



State of California – Natural Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
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January 21, 2026

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Subject: City of Lancaster General Plan Update, Notice of Availability of Draft Open Space Element and Conservation Elements; City of Lancaster, Los Angeles County

Dear Jocelyn Swain:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has reviewed the City of Lancaster's (City) Open Space Element and Conservation Element update of the City's General Plan (Plan). Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments and recommendations regarding those activities involved in the Plan that may affect California fish and wildlife or be subject to Fish and Game Code.

CDFW's Role

CDFW is California's Trustee Agency for fish and wildlife resources and holds those resources in trust for the people of the state [Fish & Game Code, §§ 711.7, subdivision (a) & 1802; Pub. Resources Code, § 21070; California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, [§ 15386, subdivision (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). CDFW is also directed to provide biological expertise during public agency environmental review efforts, focusing specifically on projects and related activities that have the potential to adversely affect state fish and wildlife resources.

CDFW also exercises regulatory authority as provided by the Fish and Game Code, including lake and streambed alteration regulatory authority (Fish & Game Code, § 1600 *et seq.*). To the extent implementation of the Plan as proposed may result in "take" of any species protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA; Fish & Game Code, § 2050 *et seq.*), or CESA-listed rare plant pursuant to the Native Plant Protection Act (NPPA; Fish & Game Code, §1900 *et seq.*), CDFW recommends future project proponents obtain appropriate authorization under the Fish and Game Code.

CDFW also administers the Natural Community Conservation Planning program (NCCP), a California regional habitat conservation planning program (Fish & G. Code, § 2800 *et seq.*).

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 2 of 14

Project Description and Summary

Proponent: City of Lancaster

Objective: The City has updated the Conservation and Open Space Elements of the City's General Plan to be in compliance with recent state legislation, Senate Bill (SB) 1425 and Assembly Bill (AB) 1889. SB 1425 requires the Open Space Element to be updated to address equitable access to open space and climate resilience. AB 1889 requires the Conservation Element to be updated to address wildlife connectivity.

Open Space Element

The Open Space Element is required to address the conservation, development, and utilization of natural resources including water and its hydraulic force, forests, soils, rivers and other waters, harbors and fisheries, wildlife, minerals, and other natural resources (LCIb, 2025).

SB 1425 (California Government Code § 65565.5) requires the General Plan Open Space Element be updated to include the following:

- (a) *Every city and county shall review and update its local open-space plan by Jan. 1, 2026. The update shall include plans and an action program, as required by Section 65564, that address all of the following:*
 - (1) *Access to open space for all residents in a manner that considers social, economic and racial equity, correlated with the environmental justice element or environmental justice policies in the General Plan, as applicable.*
 - (2) *Climate resilience and other co-benefits of open space, correlated with the safety element.*
 - (3) *Rewilding opportunities, correlated with the land use element.*
- (b) *For purposes of this section, "rewilding opportunities" may include, but are not limited to, the following:*
 - (1) *Opportunities to preserve, enhance, and expand an integrated network of open space to support beneficial uses, such as habitat, recreation, natural resources, historic and Tribal resources, water management, and aesthetics.*
 - (2) *Establishing a natural communities conservation plan to provide for coordinated mitigation of the impacts of new development.*

SB 1425 explicitly requires (LCIb, 2025) that open space plan updates address equity, climate resilience, and rewilding in coordination with related general plan elements:

Rewilding: As defined in SB 1425, *rewilding* refers to the protection, enhancement, and expansion of open spaces to support habitat connectivity, recreation, cultural and Tribal community resources, water management, and other beneficial uses. It encompasses both local and regional strategies, such as Natural Community Conservation Plans (NCCPs), to offset development impacts and promote ecological integrity. Rewilding supports the state's biodiversity and climate goals, as established under **Executive Order N-82-20** and **AB 1757 (2022)**, and should be grounded in local ecological context, community values, and compatible land uses. The rewilding analysis should include the following:

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 3 of 14

- A map depicting current and historic habitat types, including riparian areas, wetlands, oak woodlands, grasslands, and other key vegetation communities
- Identify regulated ecological resources, such as jurisdictional wetlands, waters of the U.S., sensitive natural communities, and special-status species habitat.

Conservation Element

According to the Office of Land Use and Climate and Innovation (LCI) (LCIa, 2025), updates to the Conservation Element should include an evaluation of a jurisdiction's natural resource systems based on sound science and ecological principles. The Conservation Element should provide plans for the protection and preservation of a diverse array of wildlife and their habitats. This must include wildlife that is classified as a rare, threatened, or endangered species under state and federal law (Fish & G. Code § 2050 et seq.; 16 U.S.C. § 1531). Planning for wildlife habitats should account for current habitats, health of wildlife, projected changes in such habitat due to climate change, wildlife conservation, furthering responsible development and addressing the needs of a growing human population, habitat connectivity and potential threats to such habitat from development. The Conservation Element's focus on wildlife should be consistent with Habitat Conservation Plans (e.g. California Endangered Species Act (CESA), California Environmental Quality Act Review (CEQA), Lake and Streambed Alteration Program (LSA), Timberland Conservation Program, Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP), Conservation and Mitigation Banking, Invasive Species Program, Native Plant Program) and other management plans, and should include coordination with other government agencies involved in wildlife preservation (LCIa, 2025).

AB 1889 requires a city to consider the impact of development on the movement of wildlife and habitat connectivity as part of the conservation element of its general plan.

- (a) Identify and analyze connectivity areas, permeability, and natural landscape areas within the jurisdiction, as defined;
- (b) Identify and analyze existing or planned wildlife passage features to ensure that planned development does not undermine the effectiveness of existing and potential wildlife passage features;
- (c) Consider the impacts of development and the barriers caused by development to wildlife and habitat connectivity;
- (d) Avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts and barriers to wildlife movement; and
- (e) Analyze and consider opportunities to remediate existing barriers to wildlife connectivity and restore degraded habitat and open space.

Location: The Project would apply to the entire City of Lancaster, including its sphere of influence. The City is located in the northern region of Los Angeles County, in the Antelope Valley at the western edge of the Mojave Desert.

Timeframe: Projects would be tiered from the General Plan over a 25-year planning period through to the year 2050.

Biological Setting: Sensitive communities including alkali marsh, Joshua tree woodland, southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest, fresh-water marsh, alluvial fan sage scrub, mesquite bosque, and southern willow scrub, among others that occur within the Plan area.

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 4 of 14

The following vegetation alliances were identified from the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) (DS735) (Figure 1):

- *Ambrosia salsola* - *Bebbia juncea*
- *Artemisia tridentata* ssp. *parishii*
- *Atriplex canescens*
- *Atriplex confertifolia*
- *Atriplex polycarpa*
- *Atriplex spinifera*
- *California Annual and Perennial Grassland*
- *California annual herb/grass*
- *Ephedra nevadensis* - *Lycium andersonii* - *Grayia spinosa*
- *Ericameria nauseosa*
- *Irrigated Row and Field Crops*
- *Juniperus californica*
- *Krascheninnikovia lanata*
- *Lacustrine*
- *Larrea tridentata*
- *Madrean Warm Semi-Desert Wash Woodland/Scrub*
- *Mediterranean California naturalized annual and perennial grassland*
- *North American Desert Alkaline-Saline Marsh & Playa*
- *Rhus trilobata* - *Crataegus rivularis* - *Forestiera pubescens*
- *Salix exigua*
- *Salix gooddingii* - *Salix laevigata*
- *Tamarix* spp.
- *Typha* (*angustifolia*, *domingensis*, *latifolia*)
- *Urban*
- *Yucca brevifolia*

CDFW's review of the CNDDDB, the California Native Plant Survey (CNPS) Inventory of Rare and Endangered Plants, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) endangered and threatened species lists indicates potentially occupied habitat currently exists within the General Plan's planning area for the following special status species:

Plants

- western Joshua tree
- alkali mariposa-lily
- desert cymopterus
- Lancaster milkvetch
- Red-rock poppy
- white pygmy-poppy
- Peirson's morning-glory
- golden goodmania

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 5 of 14

- crowned muilla
- California androsace
- Parry's spineflower
- Mojave spineflower
- prostrate spineflower
- Parish's alkali grass
- California Orcutt grass

Amphibians

- western spadefoot
- arroyo toad
- red-legged frog

Reptiles

- coast horned lizard
- western pond turtle
- orange-throated whiptail

Invertebrates (Insects)

- Crotch's bumble bee

Mammals

- western mastiff bat
- California mastiff bat
- pocketed free-tailed bat
- big free-tailed bat
- California leaf-nosed bat
- Yuma Myotis
- pallid bat
- Townsend's big-eared bat
- spotted bat
- small-footed bat
- fringed myotis
- American badger
- Mojave Ground Squirrel
- Los Angeles pocket mouse
- San Diego desert woodrat

Birds

- Swainson's hawk
- Cooper's hawk
- burrowing Owl
- California horned lark

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 6 of 14

- Aquila chrysaetos
- golden eagle
- Le Conte's thrasher
- loggerhead shrike
- white-tailed kite
- osprey
- western snowy plover
- tri-colored blackbird
- willow flycatcher

Comments and Recommendations

CDFW appreciates the City's efforts in offering avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures for biological resources in the General Plan update. CDFW offers the comments and recommendations below to assist the City in adequately identifying, avoiding, and/or mitigating significant, or potentially significant, direct and indirect impacts on fish and wildlife biological resources of future.

Comment #1: Multiple-Species Habitat Conservation Plan and Natural Communities Conservation Program

The Plan (4.3.3) states the City would like to develop a city-wide Multiple-Species Habitat Conservation Plan and Natural Communities Conservation Program to encourage development practices that preserve significant environmental areas and facilitate wildlife movement. CDFW is available to discuss the initiation of a Natural Communities Conservation Plan and looks forward to coordinating this effort.

Comment #2: Biological Impact Fees

Currently, the Plan includes the continued reliance on a fee-based mitigation strategy for biological impacts within the City. The Plan references collecting fee to mitigate for impacts to biological resources. However, the Plan lacks specific requirements for the money to be directed toward mitigation activities specific to the species and habitat being impacted. The Plan does not discuss or provide details supporting how the Biological Impact Fee and the Biological Impact Fee for Special Status Plants, hereafter referred to as "Fees", establish a strategic, well-designed plan to guide future development and conservation.

Absent commitment, specific performance standards, and actions to achieve performance standards, these Fees may be inadequate mitigation, resulting in substantial adverse direct and cumulative effects. Based on an average land value of \$27,704 per acre (Landsearch, 2025 and Zillow, 2025), the collection of \$3000 per acre provides a 0.1:1 ratio for mitigation. This falls far below typical recommended mitigation ratios, resulting in net loss of habitat. Therefore, the Plan may contribute to the ongoing loss of sensitive, special status, threatened, and/or endangered plants, wildlife, and vegetation communities in the Antelope Valley. Establishing a cohesive, proactive plan to fully fund and purchase specific habitat will help ensure long-term protection of rare plants, wildlife, and sensitive vegetation communities, strengthening biological resilience.

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 7 of 14

Recommended Plan Specific Actions:

CDFW requests the following recommendations to be incorporated into the final Plan:

Recommendation #1: Any development that impacts undeveloped land with sensitive plant or animal resources and their habitat shall be required to mitigate these impacts by conserving land with the same biological resources under a conservation easement. This land shall be conserved at no less than a 2:1 ratio, to ensure no net loss, and must contain the species being impacted. A qualified land manager shall be dedicated to manage all conserved land.

Recommendation #2: If the Plan will continue to rely on the collection of a fee to offset biological impacts to rare and sensitive plant and animal species and their habitat, the City should revise the Plan to provide adequate, complete, and good-faith disclosure of information that would address the following in relation to the Plan:

- 1) Whether the Fees are going towards an established program;
- 2) How that program is designed to (and will) mitigate the effects at issue at a level meaningful for purposes of CEQA;
- 3) What the Fees would acquire. It is unclear if the Fees would be used to acquire land for preservation, enhancement, and/or restoration purposes, or if the Fees would be used to purchase credits at a mitigation bank, or none of the above;
- 4) What biological resources would the Fees protect/conserve;
- 5) What land is potentially available to purchase at \$3,000 per acre in the Plan area. This would ensure a minimum no net loss of habitat if one acre of suitable habitat is purchased and conserved for each acre impacted and assess a fee;
- 6) Where the City may acquire land or purchase credits at a mitigation bank so that these Fees would offset Project impacts on biological resources and sensitive plant species in the Plan area;
- 7) When the City would use these Fees. Mitigation payment does not equate to mitigation if the funds are not being used. Also, temporal impacts on biological resources may occur as long as the City fails to implement its proposed mitigation;
- 8) How the City would commit the Project Applicant to paying these Fees. For example, when would the City require payment from the Project Applicant, how long would the Project Applicant have to pay these Fees, and what mechanisms would the City implement to ensure these Fees are paid? Mitigation measures must be fully enforceable through permit conditions, agreements, or other legally binding instruments (CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.4).
- 9) What performance measures the proposed mitigation would achieve (CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.4);
- 10) What type(s) of potential action(s) that can feasibly achieve those performance standards (CEQA Guidelines, § 15126.4); and
- 11) How these Fees would be adequate such that no impacts would occur as a result of each development project.

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 8 of 14

Comment #3: Rare Plants

The Plan does not contain a map showing the known locations of rare, CESA, and ESA plants and vegetation communities in the Plan Area. Without a map of known locations, the Plan is unable to provide a comprehensive strategy to avoid areas with known rare, CESA, and ESA plant species or provide a meaningful mitigation/conservation strategy.

Although the Plan includes maps of rare, CESA, and ESA animals, the Plan's analysis only focuses on the context of wildlife movement and habitat connectivity. It does not "provide plans for the protection and preservation of ...wildlife (including plants) that is classified as rare, threatened, or endangered species under state and federal law" (LCIa, 2026 Page 117). Without identifying these biologically sensitive areas, promoting avoidance of these species and their habitats, and providing conservation for these land resources, the Plan may not meet SB 1425 requirements of addressing rewilding.

Recommended Plan Specific Actions:

CDFW requests the following recommendations be incorporated into the final Plan:

Recommendation #3: The General Plan Guidelines from LCI outlines how General Plans should discuss rewilding. The Plan should be updated to address the following questions:

- What are the current and historic habitat types in the planning area, and where are these habitats most at risk?
- Where are ecologically significant areas, such as corridors, riparian zones, or migration routes, that can be restored or reconnected?
- Are there listed species, sensitive habitats, or rare plant communities that require enhanced protection or targeted restoration?
- How can policies promote urban rewilding, for example, by converting underused land into native habitat or incorporating ecological features into urban landscapes?

Recommendation #4: The Plan should include maps showing known locations of rare, CESA, and ESA plants using CNDDDB and other available datasets. Based on these known occurrences, the City should conserve rare vegetation communities with adequate buffers (minimum 500 meters) so as to allow for the long term viability and integrity of plant communities as a whole. Rare vegetation communities should include alkali marsh, mesquite bosque, Joshua tree woodland, desert grassland, southern willow scrub, cottonwood willow woodland, fresh-water marsh, Mojave riparian forest, desert alluvial fan scrub, desert alluvial wash and vegetation alliances ranked S1-S4.

The California Natural Diversity Database (Figure 1) has a vegetation map layer (DS 735) that the City should use to help inform known locations of rare vegetation communities (Figure 1). The California Natural Diversity Database layers DS45 and DS1002 contain locations of known rare, CESA, and ESA plants in the Plan area. The Biological Resources Assessment of the Proposed Antelope Valley Significant Ecological Area (PCR, 2000) is also a good reference for the rare vegetation communities that occur in the region.

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 9 of 14

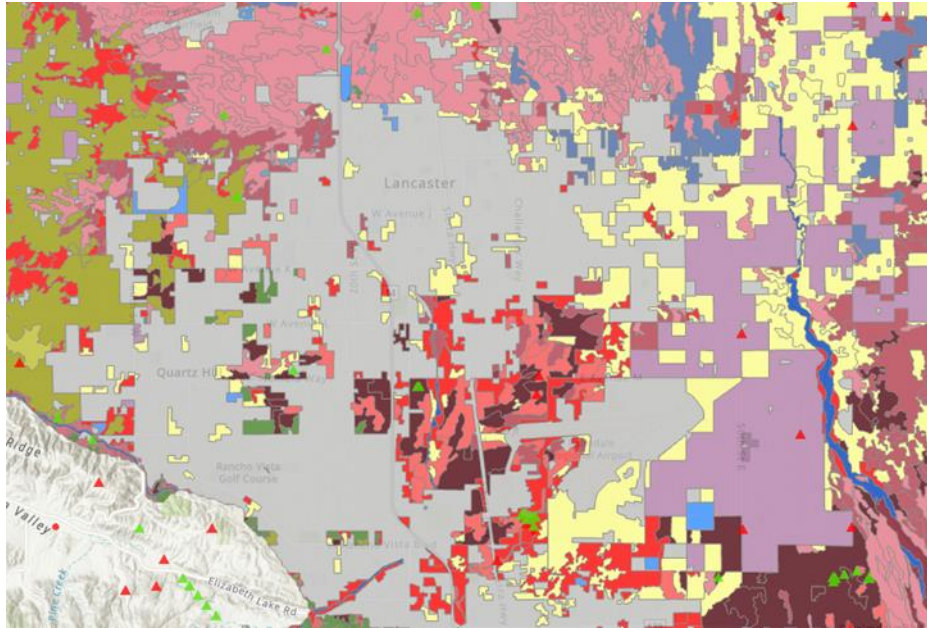


Figure 1. Vegetation alliances identified from the CNDDDB (DS735).

Recommendation #5: The Plan should include a map of burrowing owl (CESA candidate species) predicted habitat (Figure 2 below). Known locations with rare, CESA, and ESA species, such as burrowing owl and their habitat, should be prioritized for conservation.

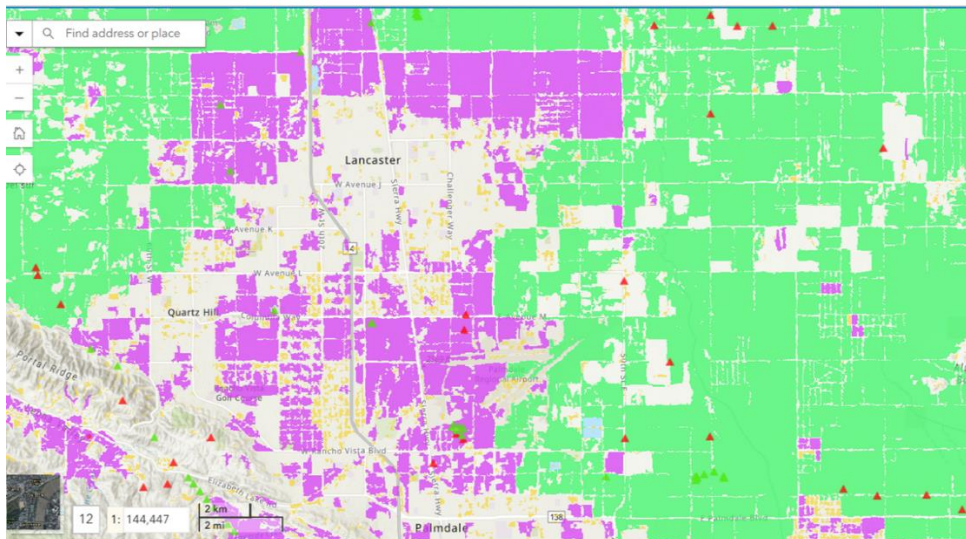


Figure 2. Burrowing Owl (CESA Candidate Species) predicted habitat.

Recommendation #6: City should identify and develop a coordinated biological preserve system that includes Pre-Approved Mitigation Areas for rare plants, sensitive vegetation communities, sensitive animals, Biological Resource Core Areas, wildlife corridors, and linkages to allow wildlife to travel throughout their habitat ranges. CDFW is available to discuss Pre-Approved Mitigation Areas and looks forward to coordinating this effort.

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 10 of 14

Comment #4: Noise and Lighting Impacts

Increased noise, light, human activity, and vibration may have negative impacts to wildlife movement and persistence in the surrounding area. Substantial noise may adversely affect wildlife species in several ways as wildlife responses to noise can occur at exposure levels of only 55-60 decibel (dB) (Barber et al. 2009). Noise can also affect predator-prey relationships as many nocturnal animals such as bats and owls primarily use auditory cues (i.e., hearing) to hunt, and have been found to have a high likelihood of occurrence in the area. Additionally, many prey species increase their vigilance behavior when exposed to noise because they need to rely more on visual detection of predators when auditory cues may be masked by noise (Rabin et al. 2006, Quinn et al. 2017). Moreover, the potential development within these proposed land use designations will increase ambient lighting around the corridors/critical habitat. Increased ambient lighting levels can increase predation risks and disorientation and disrupt normal behaviors of wildlife in adjacent feeding, breeding, and roosting habitat (Longcore and Rich 2004). Increased development may also reduce habitat quality due to edge effects. Edge effects that may occur as a result of development adjacent to natural areas are introduction of invasive species, encroachment on suitable habitat for special-status species, increased pollutants, altered microclimate conditions, and introduction of insect/pest infestations.

Artificial light at night (ALAN) is increasing in extent and intensity across the globe. It has been shown to interfere with animal sensory systems, orientation, and distribution, with the potential to cause significant ecological impacts (Barrientos et al. 2023). ALAN also causes changes in reproductive timing or success of birds in response to light leading to phenological mismatches and lower fitness (Barrientos et al. 2023). The impacts of light pollution also cause responses from biodiversity that include advance of spring leaf budding in deciduous trees, inhibition of mating insects under artificial light, wildlife shifts to darker/brighter areas where perceived predation risk is lower, and avoidance of lit wildlife crossings by mammals creating a barrier effect for linear infrastructure (Barrientos et al. 2023). The issue of light pollution and the associated impacts to wildlife should be considered when planning for additional development within the City of Lancaster.

Recommended Plan Specific Actions:

CDFW requests the following recommendations be incorporated into the final Plan:

Recommendation #7: CDFW recommends the following edits to Specific Action 3.4.2(a):

- ~~Support the protection of Little Rock Creek as a natural open space area by providing 100-foot minimum buffers against intrusion from future surrounding land uses.~~ **City shall require a 500-foot buffer of all creeks, washes, and streams, to reduce edge effect impacts and further fragmentation of corridors, linkages, and critical habitats as well as indirect impacts through increased noise, light, vibration, edge effects, and human activity.**

General Recommendations for Specific Plan Actions

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 11 of 14

- Constrain development design, where feasible, to cluster dwelling configuration along existing roadways in order to minimize clearing associated with fuel management and to reduce the need for grading, fencing, and other habitat disturbances.
- Retain habitat linkages within Little Rock and Big Rock Washes.
- Carefully review proposals for new or increased groundwater extraction to prevent overdrafting of the shallow aquifer supporting the dry lakes and riparian habitat areas. The biological functionality of these areas is directly related to the supporting hydrology, which originates from the surrounding basin slopes and from the groundwater flows of Little Rock and Big Rock Creeks.
- Allow for appropriate public access to open space lands for recreation activities while protecting and restoring the natural ecosystem and minimizing environmental damage, as appropriate.
- Establish a coherent and logical pattern of urban uses that protect and enhance open space and agricultural uses by providing a clear and permanent boundary for urban uses with the City's planning area.
- Require the use of native plants for any project proposing revegetation or landscaping. CDFW recommends the use of native species found in naturally occurring plant communities within or adjacent to the Project area.
- Prohibit the use of non-native, invasive plants for landscaping, particularly any species listed as 'watch', 'Moderate', or 'High' by the California Invasive Plant Council (Cal-IPC 2023).
- Ensure no net loss of sensitive habitats/open space in the Plan area.
- Require avoidance and mitigation measures for any fuel modification activities conducted within and adjacent to the sensitive habitat with rare, CESA, and ESA species present.
- Develop a weed management shall for all areas adjacent to open space that will be subject to fuel modification disturbance. Ensure any irrigation proposed in fuel modification zones do not allow for the introduction of invasive Argentine ants. Monitoring should also include parameters to identify possible introduction of Argentine ants.

Conclusion

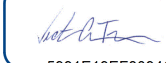
CDFW appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Plan to assist the City in identifying and planning for meaningful conservation habitat and mitigating the impacts of development on biological resources. CDFW requests an opportunity to review and comment on any response that the City has to our comments.

Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 12 of 14

Questions regarding this letter or further coordination should be directed to Kelly Schmoker¹, Senior Environmental Scientist (Specialist).

Sincerely

DocuSigned by:



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Victoria Tang
Environmental Program Manager
South Coast Region

cc: California Department of Fish and Wildlife
Victoria Tang, Environmental Program Manager
Steve Gibson, Senior Environmental Scientist (Supervisory)
Frederic (Fritz) Frieman, Senior Environmental Scientist (Supervisory)
Cindy Hailey, Staff Services Analyst
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Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 13 of 14

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Jocelyn Swain
City of Lancaster
January 21, 2026
Page 14 of 14

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