Print Form

Notice of Exemption

Appendix E

To: Office of Planning and Research
P.O. Box 3044, Room 113
Sacramento, CA 95812-3044

County Clerk
County of: Tuolumne

From: (Public Agency): Tuolumne County Resource Conservation District (TCRCD)

PO Box 4394/81 N. Washington St. Sonora CA 95370
(Address)

Project Title: Covington Big Hill Fuel Reduction Project

Project Applicant: Tuolumne County Resource Conservation District (TCRCD)

Project Location - Specific:

T2N, R15E, Portions of Sections 17, 18, 19, 20; MDBM.

Project Location - City: Sonora Project Location - County: Tuolumne

Description of Nature, Purpose and Beneficiaries of Project:

The proposed project, which will be carried out by American Forest Foundation, will reduce hazardous fuel loading and create a shaded fuel break condition on portions of 6 private parcels along Covington Mine, Columbia Crest, and North Bald Mountain Roads. Project Description Attached.

Name of Public Agency Approving Project: Tuolumne County Resource Conservation District (TCRCD)

Name of Person or Agency Carrying Out Project: American Forest Foundation

Exempt Status: **(check one):**

- ☐ Ministerial (Sec. 21080(b)(1); 15268);
- ☐ Declared Emergency (Sec. 21080(b)(3); 15269(a));
- ☐ Emergency Project (Sec. 21080(b)(4); 15269(b)(c));
- ☒ Categorical Exemption. State type and section number: Class 4, §15304 Minor Alterations to Land
- ☐ Statutory Exemptions. State code number:

Reasons why project is exempt:

This project fits under 15304- Minor Alterations to Land. Explanation Attached.

Lead Agency
Contact Person: Frank T. Lewicki Area Code/Telephone/Extension: 530-557-9632

If filed by applicant:

1. Attach certified document of exemption finding.
2. Has a Notice of Exemption been filed by the public agency approving the project? ▪ Yes No

Signature: LeAnne Ray Mott Date: 1/12/26 Title: District Manager

Signed by Lead Agency Signed by Applicant

Authority cited: Sections 21083 and 21110, Public Resources Code.
Reference: Sections 21108, 21152, and 21152.1, Public Resources Code.

Date Received for filing at OPR:

Notice of CEQA Exemption

To: Tuolumne County Clerk, 2 South Green Street Sonora, CA 95370

From: Tuolumne County Resource Conservation District, 81 N. Washington St. Suite B, Sonora CA 95370

Date: January 12, 2026

Project Title: Covington Big Hill Fuel Reduction Project

Project Location: T2N, R15E, Portions of Sections 17, 18, 19, 20; MDBM. Tuolumne County, State of California
Lead Agency Contact Person: Frank T. Lewicki, TCRCD District Forester

Project Description: The proposed project, which will be carried out by American Forest Foundation, will reduce hazardous fuel loading and create a shaded fuel break condition on portions of 6 private parcels along Covington Mine, Columbia Crest, and North Bald Mountain Roads. The project area is approximately 65 acres in size. The project area ranges in elevation from approximately 2,900 to 3,200 feet above sea level. The objective of the project is to reduce hazardous fuel loading to create or restore shaded fuel break conditions to areas that were treated 10 to 20 years ago on portions of these 6 private parcels. These parcels are strategically located in a Very High fire hazard zone and will restore safe ingress and egress for residents on North Bald Mountain, Covington Mine, and Columbia Crest Roads, and protection of the Yankee Hill communications towers. Vegetation at the site would best be described as Oak Woodland; however, there is a significant amount of ponderosa pine, sugar pine, incense cedar and a few Douglas-fir in the overstory. Overstory tree species consist primarily of canyon live oak, interior live oak. California black oak, ponderosa pine, sugar pine, incense cedar, and a few Douglas fir. Much of the project area has been treated in the past and the understory consists primarily of live oak, black oak, manzanita, chamise, poison oak and toyon sprouts ranging from two to ten feet in height. Surface and ladder fuels will be reduced or modified by mastication, chipping, or by hand cutting with chipping or pile burning. Mastication may be conducted by a variety of track laying type tractors. Hand work for chipping, as well as lopping and scattering will be conducted by hand crews using chainsaws and other hand tools. Trees up to 12-inches in diameter at breast height (dbh), surface fuels and ladder fuels will be treated to achieve a target residual tree spacing of 25 to 35-feet between crowns. Residual trees will be pruned to a height of approximately 8 to 10-feet above ground level. Dead trees of any size may be felled and chipped, piled, or masticated. Masticated or chipped material will be left on site. The reduction in vegetation will restore or create a shaded fuel break condition that will minimize fire behavior and create a stand structure that is resistant to stand replacing fires.

Reasons Project is Exempt: This project fits under 15304- Minor Alterations to Land. The project will consist of removing surface and ladder fuels to maintain an existing fuel break. The project is located in an urban interface area. The project will maintain or create an open stand condition. The project will not involve the removal of mature or scenic trees. Stand health will be improved by removing dead, dying, and suppressed trees and brush, and increasing growing space for mature, healthy dominant and co-dominant trees. Sensitive species will not be impacted by the proposed project. The project was designed to avoid adverse impacts to watercourses. Mastication and chipping will leave a layer of organic material that will provide excellent erosion control. The project was carefully designed to avoid adverse impacts to archaeological resources. The project is also designed to reduce hazardous fuel loading in a strategic area around the greater Big Hill, Columbia, and North Bald Mountain Road areas, and will make Tuolumne County more resilient regarding wildfires.

Field review by TCRCD staff confirmed that no exceptions apply that would preclude the use of a Notice of Exemption for this project. TCRCD has concluded that no significant environmental impact would occur to aesthetics, agriculture and forestland/timberland, air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, energy, geology and soils, greenhouse gas emissions, hazards and hazardous materials, hydrology and water quality, land use planning, mineral resources, noise, populations and housing, public services, recreation, transportation/ traffic, utilities and service systems, or to wildfire. Documentation of the environmental review completed by the Tuolumne County Resource Conservation District, 81 N. Washington Street, Sonora, CA 95370.

Attest: I, Lindsay Mattos, District Manager, Tuolumne County Resource Conservation District, do herby certify that the Tuolumne County Resource Conservation District approved this Notice of Exemption on the 12th day of January 2026 by the following vote:

Ayes 5 Noes 0 Abstentions 0 Absent 2

Lindsay Mattos, District Manager, TCRCD