



**COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT**

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NOTICE OF PREPARATION

Date: June 12, 2025

To: Agencies, Organizations, and Interested Persons

From: Merced County
Community and Economic Development Department
2222 M Street
Merced, CA 95340

Contact: Ana Hernandez, Planner I
Community and Economic Development Department
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Subject: Notice of Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report and Notice of a Public Scoping Meeting for Conditional Use Permit No. CUP23-002 ("Spikes Peak Solar Project")

PUBLIC REVIEW PERIOD: THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 2025 – MONDAY, JULY 14, 2025

Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Merced County (County), as Lead Agency, has determined that it will prepare an environmental impact report (EIR) for the proposed Conditional Use Permit No. CUP23-002 ("Spikes Peak Solar Project") (Project). The Project consists of construction, operation, maintenance, and eventual decommissioning of a utility-scale solar photovoltaic (PV) development including the construction of a generation tie (gen-tie) line to connect to an existing switching station, that would generate up to 150 megawatts (MW) of energy with up to 150 MW of battery energy storage system (BESS), on approximately 860 acres of land located in the western area of the County. The Project applicant, Spikes Peak Solar, LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of EDF Renewables Development, Inc., has submitted an application to the County for review and approval of the Project along with requested entitlements. The County is processing the application for the Project and associated approvals including a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) which must be approved before development can occur.

In accordance with Section 15082 of the CEQA Guidelines, the County has prepared this Notice of Preparation (NOP) to provide agencies, organizations, and interested parties with sufficient information about the Project and its potential environmental effects to provide meaningful input on the scope of the EIR. As specified by

Buildings and Safety Division
Robert Lindsey, Deputy

**Economic and Castle Airport
Development Division**
Mark J. Mimms II, Interim
Deputy

**Environmental Health
Division**
Amanda Duran, Deputy

Planning Division
Tiffany Ho, Deputy

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the CEQA Guidelines, this NOP will be circulated for a 30-day period, which starts on June 12, 2025, and concludes on July 14, 2025. During this time, the County is requesting input from agencies, organizations, and interested parties regarding the scope and content of the environmental analysis to be included in the upcoming EIR. In accordance with CEQA, the County requests that agencies provide comments on the environmental issues related to the statutory responsibilities of their particular agency. This NOP contains a description of the Project, its location, and a preliminary overview of the environmental resource topics to be addressed in the EIR.

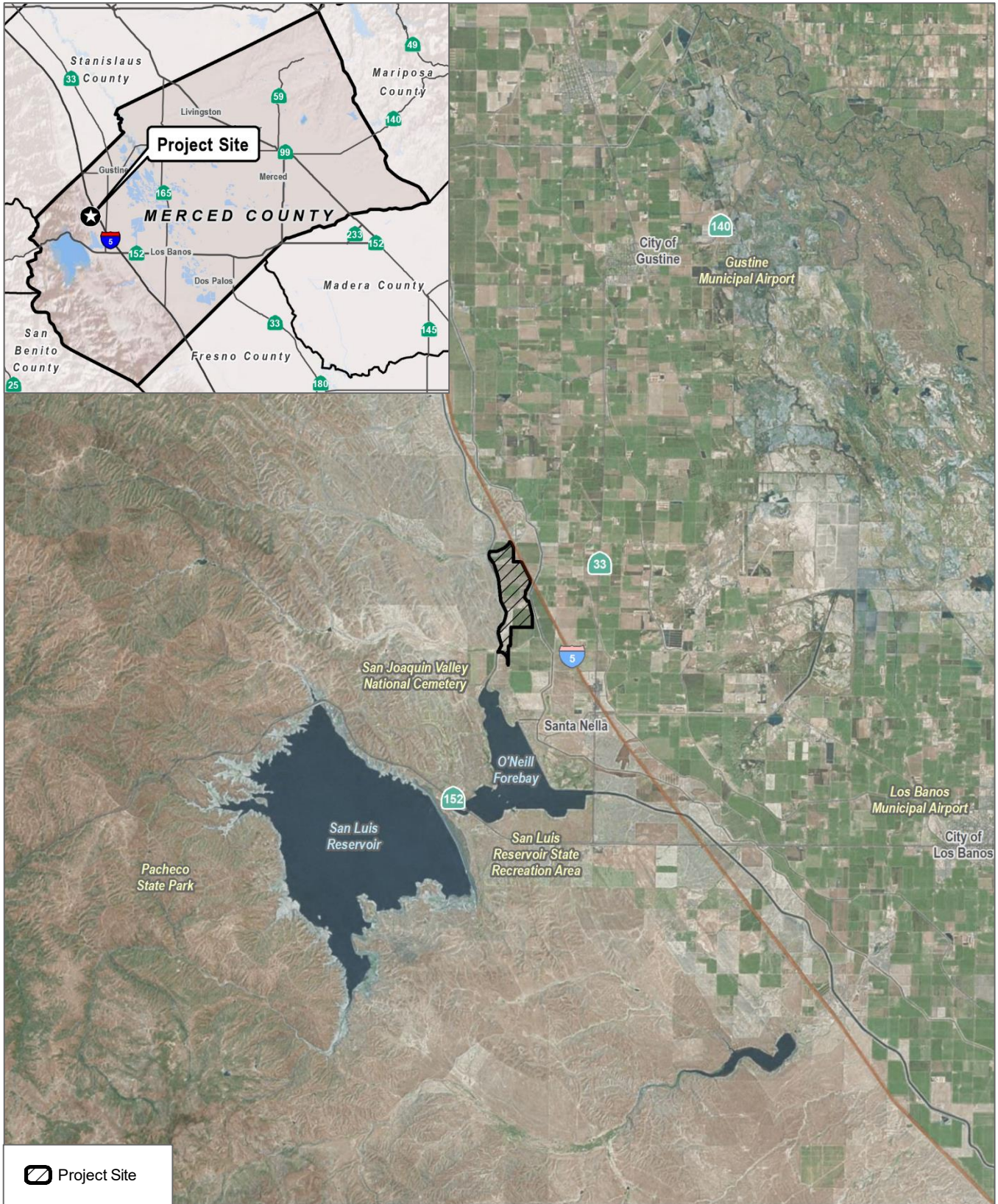
Project Location

The Project site is approximately 860 acres and is located adjacent to Interstate 5 (I-5) within an unincorporated area of the County on privately owned land, approximately 1 mile northwest of the unincorporated community of Santa Nella, approximately 6.5 miles southwest of the City of Gustine, and approximately 10 miles northwest of the City of Los Banos, as shown on Figure 1, Project Location. The Project site consists of six undeveloped parcels comprised of Assessor's Parcel Numbers (APNs) 069-220-014, 069-220-036, 069-220-046, 069-220-049, 069-220-067, and 069-240-028 (see Figure 2, Project Site).

The Project site is within a predominantly agricultural area on the western edge of the San Joaquin Valley. The Project site is bounded on the north by undeveloped private land and Butts Road, on the east by I-5 and the Delta-Mendota Canal (part of the Central Valley Project), on the south by the existing Quinto solar facility and McCabe Road, and on the west by the California Aqueduct (part of the State Water Project). There are scattered residences approximately 0.4 miles to the northeast and to the west of the Project site on Butts Road, and approximately 0.5 miles to the east along Whitworth Road. The O'Neill Forebay/San Luis Reservoir State Recreation Area is approximately 4 miles farther to the south, and the San Joaquin Valley National Cemetery is approximately 1.5 miles to the southwest. Gustine Municipal Airport is located approximately 8 miles to the northeast and Los Banos Municipal Airport is located approximately 10.25 miles to the southeast.

The Project site consists primarily of undeveloped grassland. There are no trees or buildings on the site. The topography of the Project site gently slopes from west to east, featuring a mix of flat terraces and low-lying hills that transition to steeper terrain immediately west of the site. Quinto Creek, an intermittent stream, drains from the northwestern to the northeastern corner of the site. Romero Creek, another intermittent stream, runs west to east in the southern portion of the site. Two abandoned groundwater wells are located in the northeastern and southern portion of the site. The site lacks existing infrastructure for water, sewer, storm drain, or natural gas utilities, except for non-utility easements for natural gas and oil pipelines.

Historically, land uses on and around the Project site have included a mix of cattle grazing and dryland farming operations. Currently, the Project site is used for cattle grazing. The Project site is designated Agricultural in the 2030 Merced County General Plan and zoned General Agriculture (A-1). Lands adjacent to the site are also designated Agricultural and zoned A-1. The County's zoning ordinance (Merced County Code Title 18) permits energy generation facilities for off-site energy use through a CUP within the A-1 zoning district.



SOURCE: Bing Maps 2023

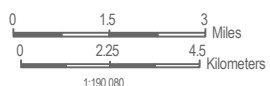
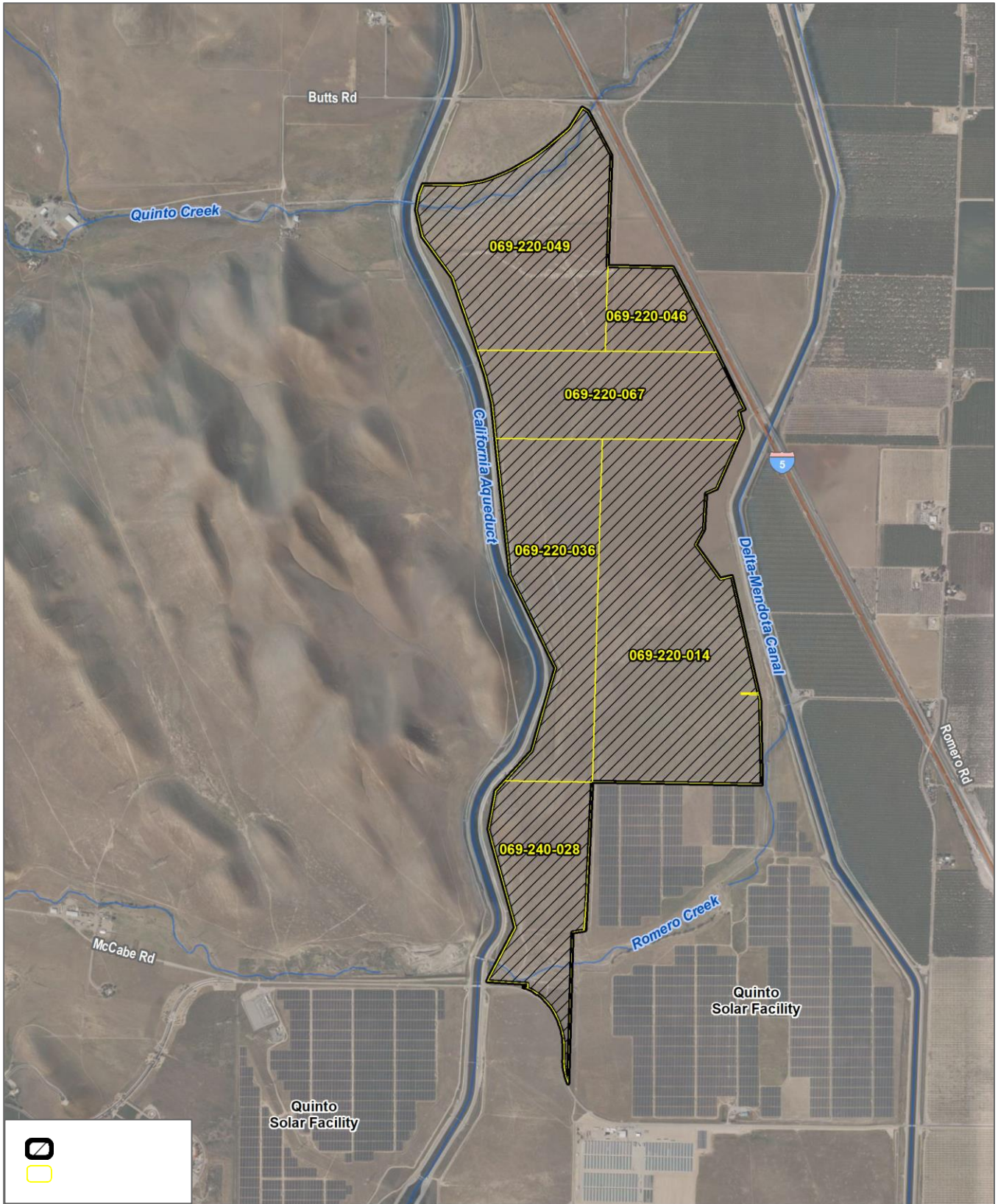


FIGURE 1
 Project Location
 Spikes Peak Solar Project



SOURCE: Bing Maps 2023

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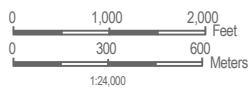


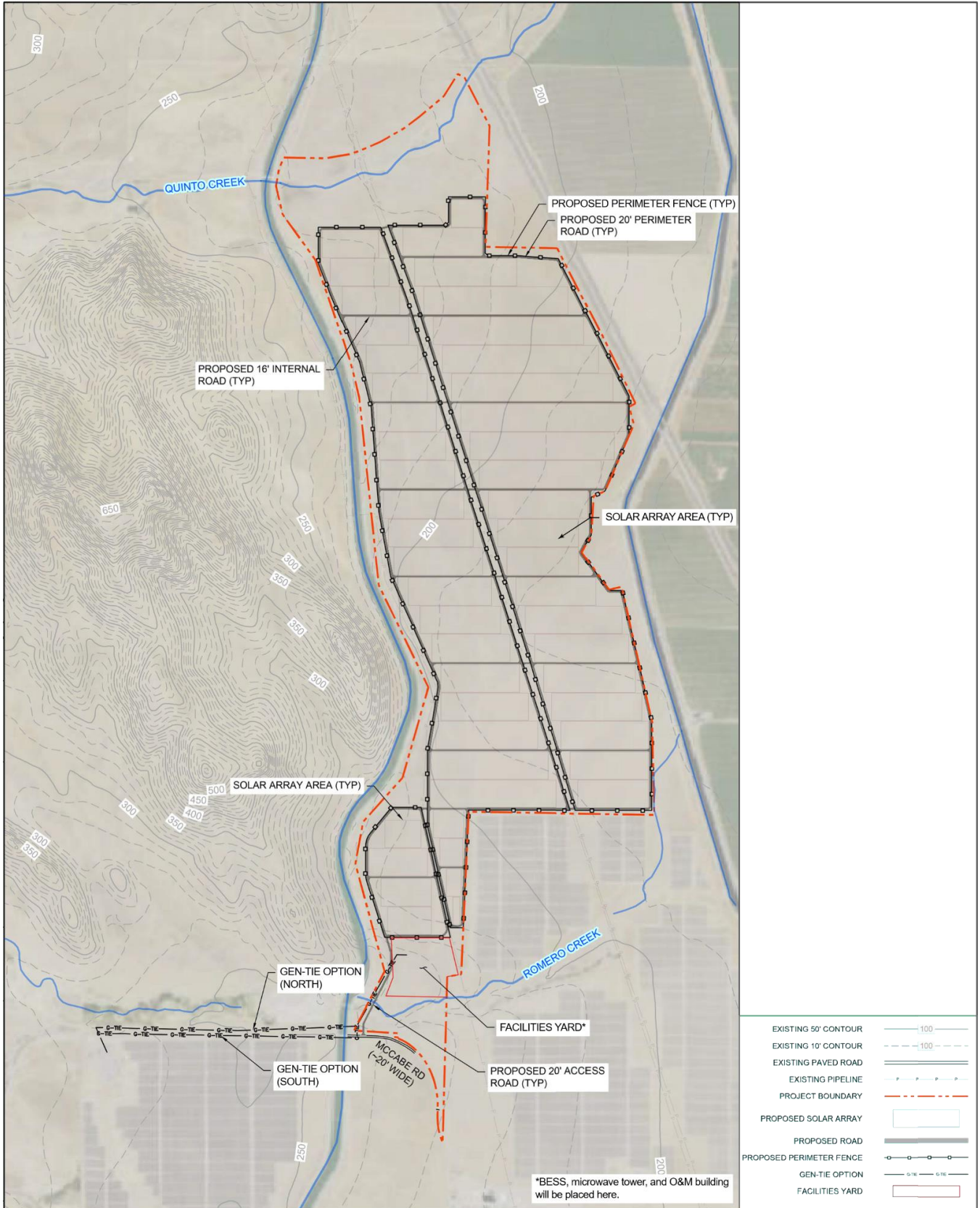
FIGURE 2
Project Site
Spikes Peak Solar Project

Project Summary

The Project consists of the development of a 150-MW PV solar-energy-generating and BESS facility with associated infrastructure, including two potential gen-tie routes to connect to existing Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) facilities (both of which are off site and would require a Franchise Route Agreement with the County). The Project would include the following components, which are shown on Figure 3, Site Plan:

- Installation of up to a total combined 150 MW of ground-mounted solar PV modules, mounted using a single-axis tracker mount system.¹ The modules would be between 2 and 15 feet high.
- Direct Current (DC) to Alternating Current (AC) power inverters at each solar block.
- Crystalline silicon panels, copper indium gallium selenide panels, bifacial panels, or Cadmium Telluride panels or other commercially available technology.
- Installation of a BESS facility and accessories that would provide energy storage capacity of up to 150 MW for the electrical grid.
- An electrical collection system of cables for delivering PV energy to inverter stations generally consisting of one or more inverter modules, a unit transformer, and voltage switch gear.
- One on-site substation (including a generator and propane tank for emergency use) which would receive electricity from inverter stations through overhead and/or underground collector lines. The substation would have an integrated Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system and would occupy an area of approximately up to 5 acres.
- Installation of a 230-kV overhead gen-tie line connecting the Project to the electrical grid. Redundant communication to be provided by underground or aboveground optical ground wire.
- Electrical Collection System. Underground or aboveground (or a combination of both) 34.5-kV collection system.
- Staging area for construction trailers and construction parking and up to five temporary laydown areas throughout the Project site.
- Installation of a 12-kV distribution line for bringing permanent power to the operation and maintenance (O&M) building and substation.
- Accessory enclosures, including a 300- to 500-square-foot control building for the substation.
- An access road/driveway to the Project site for construction and access to the 3,600-square-foot O&M building.
- An on-site roadway system consisting of internal and perimeter roadways.
- Up to two new on-site groundwater wells and/or modification of existing groundwater wells.
- Telecommunications equipment, including underground or overhead fiber optics, a meteorological solar station and albedometer weather station, and microwave/communications tower.
- Stormwater detention/retention basins (if required).
- Perimeter security fencing and shielded nighttime directional lighting.

¹ A single-axis tracker mount system automatically adjusts the angle of solar panels throughout the day, following the sun's path from east to west to maximize sunlight exposure and energy production.



SOURCE: Barr Engineering Co. 2024

FIGURE 3

Site Plan

Spikes Peak Solar Project



Off-site infrastructure improvements (see Figure 4, Off-Site Infrastructure) required to implement the Project would consist of constructing the gen-tie line connecting to the existing PG&E Quinto switching station. Local utility services such as power, communications, water, waste hauling could require coordination for off-site components. An off-site existing microwave or high-speed data site may be used for redundant communication requirements.

Required Approvals

Before approving the Project, the County is required to undertake CEQA review, including certification that the EIR adequately identifies any significant environmental effects of the Project pursuant to CEQA and the CEQA Guidelines, and adoption of a mitigation monitoring and reporting program to reflect the measures required to mitigate significant impacts, if any, of the Project. The EIR is intended to provide the CEQA documentation for approval of the Project. In addition to the County, federal, state, and regional agencies that may have jurisdiction over aspects of the Project may require certain permits and approvals. Discretionary actions and approvals of regulatory agencies that may be necessary for the Project include, but are not limited to, the following:

Merced County

- Conditional Use Permit
- Franchise Route Agreement/Encroachment Permit
- Floodplain Development Permit
- Certification of the EIR
- Approval of the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program
- Approval of a Solar Benefit Agreement and Implementation Plan
- Approval of Agricultural Preserve Amendment

Federal Agencies

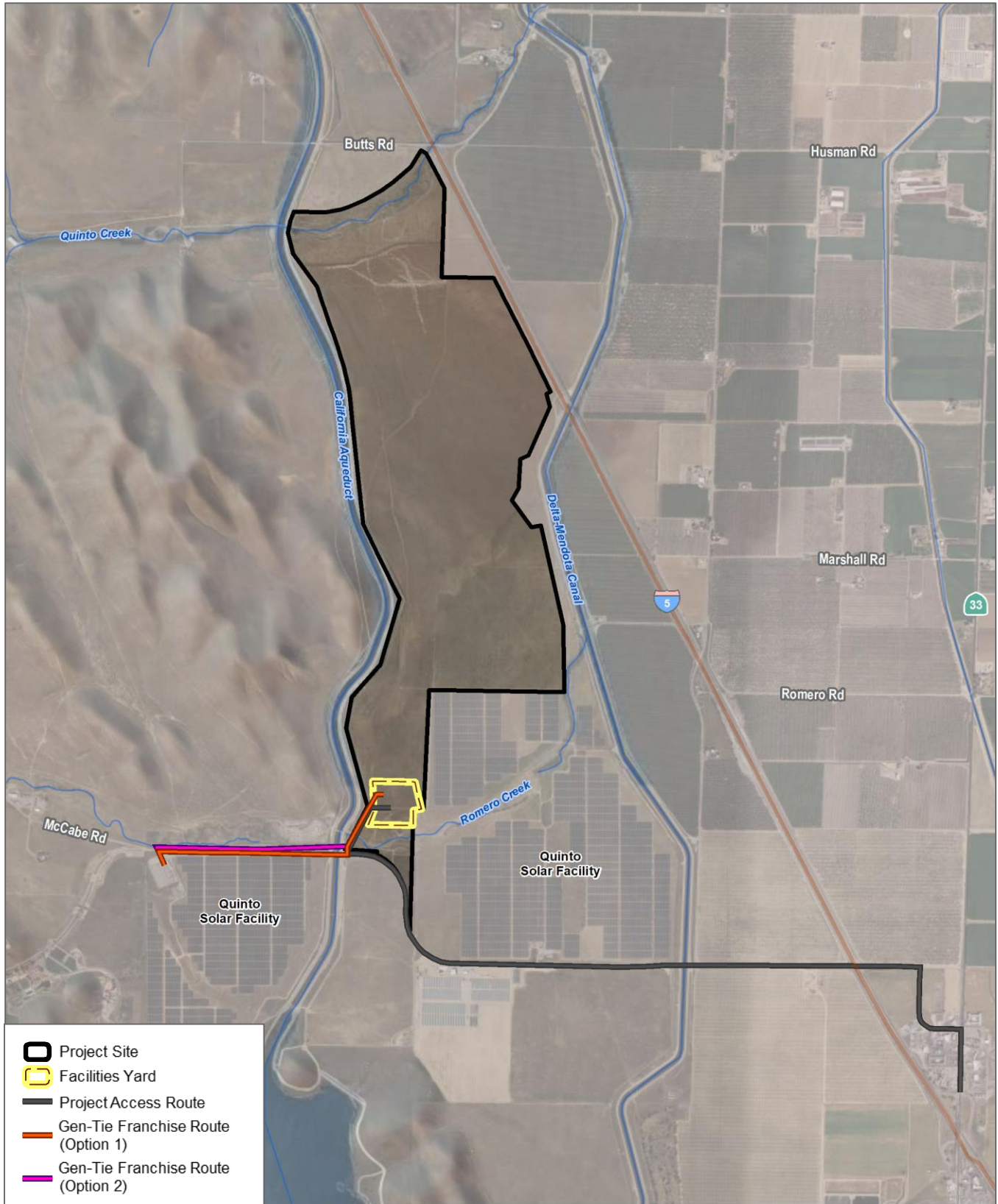
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Clean Water Act Section 404 Permit (if needed)
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Section 10, Incidental Take Permit (if needed)

State Agencies

- California Department of Fish and Wildlife, 2081 Incidental Take Permit (if needed) and Section 1602 Streambed Alteration Agreement (if needed)
- California Department of Transportation, Right-of-Way Encroachment Permit and Oversized Loads Permit
- Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, Clean Water Act Section 401 Water Quality Certification and/or Waste Discharge Requirements (if required), and Construction General Permit
- California Department of Water Resources, Crossing Consent Agreement/Encroachment Permit
- California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Fire Protection Development Standards
- State Historic Preservation Office, Section 106 Consultation

Regional Agencies

- San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, Authority to Construct and Permit to Operate



SOURCE: Bing Maps 2023

FIGURE 4
 Off-Site Infrastructure
 Spikes Peak Solar Project

Potential Environmental Impacts of the Project

The EIR will evaluate whether implementation of the Project may potentially result in one or more significant environmental impacts. An initial study will be prepared to inform the scope and content of the EIR and will be included as an appendix to the EIR. The focus of the analysis in the EIR will be on impacts that are determined to be potentially significant, and topics that are determined to have less-than-significant or no impacts will be addressed in the initial study. The full range of environmental topics will be addressed, including:

- **Aesthetics**, including adverse effect on a scenic vista, degradation of scenic resources, degradation of the existing visual quality of the area, and/or light or glare that could affect day and nighttime views;
- **Agriculture and Forestry Resources**, including loss or conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses;
- **Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Emissions**, including emissions of air pollutants and greenhouse gases during construction and operation, and odors;
- **Biological Resources**, including adverse effects on special status species, riparian habitat, other sensitive habitats, and/or federally-protected wetlands, interference with the movement of any native resident or migratory fish or wildlife, and/or conflicts with local policies and/or conservation plans;
- **Cultural Resources and Tribal Cultural Resources**, including adverse changes in the significance of historical or archaeological resources, and/or disturbance of human remains;
- **Energy**, including project's energy usage from all applicable sources;
- **Geology and Soils**, including exposure of people or structures to the risk of loss, injury or death from seismic-related effects, soils constraints and/or landslides, soil erosion or the loss of topsoil, and/or issues related to septic tanks; and disturbance of paleontological resources;
- **Hazards and Hazardous Materials**, including hazards to the public or environment due to the routine transport, use or disposal of hazardous materials, or release of hazardous materials, emission or handling of hazardous materials within one-quarter mile of a school, development on a site included on a list of hazardous materials sites (e.g., Cortese List), interference with an adopted emergency response or evacuation plan, and/or exposure to risk of injury or loss from wildfire;
- **Hydrology and Water Quality**, including violation of water quality standards or waste discharge requirements, interference with groundwater recharge, alteration of existing drainage patterns, generation of runoff that exceeds the capacity of existing or planned drainage facilities, placement of housing in the 100-year floodplain, impediments to flood flows, loss, injury or death due to flooding and/or inundation by seiche, tsunami or mudflow;
- **Land Use and Planning**, including physical division of established communities and consistency with adopted plans;
- **Mineral Resources**, including the loss of availability of known mineral resources and/or locally-important mineral resources;
- **Noise**, including noise from construction, traffic, and other operational noise sources;
- **Population and Housing**, including direct and indirect unplanned population growth;
- **Public Services and Recreation**, including on the need to construct new public service and recreation facilities to maintain acceptable service ratios, and physical deterioration of existing parks and recreational facilities;

- **Transportation**, including conflicts with plans or policies related to circulation, transit, roadways, bicycle, or pedestrian facilities, conflict with CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.3(b), increased hazards due to design features or incompatible uses, and/or inadequate emergency access;
- **Utilities and Service Systems**, including construction or relocation of public utility facilities, water supply, wastewater treatment capacity, and conflicts with solid waste reduction goals and regulations;
- **Wildfire**, including evaluation of whether the project would impair implementation of any emergency response or emergency evacuation plan; expose future residents to pollutant concentrations from wildfires; result in new infrastructure that will exacerbate fire risk; and expose people to risk of flooding and landslides as a result of post-fire runoff.

The issues to be addressed in the EIR will be finalized after comments on the NOP are received. The EIR will also address all other CEQA-mandated topics. Where the potential for the Project to cause significant environmental impacts is identified, the EIR will include feasible mitigation measures to avoid or substantially lessen those impacts. The analysis for all topics will address direct and indirect impacts of the Project, as well as cumulative impacts. Consistent with CEQA Guidelines Section 15130, cumulative impacts will be discussed where the incremental impact of the Project is cumulatively considerable when combined with other area projects. The EIR will also evaluate the potential for the Project to induce growth. In accordance with CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.6, the EIR will describe a range of reasonable alternatives to the Project capable of meeting most of the Project objectives and that would avoid or substantially lessen any potential significant effects identified for the Project.

Public Scoping Comment Period and Meeting

Public Scoping Comment Period

The County has established a 30-day public scoping period from **June 12, 2025, through July 14, 2025**. As required by the CEQA Guidelines, within 30 days after receiving the NOP, each responsible and trustee agency is required to provide the lead agency with specific detail about the scope, significant environmental issues, reasonable alternatives, and mitigation measures related to the responsible or trustee agency's area of statutory responsibility that will need to be explored in the EIR. In the response, responsible and trustee agencies should indicate their respective level of responsibility for the Project.

This NOP is being furnished to obtain suggestions and information from other agencies, organizations, and the public on the scope of issues and alternatives to consider in developing the EIR. Written comments from interested parties are invited to ensure that the full range of environmental issues related to development of the EIR are identified. All comments received, including names and addresses, will become part of the official administrative record and may be made available to the public.

During the public scoping comment period, the NOP is available for public review online at the following website:

<https://www.countyofmerced.com/414/Environmental-Documents>

A printed copy of this NOP is also available for review in person at the Merced County Community and Economic Development Department, 2222 M Street, 2nd Floor, Merced, CA 95340 and at the Merced County Library.

Public Scoping Meeting

During the 30-day public scoping period, the County will hold a public scoping meeting on Wednesday, June 25, 2025, at 4:00 p.m. The meeting will be held virtually via an online webinar at tinyurl.com/Spikes-Peak-Scoping-Meeting. The public scoping meeting will provide an additional opportunity to receive and disseminate information, identify potential environmental issues of concern, and discuss the scope of analyses to be included in the EIR. The scoping meeting is not a public hearing, and no decisions on the Project will be made at this meeting. The meeting is provided as an additional opportunity for agencies, organizations, and the public to receive information on the Project and obtain information on how to submit written comments on what environmental issues should be addressed in the EIR. All public agencies, organizations, and interested parties are encouraged to attend and participate in the meeting.

Scoping Comments

All scoping comments must be received in writing by **5:00 p.m. on Monday, July 14, 2025**, which marks the end of the 30-day public scoping period. All written comments should indicate an associated contact person for the agency or organization, if applicable, and reference the Project name in the subject line. Pursuant to CEQA, responsible agencies are requested to indicate their statutory responsibilities in connection with the Project when responding. Please mail or email comments and direct any questions to the following contact person:

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