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State of California – Natural Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
Northern Region
601 Locust Street
Redding, CA 96001
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GAVIN NEWSOM, Governor
MEGHAN HERTEL, Director

April 16, 2026

Breeanna Kalson
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SUBJECT: Review of the Notice of Preparation for the Ferndale Access Project, EA# 01-0N330, SCH# 2026020911.

Dear Breeanna Kalson:

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has reviewed the Notice of Preparation (NOP) of a Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the Ferndale Access Project (Project) dated February 24, 2026 (Expense Authorization [EA] #01-0N330, State Clearing House [SCH] #2026020911). CDFW appreciates receiving this referral from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans, Lead Agency) and the opportunity to comment on the Project, relative to impacts on biological resources.

CDFW is a Trustee Agency pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). As the Trustee for the State's fish and wildlife resources, CDFW has jurisdiction over the conservation, protection, and management of fish, wildlife, native plants and their habitat necessary for biologically sustainable populations of those species (Fish & G. Code, § 1801, § 1802). As the Trustee Agency for fish and wildlife resources, CDFW provides requisite biological expertise to review and comment upon CEQA documents, and makes recommendations regarding those resources held in trust for the people of California.

CDFW may also assume the role of Responsible Agency. A Responsible Agency is an agency other than the Lead Agency that has a legal responsibility for carrying out or approving a project. A Responsible Agency actively participates in the Lead Agency's CEQA process, reviews the Lead Agency's CEQA

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document and uses that document when making a decision on a project. The Responsible Agency must rely on the Lead Agency's CEQA document to prepare and issue its own findings regarding a project (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, § 15096, §15381 [hereafter, CEQA Guidelines]). CDFW most often becomes a Responsible Agency when a Lake or Streambed Alteration Agreement (Fish & G. Code, § 1600 et seq.) or a California Endangered Species Act (CESA) Incidental Take Permit (Fish & G. Code, § 2081(b)) is needed for a project. CDFW relies on the CEQA document prepared by the Lead Agency to make a finding and decide whether to issue the permit or agreement. It is important that the Lead Agency's DEIR considers CDFW's Responsible Agency requirements. For example, CEQA requires CDFW to include additional feasible alternatives or feasible mitigation measures within its powers that would substantially lessen or avoid any significant effect a project would have on the environment (CEQA Guidelines, § 15096(g)(2)).

CDFW offers the following comments and recommendations in our role as Trustee and Responsible Agency pursuant to CEQA (California Public Resource Code, § 21000 et seq.).

Project Description and Location

The Project is located approximately 5 miles northeast of Ferndale in Humboldt County on State Route (SR) 211 between Post Miles R77.0 and 78.8 and encompasses Eel River Bridge No. 04 0134 (Fernbridge), which spans the main stem of the Eel River.

As described in the NOP, Fernbridge was built in 1911 and is the longest working poured concrete bridge in the world. Earthquakes in 2022 and 2023 resulted in major damage to Fernbridge. The Project proposes to address deficiencies of Fernbridge to provide permanent and reliable access to Ferndale and the surrounding area served by SR 211. The NOP states the DEIR will analyze a 'No Build' alternative and up to seven build alternatives:

'No Build' Alternative: No modifications to Fernbridge

Alternative 1: Rehabilitation of Fernbridge at its existing width

Alternative 2: Rehabilitation and widening of existing Fernbridge

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Alternative 3: Construction of a new bridge on a new alignment and rehabilitation of Fernbridge for bicycles/pedestrians

Alternative 4: Construction of a new bridge on a new alignment and rehabilitation of Fernbridge for bicycles/pedestrians with modified superstructure

Alternative 5: Construction of a new bridge on a new alignment and demolition of Fernbridge

Alternative 6: Construction of a new bridge on a new alignment and Fernbridge as a monument

Alternative 7: Construction of a new bridge on the existing alignment and demolition of Fernbridge

The NOP states the CEQA environmental effects subject areas most likely to result in potentially significant impacts are aesthetics, biological resources, and historic resources, but that further analysis and ongoing Project design could reveal additional or different areas of potential impact. For biological resources, the NOP states the Project area would affect the Eel River, a major fish-bearing waterway, its shoreline, and banks. Caltrans will prepare a Natural Environment Study to identify the sensitive habitat areas and plant and animal special status species that may be impacted by the Project. An Aquatic Resources Delineation Report will be prepared by Caltrans to delineate jurisdictional waters and quantify potential impacts. The DEIR will summarize the results of the assessment, identify applicable avoidance and minimization measures, and, as applicable, identify mitigation measures that would reduce or avoid impacts. A Biological Assessment will be prepared as part of the Section 7 Endangered Species Act consultation process with National Marine Fisheries Service. Coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, CDFW, Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the California Coastal Commission is also anticipated by the NOP.

Environmental Setting and Special Status Species

The Project occurs on the Eel River, California's third largest watershed. The Eel River is 196 miles long and drains 3,684 square miles. Eel River flows are highly variable with areas of discontinuous surface flow during low-flow drought

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conditions in the Lower Eel River, and flows likely exceeding 800,000 cubic feet per second at the Project location during the December 23, 1964, flood of record (USGS 2026a). The Project location is within the upper reaches of tidal influence and experiences approximately 1-foot of water elevation change between high and low tides (USGS 2026b).

The Project location and surrounding nine U.S. Geological Survey 7.5-minute topographic quadrangles contain potential habitat for at least 123 special status species, including 13 fishes, four amphibian, one reptile, four mollusks, three insects, 32 birds, 11 mammals, 52 plants and lichens, and three Sensitive Natural Communities (CDFW 2026). Of these, 18 species are listed as threatened, endangered, or candidates for listing pursuant to CESA, including: tricolored blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*, CESA Threatened); greater sandhill crane (*Antigone canadensis tabida*, CESA Threatened); burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*, CESA Candidate Endangered); marbled murrelet (*Brachyramphus marmoratus*, CESA Endangered); western yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*, CESA Endangered); willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*, CESA Endangered); bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, CESA Endangered); bank swallow (*Riparia riparia*, CESA Threatened); northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*, CESA Threatened); white sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*, CESA Candidate Threatened); coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch* - southern Oregon / northern California Evolutionarily Significant Unit, CESA Threatened); summer-run steelhead (*O. mykiss irideus* - northern California Distinct Population Segment, CESA Endangered); longfin smelt (*Spirinchus thaleichthys*, CESA Threatened); western bumble bee (*Bombus occidentalis*, CESA Candidate Endangered); Humboldt marten (*Martes caurina humboldtensis*, CESA Endangered); Menzies wallflower (*Erysimum menziesii*, CESA Endangered); beach layia (*Layia carnosa*, CESA Endangered); and western lily (*Lilium occidentale*, CESA Endangered).

The lower Eel River is an irreplaceable aquatic connectivity corridor utilized by anadromous fish and other species accessing upstream Eel River sub-watersheds, including the Van Duzen River, South Fork Eel River, Middle Main Stem Eel River, North Fork Eel River; Middle Fork Eel River, and the Upper Main Stem Eel River. Historic salmonid run sizes in the Eel River totaled over 1 million spawning adults annually, including the third largest chinook salmon (*O. tshawytscha*) population (100-800k), second largest steelhead (100-150k), and

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50-100k coho salmon. These populations have declined markedly over the past century. Ongoing habitat restoration has been occurring in recent decades to restore salmonid runs. These efforts are highlighted and expanded in the California Governor's 2024 Salmon Strategy, which includes restoring and expanding habitat for salmon spawning and rearing. Additionally, an interagency Lower Eel River Salmonid Habitat Restoration Priorities (SHaRP) team has begun a process that will result in an action plan for the Lower Eel River including the Van Duzen River and mainstem South Fork Eel River (NOAA 2026). Focal species for the Lower Eel River SHaRP include chinook salmon, coho salmon, steelhead, pacific lamprey (*Entosphenus tridentatus*), and green sturgeon (*A. medirostris*).

Riparian habitat, including the Lower Eel River, is essential for a wide variety of important resident and migratory fish and wildlife species (CDFW 2014), including CESA-listed bank swallows that nest in close proximity to the Project. Riparian areas are those which surface and subsurface hydrology interconnect aquatic areas with adjacent uplands. In the Lower Eel River watershed, riparian habitat occurs adjacent to a diversity of features including isolated seeps and springs; ephemeral, intermittent and perennial streams; wetlands; ponds; rivers; and floodplains. California's State Wildlife Action Plan (CDFW 2025) identifies multiple general strategies for conserving riparian habitat. CDFW seeks to, and supports projects that develop and increase riparian area, heterogeneity, and connectivity along the mainstem Lower Eel River, tributaries within the Lower Eel River floodplain, and freshwater wetlands.

CDFW Consultation History

CDFW consultation for this Project began on February 4, 2025, with CDFW staff participating in a multi-agency meeting where Caltrans presented a preliminary Project overview and schedule. During that meeting CDFW staff highlighted the importance of the Lower Eel River habitat for special status species, including salmonids, bank swallows and other species and habitats. CDFW looks forward to continued communication and coordination by the Lead Agency regarding specific Project components, impacts, and proposed mitigation strategies.

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CDFW Permitting

Based on information provided in the NOP, the proposed Project will have substantial impacts to the bed, bank and channel of the Eel River. Caltrans should notify CDFW for a Lake or Streambed Alteration (LSA) Agreement. Additionally, CDFW will need more information to assess the potential for the Project to result in take[1] of species listed as threatened, endangered or otherwise protected pursuant to Fish and Game Code and whether take authorization from CDFW will be needed. For more information, please visit CDFW's LSA webpage: https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Environmental-Review/LSA and CESA permitting webpage: https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/CESA/Permitting. CDFW looks forward to continuing coordination with Caltrans to ensure that mitigation approaches will be compatible with state permitting requirements, including further coordination on mitigation approaches for impacts to onsite habitat.

Comments and Recommendations

CDFW offers the following comments and recommendations in our role as Trustee and Responsible Agency pursuant to CEQA (California Public Resource Code, § 21000 et seq.). To enable CDFW staff to adequately review and comment on the proposed Project, we recommend the following information be included in the DEIR, as applicable.

1. **Project Description**. Several important aspects of the Project have not been described in the NOP. This limits CDFW's ability to evaluate the potential impact to trustee resources. CDFW recommends the DEIR include a comprehensive project description **(Recommendation 1)**. Details should include, but are not limited to:
    - all work occurring from the bed, bank, channel, or riparian areas of the Eel River (e.g., methods, equipment, materials, work windows);
    - anticipated impacts to riverine and riparian habitats;
    - anticipated impacts to special status species and habitats;
    - measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate for impacts to biological resources;

[1] Take means hunt, pursue, catch, capture, or kill, or attempt to hunt, pursue, catch, capture, or kill (Fish & G. Code, § 86).

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- anticipated sequencing and timeline of construction;
- staging and stockpile areas; and
- other Project elements that constitute the "whole of an action," which have a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment (CEQA Guidelines, § 15378(a)).

2. **Eel River Geomorphology and Hydraulics**. The lower Eel River is situated in a dynamic landscape influenced by tectonic movements, sea level changes, wide river channel migration zones, and associated riverine scour, erosional and depositional events. Antropogenic factors including flood control, river bank hardening, in-stream gravel mining and other actions add further complexity to the environmental setting. The existing Fernbridge structure has received prior protection from erosion and scour, often occurring as bankline armoring in the form of rock slope protection (RSP). RSP and other forms of bank hardening alter natural geomorphic processes and can result in deflection of hydraulic energy to other locations along the river where they can cause increased scour and bank erosion. The DEIR should include a geomorphic and hydraulic analysis of the Lower Eel River from the confluence of the Van Duzen River to at least two miles downstream of the Project location **(Recommendation 2)**. This analysis should include a chronological history of bank hardening, gravel mining, channel migrations, bankline erosion, and other factors affecting riverine geomorphology. This analysis should be used to inform appropriate locations for bridge abutments, piers, and other Project features that could impact geomorphic processes beneficial to the ecosystem, including mature riparian vegetation and salmonid habitats needed for multiple species and life stages.

3. **Early Coordination for LSA/CESA Permitting**. All Project alternatives, with the exception of the 'No Build' Alternative, will result in alterations to the bed, channel, or bank of the Eel River and require LSA notification to CDFW pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 1602. In addition to other special status species and habitats, the DEIR must evaluate potential impacts to CESA-list species with potential habitat in the Project vicinity. CDFW recommends Caltrans engage in early consultation with CDFW to determine Project impacts to CESA-listed species and their habitats. For take authorizations issued by CDFW for the Project, Caltrans will be required to implement species-specific minimization and avoidance

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measures, and fully mitigate the impacts of the Project (Fish and Game Code § 2081 (b); Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, §§ 783.2-783.8). To facilitate the permitting processes, CDFW recommends Caltrans engage in early consultation to determine Project impacts to the Eel River and CESA-listed species and their habitats, and adequate mitigation **(Recommendation 3).**

4. **Pile Driving.** The Project area is an important migratory corridor for CESA-listed fish species, including longfin smelt, summer-run steelhead, and coho salmon, which are known to spawn further upstream in Eel River tributaries. The NOP does not provide details on methods for bridge demolition or construction (e.g., impact hammer, vibratory hammer), types of piles, number of piles, or hydroacoustic impacts expected from pile installation/removal. Pile driving and other percussive work produces intense sound vibrations that are injurious (i.e., barotrauma) to fish (Popper et al., 2006). CDFW and Caltrans are signatories to the interagency Interim Criteria for Injury to Fish from Pile Driving Activities (2008 Interim Criteria; Enclosure 1). According to the Interim Criteria, the sound pressure levels should not exceed 206 dB peaks and 187 dB accumulated sound exposure level (SEL) for all listed fish except those that are less than 2 grams. In that case, the criteria for the accumulated SEL should be 183 dB. Impact analyses in the DEIR should use the Interim Criteria for Injury to Fish from Pile Driving Activities **(Recommendation 4).**

5. **Wildlife Connectivity**. The DEIR must address potential Project impacts on movement of wildlife species (CEQA Guidelines, California Streets and Highways Code section 158 et seq). Riparian corridors are vital travel routes for a variety of terrestrial species to access essential resources for survival. CDFW recommends early coordination with wildlife connectivity staff to discuss Project features that could minimize impacts to wildlife connectivity **(Recommendation 5).** Possible features include construction of dry benches on the riverbank under the bridge to facilitate the crossing of terrestrial wildlife during rain events. Exclusion fencing could also be considered to guide wildlife away from SR 211 and reduce roadkill. Wildlife fencing in combination with wildlife crossing structures is an effective strategy to reduce vehicle collisions while also maintaining connectivity across highways for wildlife (Huijser et al., 2009, Clevenger et al. 2001, Gagnon et al., 2015, Sawyer et al., 2012).

6. **Water Quality**. The Eel River is listed as sediment-impaired pursuant to Clean Water Act section 303(d). The Project will be required to address

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impacts to Waters of the State through the California State Water Resources Control Board's Construction Stormwater General Permit and the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board's Clean Water Act section 401 Water Quality Certifications and Waste Discharge Requirements. Pollution discharges or releases (e.g. sediment, high pH) not expressly authorized by the State Water Resources Control Board or the Regional Water Quality Control Board are unlawful pursuant to Fish and Game Code section 5650. The Project must be proactive in maintaining water quality throughout construction. In addition to standard erosion control, stormwater and other Best Management Practices, the Project should strongly consider 1) locating staging and stockpile locations outside flood-prone areas, 2) ceasing vehicle traffic in construction areas during precipitation that could result in discharges, 3)timing concrete (and other deleterious materials) pours to avoid precipitation and allow adequate cure time prior to contact with river flow or other waters, and 4) use of active treatment systems to treat runoff **(Recommendation 6)**.

7. **Alternative Recommendations**. Five of the seven build alternatives in the NOP include construction of a new bridge. From a biological perspective, it is preferrable to remove the existing bridge and restore the river and its banks at that location if a new bridge is built **(Recommendation 7)**.

8. **Compensatory Mitigation**. For potentially significant environmental impacts, the DEIR should include a mitigation monitoring or reporting program/plan (MMRP) (CEQA Guidelines, § 15097). MMRP measures should include specific details on mitigation implementation unless the DEIR explains why it's impractical or infeasible to provide those details at this time. If specific details are not included and compliance with a regulatory permit is identified as mitigation, the DEIR mitigation measures should include specific performance standards the mitigation will achieve so there is substantial evidence in the record that the mitigation will reduce the impacts to the specified performance standards (CEQA Guidelines 15126.4(a)(1)(B)). Additionally, the impacts associated with mitigation implementation, as well as mitigation permitting, should be addressed in the DEIR when considering the Project's "whole of the action" (CEQA Guidelines, §§ 15003(h), 15063(a)(1), 15378(a), and 15126.4 (a)(1)(D)). Therefore, the DEIR should include specific details regarding mitigation measure performance standards as well as potential impacts and permitting requirements associated with mitigation implementation **(Recommendation 8)**.

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9. **Special Status Species Observations**. CEQA requires that information developed in projects be incorporated into a database (Public Resources Code, § 21003(e)). The Project should report any special status species or Sensitive Natural Communities detected during Project surveys or construction monitoring to the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDB) **(Recommendation 9)**. The CNNDB field survey form can be found at the following link: https://www.wildlife.ca.gov/Data/CNDDB/Submitting-Data.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The DEIR should include a comprehensive project description including, but not limited, to all work occurring from the bed, bank, channel, or riparian areas of the Eel River; anticipated impacts to riverine and riparian habitats; anticipated impacts to special status species and habitats; measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate for impacts to biological resources; anticipated sequencing and timeline of construction; staging and stockpile areas; and other Project elements that constitute the "whole of an action," which have a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment.

2. The DEIR should include a geomorphic and hydraulic analysis of the Lower Eel River from the confluence of the Van Duzen River to at least two miles downstream of the Project location. This analysis should include a chronological history of bank hardening, gravel mining, channel migrations, bankline erosion, and other factors affecting riverine geomorphology. This analysis should be used to inform appropriate locations for bridge abutments, piers, and other Project features that could impact geomorphic processes beneficial to the ecosystem, including mature riparian vegetation and salmonid habitats needed for multiple species and life stages.

3. To facilitate LSA and CESA permitting processes, Caltrans should engage in additionally early consultation to determine Project impacts to the Eel River and CESA-listed species and their habitats, and adequate mitigation.

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4. Impact analyses for pile driving and other percussive work should use the 2008 interagency Interim Criteria for Injury to Fish from Pile Driving Activities.

5. Caltrans should engage in early coordination with CDFW wildlife connectivity staff to discuss Project features that could minimize impacts to wildlife connectivity. Possible features include construction of dry benches to facilitate the crossing of terrestrial wildlife and exclusion to guide wildlife away from SR 211.

6. Caltrans should strongly consider locating staging and stockpile locations outside flood-prone areas; ceasing vehicle traffic in construction areas during precipitation that could result in discharges; timing concrete (and other deleterious materials) pours to avoid precipitation and allow adequate cure time prior to contact with river flow or other waters; and use of active treatment systems to treat runoff.

7. From a biological perspective, it is preferrable to remove the existing bridge and restore the river and its banks at that location if a new bridge is built.

8. The DEIR should include specific details regarding mitigation measure performance standards as well as potential impacts and permitting requirements associated with mitigation implementation.

9. The Project should report any special status species or Sensitive Natural Communities detected during Project surveys or construction monitoring to CNDDB.

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this NOP. CDFW staff are available to meet with you to consult with or address the contents of this letter in greater depth. If you have questions on this matter or would like to discuss these recommendations, please contact Senior Environmental Scientist Specialist Greg O'Connell at Gregory.OConnell@Wildlife.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:
Michael Harris
AA601B4C4B11422...

Michael Harris, Acting Regional Manager
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Enclosure 1. Interim Criteria for Injury to Fish from Pile Driving Activities

Citations

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