonment and other take of SWHA as a result of Project activities.

**Recommended Mitigation Measure 4: SWHA Take Authorization**

CDFW also recommends that in the event an active SWHA nest is detected, and a ½-mile no-disturbance buffer is not feasible, consultation with CDFW is warranted to discuss how to implement the Project and avoid take. If take cannot be avoided, authorization through the acquisition of an ITP, pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b) is necessary to comply with CESA.

**California Tiger Salamander**

The DEIR states that California tiger salamander (CTS) has a low potential to occur within the Project site as no aquatic breeding habitat occurs onsite; however, the DEIR states that potential upland dispersal habitat is present. MM 3.4-2(b) requires a pre-construction survey within 48 hours of Project activities, and, if CTS are found, the measure states, "...CDFW will be notified immediately and consultation will be initiated to develop appropriate actions before construction begins." CDFW doesn't concur that conducting a pre-construction survey only 48 hours in advance of Project activities

Jonnie Lan  
Principal Planner  
June 16, 2025  
Page 6

would be sufficient to detect CTS presence within suitable upland and/or breeding habitat. As such, CDFW recommends the following:

**Recommended Mitigation Measure 5: CTS Protocol-Level Surveys**

CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct protocol-level surveys in accordance with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) “Interim Guidance on Site Assessment and Field Surveys for Determining Presence or a Negative Finding of the California Tiger Salamander” (USFWS 2003) at the appropriate time of year to determine the existence and extent of CTS breeding and refugia habitat within suitable habitat. The protocol-level surveys for CTS require more than one survey season and are dependent upon sufficient rainfall to complete. As a result, consultation with CDFW and USFWS is recommended well in advance of beginning the surveys and prior to any planned vegetation or ground-disturbing activities. CDFW advises that the protocol-level survey also include a 100-foot buffer around the Project site in all areas that could support CTS. Please be advised that protocol-level survey results are viable for two years after the results are reviewed by CDFW.

**Recommended Mitigation Measure 6: CTS Avoidance Buffer**

If CTS protocol-level surveys are not conducted, CDFW advises that a minimum 50-foot no-disturbance buffer be delineated around all small mammal burrows in suitable upland refugia habitat within and/or adjacent to potential or known breeding habitat. Further, CDFW recommends potential or known breeding habitat within and/or adjacent to the Project site be delineated with a minimum 250-foot no-disturbance buffer. Both upland burrow and wetland breeding no-disturbance buffers are intended to minimize impacts to CTS habitat and avoid take of individuals.

**Recommended Mitigation Measure 7: CTS Take Authorization**

If through surveys it is determined that CTS are occupying or have the potential to occupy the Project site, consultation with CDFW is warranted to determine if the Project can avoid take. If take cannot be avoided, take authorization through the acquisition of an ITP, pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b), is necessary to comply with CESA. As stated above, in the absence of protocol surveys, the Project proponent can assume presence of CTS within the Project site and obtain an ITP from CDFW.

**Western Burrowing Owl**

CDFW notes that the California Fish and Game Commission (FGC) approved western burrowing owl (BUOW) as a potential candidate for listing as a protected species under CESA on October 10, 2024, and published these findings in the California Regulatory Notice Register (Notice Register) on October 25, 2024. As such, BUOW is now a candidate under CESA and receives the same legal protection afforded to an endangered or threatened species (Fish & G. Code, §§ 2074.2 & 2085).

Jonnie Lan  
Principal Planner  
June 16, 2025  
Page 7

The DEIR states that the BUOW has the potential to occur within the Project site as potentially suitable habitat is present onsite. MM 3.4-3(b) requires focused surveys within 500 feet of the Project site and appropriate avoidance buffers in accordance with CDFW's Staff Report on Burrowing Owl Mitigation (CDFG 2012). CDFW concurs with these measures and also recommends that these buffers be implemented for both wintering and breeding BUOW. If a BUOW or known BUOW den (active or inactive) is detected and the no-disturbance buffers are not feasible, CDFW recommends consultation with CDFW occur to discuss how to implement the Project and avoid take.

### **Crotch's Bumble Bee**

The DEIR states that Crotch's bumble bee (CBB) has a low potential to occur within the Project site as it provides marginally suitable nesting and foraging habitat. MM 3.4-1(b) requires protocol-level surveys and stoppage of work if CBB are encountered, until the individual leaves of its own volition. If a nest is detected, the measure states, "...an appropriate no disturbance buffer zone (including foraging resources and flight corridors essential for supporting the colony) shall be established around the nest to reduce the risk of disturbance or incidental take..." CDFW concurs with this measure but recommends that all potential habitat including small mammal burrows and thatched/bunch grasses be avoided by a minimum of 50 feet to avoid take and potentially significant impacts. CDFW also concurs with the portion of the measure that states the Project biologist would consult with CDFW if take cannot be avoided. If take cannot be avoided, take authorization through the acquisition of an ITP, pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b), is necessary to comply with CESA.

### **Editorial comments and/or suggestions**

**Landscape plans:** The DEIR states that a combination of native and non-native tree species will be utilized to create shade and comfort, along with street trees, ground cover, and shrubs being planted along Bellevue Road, Lake Road, Mandeville Lane, and internal roadways. CDFW recommends the Project landscaping plans restrict the use of invasive plant species as part of these plans. More information on common invasive plant species found in California can be found here: [The Cal-IPC Inventory – California Invasive Plant Council](#).

**Nesting Birds:** CDFW recognizes MM 3.4-3(d) to avoid or minimize impacts to nesting birds. CDFW encourages that Project ground-disturbing activities occur during the bird non-nesting season; however, if ground-disturbing or vegetation-disturbing activities must occur during the nesting season (February 1st through September 15th), the Project proponent is responsible for ensuring that implementation of the Project does not result in violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act or relevant Fish and Game Code sections as referenced above.

Jonnie Lan  
Principal Planner  
June 16, 2025  
Page 8

CDFW further recommends that a qualified biologist conduct a pre-construction survey for active nests no more than 10 days prior to the start of ground or vegetation disturbance to maximize the probability that nests that could potentially be impacted are detected. CDFW also recommends that surveys cover a sufficient area around the Project site to identify nests and determine their status. A sufficient area means any area potentially affected, either directly or indirectly, by the Project. In addition to direct impacts (i.e., nest destruction), noise, vibration, and movement of workers or equipment could also affect nests. CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist establish a behavioral baseline of all identified nests. Once Project activities begin, CDFW recommends having a qualified biologist continuously monitor nests to detect behavioral changes resulting from the Project. If behavioral changes occur, CDFW recommends halting the work causing that change and consulting with CDFW for additional avoidance and minimization measures.

If continuous monitoring of identified nests by a qualified biologist is not feasible, CDFW recommends a minimum no-disturbance buffer of 250 feet around active nests of non-listed bird species and a 500-foot no-disturbance buffer around active nests of non-listed raptors. These buffers are advised to remain in place until the breeding season has ended or until a qualified biologist has determined the birds have fledged and are no longer reliant upon the nest or on-site parental care for survival. Variance from these no-disturbance buffers is possible when there is a compelling biological or ecological reason to do so, such as when the Project site would be concealed from a nest site by topography. CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist advise and support any variance from these buffers and notify CDFW in advance of implementing a variance.

**Federally Listed Species:** CDFW recommends consulting with the USFWS regarding potential impacts to federally listed species including, but not limited to, CTS and western spadefoot (*spea hammondi*). The federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) is more broadly defined than CESA; take under the ESA also includes significant habitat modification or degradation that could result in death or injury to a listed species by interfering with essential behavioral patterns such as breeding, foraging, or nesting. Consultation with the USFWS in order to comply with the ESA is advised well in advance of any Project activities.

**California Natural Diversity Database:** Please note that the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) is populated by voluntary submissions of species detections. As a result, species may be present in locations not depicted in the CNDDDB but where there is suitable habitat and features capable of supporting species. A lack of an occurrence record, or lack of recent occurrence records, in the CNDDDB does not mean that a species is not present. In order to adequately assess any potential Project-related impacts to biological resources, surveys conducted by a qualified biologist during the appropriate survey period(s) and using the appropriate protocol survey

Jonnie Lan  
Principal Planner  
June 16, 2025  
Page 9

methodology are warranted in order to determine whether or not any special-status species are present.

## ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

CEQA requires that information developed in environmental impact reports and negative declarations be incorporated into a database which may be used to make subsequent or supplemental environmental determinations. (Pub. Resources Code, § 21003, subd. (e).) Accordingly, please report any special-status species and natural communities detected during Project surveys to the CNDDDB. The CNDDDB field survey form can be filled out and submitted online at the following link: <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDDB/Submitting-Data>. The types of information reported to CNDDDB can be found at the following link: <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDDB/Plants-and-Animals>.

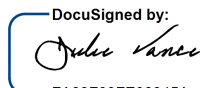
## FILING FEES

The Project, as proposed, would have an impact on fish and/or wildlife, and assessment of environmental document filing fees is necessary. Fees are payable upon filing of the Notice of Determination by the Lead Agency and serve to help defray the cost of environmental review by CDFW. Payment of the environmental document filing fee is required in order for the underlying project approval to be operative, vested, and final. (Cal. Code Regs, tit. 14, § 753.5; Fish & G. Code, § 711.4; Pub. Resources Code, § 21089).

## CONCLUSION

CDFW appreciates the opportunity to comment on the DEIR to assist the City in identifying and mitigating Project impacts on biological resources. A Mitigation and Monitoring Program (MMRP) (Attachment 2) is included to assist the City with incorporating the recommended mitigation measures provided above. Questions regarding this letter or further coordination should be directed to John Riedel, Environmental Scientist, at (559) 807-1453, or [john.riedel@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:john.riedel@wildlife.ca.gov).

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:  
  
FA83F09FE08945A...  
Julie A. Vance  
Regional Manager

Jonnie Lan  
Principal Planner  
June 16, 2025  
Page 10

## ATTACHMENTS

ec: State Clearinghouse  
Governor's Office of Planning and Research  
[State.Clearinghouse@opr.ca.gov](mailto:State.Clearinghouse@opr.ca.gov)

Matt Nelson,  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
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Jonnie Lan  
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June 16, 2025  
Page 11

## REFERENCES

- California Department of Fish and Game. 2012. Staff report on burrowing owl mitigation. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California, USA.
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2017. Bald eagle breeding survey instructions. California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Sacramento, California, USA.
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife. 2025. Biogeographic information and observation system (BIOS). <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/BIOS>. Accessed 30 April 2025.
- Pagel, J.E., D.M. Whittington, and G.T. Allen. 2010. Interim Golden Eagle inventory and monitoring protocols; and other recommendations. Division of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee (SWHA TAC). 2000. Recommended timing and methodology for Swainson's hawk nesting surveys in the central valley of California. Swainson's Hawk Technical Advisory Committee.
- U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2003. Interim guidance on site assessment and field surveys for determining presence or a negative finding of the California tiger salamander. Sacramento, California, USA.

**Attachment 2**

**CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE  
RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MONITORING AND REPORTING PROGRAM  
(MMRP)**

**PROJECT: UC Villages Project**

**SCH No.: 2024031198**

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE	STATUS/DATE/INITIALS
<i>Before Disturbing Soil or Vegetation</i>	
BAEA and GOEA (FPR) Fully Protected Raptors	
<b>Recommended Mitigation Measure 1:</b> FPR surveys	
Swainson’s Hawk (SWHA)	
<b>Recommended Mitigation Measure 4:</b> SWHA take authorization	
California Tiger Salamander (CTS)	
<b>Recommended Mitigation Measure 5:</b> CTS protocol level surveys	
<b>Recommended Mitigation Measure 7:</b> CTS take authorization	
<i>During Construction</i>	
BAEA and GOEA (FPR) Fully Protected Raptors	
<b>Recommended Mitigation Measure 2:</b> FPR avoidance buffer	
Swainson’s Hawk (SWHA)	
<b>Recommended Mitigation Measure 3:</b> SWHA avoidance buffer	
California Tiger Salamander (CTS)	
<b>Recommended Mitigation Measure 6:</b> CTS avoidance buffer	



State of California – Natural Resources Agency  
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE  
Central Region  
1234 East Shaw Avenue  
Fresno, California 93710  
www.wildlife.ca.gov

**GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor**  
**CHARLTON H. BONHAM, Director**



## ATTACHMENT 1

May 06, 2024

Kim Espinosa, Temporary Director of Development Services  
City of Merced Planning Division  
678 West 18<sup>th</sup> Street  
Merced, California 95340  
(209) 385-6858  
[espinosak@cityofmerced.org](mailto:espinosak@cityofmerced.org)

Subject: **UC Villages Project (Project)**  
**Notice of Preparation (NOP)**  
**SCH: 2024031198**

Dear Kim Espinosa:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) received a Notice of Preparation (NOP) of a Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) from the City of Merced Planning Division (City of Merced) for the UC Villages Project (Project) pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and CEQA Guidelines.<sup>1</sup>

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding those activities involved in the Project that may affect California fish and wildlife. Likewise, CDFW appreciates the opportunity to provide comments regarding those aspects of the Project that CDFW, by law, may be required to carry out or approve through the exercise of its own regulatory authority under the Fish and Game Code. While the comment period may have ended, CDFW respectfully requests that the City of Merced still consider our comments.

### CDFW ROLE

CDFW is California's **Trustee Agency** for fish and wildlife resources and holds those resources in trust by statute for all the people of the State (Fish & G. Code, §§ 711.7, subd. (a) & 1802; Pub. Resources Code, § 21070; CEQA Guidelines § 15386, subd. (a)). CDFW, in its trustee capacity, has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants, and habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species (*Id.*, § 1802). Similarly, for purposes of CEQA, CDFW is charged by law to provide, as available, biological expertise during public

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<sup>1</sup> CEQA is codified in the California Public Resources Code in section 21000 et seq. The "CEQA Guidelines" are found in Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, commencing with section 15000.

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 2

agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect fish and wildlife resources.

CDFW is also submitting comments as a **Responsible Agency** under CEQA (Pub. Resources Code, § 21069; CEQA Guidelines, § 15381). CDFW expects that it may need to exercise regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code. As proposed, for example, the Project may be subject to CDFW's lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority (Fish & G. Code, § 1600 et seq.). Likewise, to the extent implementation of the Project as proposed may result in "take" as defined by State law of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) (Fish & G. Code, § 2050 et seq.), the project proponent may seek related take authorization as provided by the Fish and Game Code.

**Fully Protected Species:** CDFW has jurisdiction over fully protected species of birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles, and fish, pursuant to Fish and Game Code sections 3511, 4700, 5050, and 5515. Fully protected species may not be taken or possessed at any time and no licenses or permits may be issued for their take except as follows:

- Take is for necessary scientific research,
- Efforts to recover a fully protected, endangered, or threatened species, live capture, and relocation of a bird species for the protection of livestock, or
- They are a covered species whose conservation and management are provided for in a Natural Community Conservation Plan (Fish & G. Code, §§ 3511, 4700, 5050, & 5515).

Additionally, specified types of infrastructure projects may be eligible for an Incidental Take Permit (ITP) for unavoidable impacts to fully protected species if certain conditions are met (see Fish & G. Code §2081.15). Project proponents should consult with CDFW early in the project planning process if an ITP may be pursued for the Project.

**Nesting Birds:** CDFW has jurisdiction over actions with potential to result in the disturbance or destruction of active nest sites or the unauthorized take of birds. Fish and Game Code sections that protect birds, their eggs and nests include sections 3503 (regarding unlawful take, possession, or needless destruction of the nest or eggs of any bird), 3503.5 (regarding the take, possession, or destruction of any birds-of-prey or their nests or eggs), and 3513 (regarding unlawful take of any migratory nongame bird).

**Federally Listed Species:** CDFW recommends consulting with the USFWS on potential impacts to Federally listed species. Take under the Federal Endangered Species Act (FESA) is more broadly defined than CESA; take under FESA also includes significant habitat modification or degradation that could result in death or injury to a listed species by interfering with essential behavioral patterns such as breeding,

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 3

foraging, or nesting. Consultation with the USFWS to comply with FESA is advised well in advance of any ground disturbing activities.

**Unlisted Species:** Species of plants and animals need not be officially listed as Endangered, Rare, or Threatened (E, R, or T) on any State or Federal list to be considered E, R, or T under CEQA. If a species can be shown to meet the criteria for E, R, or T, as specified in the CEQA Guidelines section 15380, CDFW recommends it be fully considered in the environmental analysis for the Project.

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION SUMMARY**

**Proponent:** Sid Lakireddy, UC Villages LLC

**Objective:** The proposed Project includes an approximately 35-acre development of mixed-use commercial and housing located across from the UC Merced campus.

**Location:** The Project is located in unincorporated Merced County, to the northeast of the City of Merced's limits. The site is at the southwestern corner of the Bellevue Road and Lake Road intersection. The Project site is 37.23 acres and is comprised of Assessor's Parcel Numbers (APNs) 060-590-016, -017, -019, -025, -026, and 060-020-016.

**Timeframe:** N/A

## **COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

CDFW offers the comments and recommendations below to assist City of Merced in adequately identifying and/or mitigating the Project's significant, or potentially significant, direct, and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife (biological) resources. Editorial comments or other suggestions may also be included to improve the DEIR prepared for this Project.

The Project site is located approximately ½-mile south of Yosemite Lake, 1-mile east of Fairfield Canal and directly southwest from the UC Merced Campus and is comprised of annual grassland, disturbed annual grassland, and a portion with previous agricultural use. The Project site is bordered by agriculture fields, a few rural residences, and annual grassland and vernal pool habitats. Based on a review of the Project description, California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) records, the surrounding habitat, as well as our familiarity with the resources previously in the UC Merced footprint prior to construction, as well that on the adjacent Campus Natural reserve lands owned by the UC and The Nature Conservancy, several special-status species could potentially be impacted by Project activities.

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 4

The Project area is within the geographic range of several special status animals species, including but not limited to, the State endangered and fully protected bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), the State and federally threatened California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*), the State candidate endangered Crotch's bumble bee (*Bombus crotchii*), the State fully protected golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), the State threatened Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), the State threatened tricolored blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*), the State species of special concern and federally proposed threatened western spadefoot (*Spea hammondi*), and the State species of special concern burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*). The Project area is also within geographic range of several special-status plant species including, but not limited to, the federally endangered and California Rare Plant Rank (CRPR) 1B.1 Keck's checkerbloom (*Sidalcea keckii*), the State endangered, CRPR 1B.1, and federally threatened San Joaquin Valley Orcutt grass (*Orcuttia inaequalis*) and Colusa grass (*Neostapfia colusana*), the State endangered, CRPR 1B.2, and federally threatened succulent owls-clover (*Castilleja campestris* var. *succulenta*). The Project area also has potential habitat for migratory and non-migratory nesting bird species.

In order to adequately assess potential impacts to biological resources, CDFW recommends a qualified biologist review the Project area and conduct habitat assessments and/or focused biological surveys during the appropriate survey period(s) in order to determine whether any special-status species may be present within the Project site. This information should be used to inform the need for additional protocol surveys, assist with the development of avoidance, minimization, and/or mitigation measures, and when developing project alternatives to avoid and minimize potentially significant biological impacts. We also recommend reviewing UC Merced documents such as *the Final Conservation Strategy for the UC Merced Project* (October 2008) and *the University of California, Merced Campus and Community North Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR) (State Clearinghouse Number 2008041009)* dated November 7, 2008.

### **Fully Protected Raptors**

The Project site is within the known geographic range of bald eagle (BAEA) and golden eagle (GOEA), and a BAEA historical occurrence was documented at Lake Yosemite, ½-mile north of the Project site (CDFW 2024). BAEA require large bodies of water with hunting perches of large limbed trees to pounce on fish or small mammals and GOEA are known to inhabit open areas with large trees and cliffs for nesting. These habitat features are present within the Project vicinity, and as such, CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct focused BAEA and GOEA surveys as part of the biological studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR. To avoid Project related impacts to these species, CDFW recommends incorporating survey methods outlined in the Protocol for

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 5

Evaluating Bald Eagle Habitat and Populations in California (Jackman and Jenkins 2004) and the Interim Golden Eagle Inventory and Monitoring Protocols; and Other Recommendations guidelines (USFWS 2010). If surveys indicate the presence or potential presence of BAEA or GOEA, consultation with the CDFW is recommended for guidance on the development of take avoidance measures.

### **California Tiger Salamander**

The Project site is within the known geographic range of California tiger salamander (CTS) and a historical occurrence was documented ¼-mile north of the Project site (CDFW 2024). In addition, CDFW issued an Incidental Take Permit (2081-2009-010-04) for the construction of UC Merced for the take of several listed species known to occur in the UC Merced footprint, including CTS. CTS breed and develop in vernal and seasonal pools and stock ponds in grassland, woodland, and scrub habitat types and have been determined to be physiologically capable of dispersing up to approximately 1 ½-miles from seasonally flooded wetlands (Searcy and Shaffer 2011). These habitat features are present within the Project vicinity, and, as such, CDFW recommends a qualified biologist conduct protocol-level surveys in accordance with the USFWS “Interim Guidance on Site Assessment and Field Surveys for Determining Presence or a Negative Finding of the California Tiger Salamander” (USFWS CTS Protocol) (USFWS 2003) as part of the biological technical studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR.

In addition to conducting CTS surveys, CDFW recommends the following:

#### **Recommended Mitigation Measure 1: CTS Surveys**

Depending on the time between the initial survey efforts conducted in support of the Draft EIR and project construction, CDFW recommends that additional protocol-level surveys be conducted following the USFWS CTS Protocol. It should be noted that the protocol requires that surveys be conducted during at least two seasons, with sufficient precipitation, to be considered complete.

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 6

**Recommended Mitigation Measure 2: CTS Avoidance Buffer**

If CTS protocol-level surveys as described in Recommended Mitigation Measure 1 are not conducted, CDFW advises that a minimum 50-foot no-disturbance buffer be delineated around all small mammal burrows in suitable upland refugia habitat within and/or adjacent to the Project site. Further, CDFW recommends potential or known breeding habitat within and/or adjacent to the Project site be delineated with a minimum 250-foot no-disturbance buffer. Both upland burrow and wetland breeding no-disturbance buffers are intended to minimize impacts to CTS habitat and avoid take of individuals.

**Recommended Mitigation Measure 3: CTS Take Authorization**

If through surveys it is determined that CTS are occupying or have the potential to occupy the Project site, consultation with CDFW is warranted to discuss how to implement the project and avoid take. If take cannot be avoided, take authorization through the acquisition of an ITP, pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b) is necessary to comply with CESA.

**Crotch's Bumble Bee**

The Project site is within the known geographic range of Crotch's bumble bee (CBB) (CDFW 2024). CBB are known to inhabit areas of grasslands and scrub that contain requisite habitat elements for nesting, such as small mammal burrows and bunch/thatched grasses. CBB was once common throughout most of central and southern California. However, it now appears to be absent from most of their range, especially in the central portion of its historic range within California's Central Valley (Hatfield et al. 2015). Analyses by the Xerces Society et al. (2018) suggest there have been sharp declines in relative abundance by 98% and persistence by 80% over the last ten years.

CDFW recommends a qualified biologist conduct a habitat assessment as part of the biological technical studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR to determine if the Project site or its immediate vicinity contain habitat suitable to support CBB. Potential nesting sites, which include all small mammal burrows, perennial bunch grasses, thatched annual grasses, brush piles, old bird nests, dead trees, and hollow logs would need to be documented as part of the assessment. If potentially suitable habitat is identified, CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct focused surveys for CBB, and their requisite habitat features following the methodology outlined in the Survey Considerations for California Endangered Species Act Candidate Bumble Bee Species (CDFW 2023) as part of the biological technical studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR. If surveys indicate the presence or potential presence of CBB, consultation with the CDFW is recommended for guidance on the development of mitigation measures such as take avoidance, minimization, and mitigation.

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 7

### **Swainson's hawk**

The Project site is within the known geographic range of Swainson's hawk (SWHA) and there are historical occurrences documented within 1 mile of the Project site (CDFW 2024). In addition, CDFW issued an Incidental Take Permit (2081-2009-010-04) for the construction of UC Merced for the take of several listed species known to occur in the UC Merced footprint, including SWHA. SWHA are known to breed within the Central Valley of California and prefer to nest and forage in alfalfa, fallow fields, field crops, and grassland habitats with a sufficient source of small mammals (CDFG 1994). Based on aerial imagery, most of the Project site contains suitable habitat for SWHA foraging. In addition, there are trees and structures located within the vicinity of the Project area that may provide suitable nesting habitat. Therefore, CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct surveys for nesting SWHA following the entire survey methodology developed by the SWHA Technical Advisory Committee (SWHA TAC 2000) as part of the biological technical studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR.

In addition to conducting SWHA surveys, CDFW recommends the Draft EIR include the following measures:

#### **Recommended Mitigation Measure 4: SWHA Surveys Prior to Construction**

Depending on the time between the initial survey efforts conducted in support of the Draft EIR and project construction, CDFW recommends that additional surveys, following the survey methodology developed by the SWHA Technical Advisory Committee, be repeated the survey season immediately prior to construction.

#### **Recommended Mitigation Measure 5: SWHA Avoidance Buffer**

If Project-specific activities will take place during the SWHA nesting season (i.e., March 1 through September 15), and active SWHA nests are present, CDFW recommends a minimum ½-mile no-disturbance buffer be delineated and maintained around each nest, regardless of whether it was detected by surveys or observed incidentally. These buffers would remain in place until the breeding season has ended or until a qualified biologist has determined that the birds have fledged and are no longer reliant upon the nest or parental care for survival, to prevent nest abandonment and other take of SWHA as a result of Project activities.

#### **Recommended Mitigation Measure 6: SWHA Take Authorization**

CDFW also recommends that in the event an active SWHA nest is detected, and a ½-mile no-disturbance buffer is not feasible, consultation with CDFW is warranted to discuss how to implement the project and avoid take. If take cannot be avoided, take

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 8

authorization through the acquisition of an ITP, pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 2081 subdivision (b) is necessary to comply with CESA.

### **Recommended Mitigation Measure 7: SWHA Foraging Habitat Mitigation**

Finally, CDFW recommends compensation for the loss of SWHA foraging habitat as described in CDFW's "Staff Report Regarding Mitigation for Impacts to Swainson's Hawks" (CDFG 1994) to reduce impacts to foraging habitat to less than significant. The Staff Report recommends that mitigation for habitat loss occur within a minimum distance of 10 miles from known nest sites. CDFW has the following recommendations based on the Staff Report:

- For projects within 1 mile of an active nest tree, a minimum of 1 acre of habitat management (HM) land for each acre of development is advised.
- For projects within 5 miles of an active nest but greater than 1 mile, a minimum of  $\frac{3}{4}$  acre of HM land for each acre of development is advised.
- For projects within 10 miles of an active nest tree but greater than 5 miles from an active nest tree, a minimum of  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre of HM land for each acre of development is advised.

### **Tricolored blackbird**

The Project site is within the known geographic range of tricolored blackbird (TRBL) and there are historical occurrences documented within  $1\frac{1}{4}$  miles of the Project site (CDFW 2024). TRBL breed within the vicinity of fresh water and are known to breed in alfalfa, wheat, and other low agricultural crop fields, and these fields are becoming an increasingly important nesting habitat type, particularly in the San Joaquin Valley (Beedy et al. 2023). Based on aerial imagery, it appears the Project site and vicinity may contain suitable habitat for TRBL foraging and nesting. In 2017, approximately 30,000 TRBL were distributed among 16 colonies in Merced County (Meese 2017). Nesting can occur synchronously, with all eggs laid within one week (Orians 1961). For these reasons, depending on timing, disturbance to nesting colonies can cause abandonment, significantly impacting TRBL populations (Beedy et al. 2020).

As the Project site is within the known geographic range of TRBL and suitable foraging and nesting habitat may be present, CDFW recommends that a qualified biologist conduct a habitat assessment as part of the biological technical studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR. If potentially suitable habitat is identified, consultation with CDFW is recommended for guidance on focused survey methods and mitigation measures such as avoidance, take authorization, and mitigation.

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 9

### **Western Spadefoot**

The Project site is within the known geographic range of western spadefoot (WESP) and there is a documented historical occurrence 4 miles from the Project site. WESP occurs primarily in grasslands and seasonal wetlands with appropriate upland habitat. These habitat features may be present within the Project site and Project vicinity and, as such, CDFW recommends that a general habitat assessment be conducted as part of the biological technical studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR. If the habitat assessment indicates the presence or potential presence of WESP, consultation with the CDFW is recommended for guidance on surveys and mitigation measures such as avoidance, minimization, and mitigation.

### **Burrowing Owl**

The Project site is within the known geographic range of burrowing owl (BUOW) and there is a documented historical occurrence ¼-mile from the Project site. BUOW inhabit open grasslands containing small mammal burrows, a requisite habitat feature used for nesting and cover. These habitat features are present within the Project site and Project vicinity, and as such, CDFW recommends assessing presence/absence of BUOW by having a qualified biologist conduct surveys following the California Burrowing Owl Consortium's (CBOC) "Burrowing Owl Survey Protocol and Mitigation Guidelines" (CBOC 1993) and CDFW's "Staff Report on Burrowing Owl Mitigation" (CDFG 2012) as part of the biological studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR. If surveys indicate the presence or potential presence of BUOW, consultation with the CDFW is recommended for guidance on mitigation measures such as avoidance, minimization, and mitigation.

### **Special-Status Plants**

The Project site is within the known geographic range of several special status plant species and several species have been documented directly within or adjacent to the Project. In addition, CDFW issued an Incidental Take Permit (2081-2009-010-04) for the construction of UC Merced for the take of several listed species known to occur in the UC Merced footprint, including succulent owl's clover, Colusa grass, and San Joaquin orcutt grass. Special-status plant species are threatened with habitat loss and habitat fragmentation resulting from development, vehicle and foot traffic, and introduction of non-native plant species (California Native Plant Society 2018), all of which may be unintended impacts of the Project. Therefore, CDFW recommends that the Project site(s) be surveyed for special status plants by a qualified botanist following the "Protocols for Surveying and Evaluating Impacts to Special-Status Native Plant Populations and Natural Communities" (CDFW 2018) as part of the biological technical studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR. This protocol, which is intended to maximize detectability, includes the identification of reference populations to facilitate

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 10

the likelihood of field investigations occurring during the appropriate floristic period. If surveys indicate the presence or potential presence of special status plants, consultation with CDFW is recommended for guidance on mitigation measures such as avoidance, minimization, and mitigation. Please note, if State-listed plant species are identified during botanical surveys, consultation with CDFW is warranted to determine if the Project can avoid take of that species. If take cannot be avoided, take authorization would need to occur through issuance of a State ITP to comply with CESA and/or Fish and Game Code section 1900 and California Code of Regulations, title 14, section 786.9, subdivision (b).

### **Nesting birds**

The Project site is within the known geographic range of several species of migratory and non-migratory birds and may contain suitable habitat for an abundance of nesting bird species. To evaluate Project-related impacts on migratory and non-migratory birds, CDFW recommends that a general habitat assessment for nesting and foraging birds be conducted as part of the biological technical studies conducted in support of the Draft EIR.

### **Editorial Comments and/or Suggestions**

#### **Federally Listed Species**

CDFW recommends consulting with USFWS regarding potential impacts to federally listed species including, but not limited to, California tiger salamander, Colusa grass, Keck's checkerbloom, San Joaquin Valley Orcutt grass, succulent owls-clover, vernal pool fairy shrimp (*Branchinecta lynchi*), and western spadefoot. FESA is more broadly defined than CESA; take under FESA also includes significant habitat modification or degradation that could result in death or injury to a listed species by interfering with essential behavioral patterns such as breeding, foraging, or nesting. Consultation with the USFWS in order to comply with FESA is advised well in advance of any Project activities.

#### **California Natural Diversity Database**

Please note that the CNDDDB is populated by voluntary submissions of species detections. As a result, species may be present in locations not depicted in the CNDDDB but where there is suitable habitat and features capable of supporting species. A lack of an occurrence record, or lack of recent occurrence records, in the CNDDDB does not mean that a species is not present. In order to adequately assess any potential Project-related impacts to biological resources, surveys conducted by a qualified biologist during the appropriate survey period(s) and using the appropriate protocol survey

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 11

methodology are warranted in order to determine whether or not any special status species are present.

### **Project Alternatives Analysis**

CDFW recommends that the information and results obtained from the biological technical surveys, studies, and analysis conducted in support of the Project's Draft EIR be used to develop and modify the Project's alternatives to avoid and minimize impacts to biological resources to the maximum extent possible. When efforts to avoid and minimize have been exhausted, CDFW advises that remaining impacts to sensitive biological resources be mitigated to reduce impacts to a less than significant level, if feasible.

### **Cumulative Impacts**

CDFW recommends that a cumulative impact analysis be conducted for all biological resources that will either be significantly or potentially significantly impacted by implementation of the Project, including those whose impacts are determined to be less than significant with mitigation incorporated or for those resources that are rare or in poor or declining health and will be impacted by the Project, even if those impacts are relatively small (i.e., less than significant). Cumulative impacts are recommended to be analyzed using an acceptable methodology to evaluate the impacts of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects on resources and be focused specifically on the resource, not the Project. An appropriate resource study area should also be identified and mapped for each resource being analyzed and utilized for this analysis. CDFW recommends closely evaluating the need for a cumulative impacts analysis for the following species as part of the Draft EIR due to these species being in poor or declining health or at risk: bald eagle, burrowing owl, California tiger salamander, Colusa grass, Keck's checkerbloom, San Joaquin Valley Orcutt grass, succulent owls-clover, tricolored blackbird, vernal pool fairy shrimp, western spadefoot, and any impacted migratory or non-migratory nesting bird species. CDFW staff is available for consultation in support of cumulative impacts analyses as a trustee and responsible agency under CEQA.

Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 12

## ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

CEQA requires that information developed in environmental impact reports and negative declarations be incorporated into a database which may be used to make subsequent or supplemental environmental determinations. (Pub. Resources Code, section 21003, subd. (e).) Accordingly, please report any special status species and natural communities detected during Project surveys to the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB). The CNDDDB field survey form can be filled out and submitted online at the following link: <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDDB/Submitting-Data>. The types of information reported to CNDDDB can be found at the following link: <https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDDB/Plants-and-Animals>.

## FILING FEES

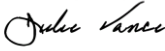
The Project, as proposed, would have an impact on fish and/or wildlife, and assessment of environmental document filing fees is necessary. Fees are payable upon filing of the Notice of Determination by the Lead Agency and serve to help defray the cost of environmental review by CDFW. Payment of the environmental document filing fee is required in order for the underlying project approval to be operative, vested, and final. (Cal. Code Regs, tit. 14, section 753.5; Fish & G. Code, section 711.4; Pub. Resources Code, section 21089).

## CONCLUSION

CDFW appreciates the opportunity to comment on the NOP to assist the City of Merced in identifying and mitigating Project impacts on biological resources.

More information on survey and monitoring protocols for sensitive species can be found at CDFW's website (<https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Survey-Protocols>). Please see the enclosed Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP) table which corresponds with recommended mitigation measures in this comment letter. Questions regarding this letter or further coordination should be directed to John Riedel, Environmental Scientist, at (559) 807-1453 or [john.riedel@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:john.riedel@wildlife.ca.gov).

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:  
  
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Julie A. Vance  
Regional Manager

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May 06, 2024  
Page 13

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Kim Espinosa  
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May 06, 2024  
Page 14

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Kim Espinosa  
Temporary Director of Development Services  
May 06, 2024  
Page 15

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Kim Espinosa  
 Temporary Director of Development Services  
 May 06, 2024  
 Page 16

**Attachment 1**  
**CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE**  
**RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MONITORING AND REPORTING PROGRAM**  
**(MMRP)**  
**PROJECT: UC Villages Project**  
**SCH No.: 2024031198**

<b>RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE</b>	<b>STATUS/DATE/INITIALS</b>
<i>Before Disturbing Soil or Vegetation</i>	
California tiger salamander	
Recommended Mitigation Measure 1: <b>CTS Surveys</b>	
Recommended Mitigation Measure 3: <b>CTS Take Authorization</b>	
Swainson's hawk	
Recommended Mitigation Measure 4: <b>SWHA surveys prior to construction</b>	
Recommended Mitigation Measure 6: <b>SWHA take authorization</b>	
Recommended Mitigation Measure 7: <b>SWHA foraging habitat mitigation</b>	
<i>During construction</i>	
California tiger salamander	
Recommended Mitigation Measure 2: <b>CTS Avoidance Buffer</b>	
Swainson's hawk	
Recommended Mitigation Measure 5: <b>SWHA avoidance buffer</b>	