

**Appendix A. Biological Resources Baseline Study for the French Hotel  
Project**

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September 25, 2025

JN 203063

**CITY OF SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO**

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**SUBJECT: Results of a Biological Resources Baseline Study for the French Hotel Project – San Juan Capistrano, Orange County, California**

Dear Mr. Garcia,

Michael Baker International, Inc. (Michael Baker) is pleased to submit this biological resources baseline study to the City of San Juan Capistrano for the proposed French Hotel Project (project or project site) located in the City of San Juan Capistrano, Orange County, California. Michael Baker conducted a literature review and an on-site field survey on September 11, 2024, which included a comprehensive site evaluation for jurisdictional waters, sensitive habitats, and special-status<sup>1</sup> species to characterize existing biological conditions and assess the potential for the project to affect special-status plant and wildlife species. In order to meet the project’s goal of achieving a Class 32 Exemption under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the project must have no value as habitat for endangered, rare, or threatened species. Under the California Code of Regulations (CCR) Title 14, Section 15380, species are only considered to be “endangered, rare, or threatened” if they are listed as such under Sections 670.2 (*Plants of California Declared to Be Endangered, Threatened or Rare*) or 670.5 (*Animals of California Declared To Be Endangered or Threatened*) of CCR Title 14 or under Sections 17.11 (*Endangered and Threatened Wildlife*) or 17.12 (*Endangered and Threatened Plants*) of the Code of Federal Regulations Title 50.

**Project Location**

The project site is generally located in the Historic Downtown area of the City of San Juan Capistrano, Orange County, California. The project is located in Section 1 of Township 8 South, Range 8 West of the USGS *San Juan Capistrano* and *Dana Point, California* 7.5-minute topographic quadrangle maps. The project is located at 31871 Camino Capistrano and is generally bounded by Yorba Street to the north, Amtrak/Metrolink railroad tracks to the west, Forster Street to the south, and Camino Capistrano to the east.

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<sup>1</sup> As used in this report, “special-status” refers to plant and wildlife species that are Federally-/State-listed, proposed, or candidates; plant species that have been designated a California Rare Plant Rank species by the California Native Plant Society; wildlife species that are designated by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife as Fully Protected, Species of Special Concern, or Watch List species; and State/locally rare vegetation communities.

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## **Project Description**

The proposed French Hotel Project, located at 31841–31871 Camino Capistrano, involves the rehabilitation of two historic adobes (Casa Manuel Garcia Adobe and the Domingo Yorba Adobe) and development of a 70-room boutique hotel complex with restaurant and event spaces. The Casa Manuel Garcia Adobe (Building 1) will be rehabilitated through removal of non-historic additions and structural improvements, with the first floor used for restaurant dining and the upper floor converted into two hotel rooms and a parlor space. The Domingo Yorba Adobe (Building 4) will also be rehabilitated, with non-contributing additions removed and a rear addition constructed to provide restrooms and code-compliant facilities, allowing use as an ancillary hotel space with dining, leisure, and event functions. New construction includes Building 1A, a 2,925-square-foot building containing kitchen, bar, and dining space with indoor-outdoor seating; Building 2, a 6,274-square-foot barn-style event building with an outdoor patio and supporting kitchen; and Building 3, a three-story, three-winged hotel containing 67 guest rooms and conference and meeting areas, arranged around a courtyard with pool, spa, and landscaped areas. Parking will be valet-operated, with vehicles received at the lobby and stored in Building 5, a 2,450-square-foot mechanical parking structure located at railroad level, accommodating up to 66 cars. Circulation improvements include a new 20-foot-wide driveway at the northern property line, removal of the existing central driveway to create a pedestrian plaza and public gathering area, and installation of ADA-compliant sidewalks along Camino Capistrano. Five additional on-street parking spaces will be provided on the northern side of the property. The landscape plan provides for removal of 18 trees and replacement planting at 150 percent of the lost caliper using drought-tolerant, native species. The project design follows the site's existing grade, with Buildings 1, 1A, 2, and 4 located at street level and Buildings 3 and 5 located at railroad level.

## **Methodology**

### *Literature Review and Records Searches*

Records searches were conducted to determine which special-status plant and wildlife species have been recorded from the project vicinity within the USGS *San Juan Capistrano* and *Dana Point, California* 7.5-minute quadrangles. The records search was achieved through a query of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's (CDFW) California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB; CDFW 2024) and the California Native Plant Society's Inventory of Rare and Endangered Plants of California (CIRP; CNPS 2024). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) online environmental planning tool was also reviewed to identify protected biological resources falling under USFWS jurisdiction that are known or expected to occur on or within the project vicinity (USFWS 2024a). In addition, Michael Baker reviewed the USFWS Environmental Conservation Online System Critical Habitat Mapper (USFWS 2024b), the U.S. Department of Agriculture/Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA) Web Soil Survey (USDA 2024), and historic/current aerial photographs (Google, Inc. 2024 and [Historicaerials.com](https://www.historicaerials.com) 2024).

### *Habitat Assessment*

A general field survey was conducted by Michael Baker senior biologist Mr. Ryan Winkleman on September 11, 2024. The survey was conducted between the hours of 0910 and 1020, with temperatures ranging from 75 to 78 degrees Fahrenheit, winds from 0-4 miles per hour, and completely overcast skies at the onset, giving way to nearly cloudless skies by survey completion. Vegetation communities occurring within the project site were mapped on an aerial photograph and classified in accordance with the vegetation descriptions provided in *A Manual of California Vegetation* (Sawyer *et al.*, 2009) and cross referenced with

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the vegetation descriptions provided by Holland (1986). In addition, site characteristics such as soil condition, topography, hydrology, anthropogenic disturbances, indicator species, condition of on-site vegetation communities, and the presence of potentially regulated jurisdictional features were noted. Michael Baker used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) ArcView software to digitize the mapped vegetation communities and then transferred these data onto an aerial photograph to further document existing conditions and quantify the acreage of each vegetation community.

All wildlife species observed, as well as dominant plant species within each vegetation community, were recorded in a field notebook. Plant species observed during the field survey were identified by visual characteristics and morphology in the field, while unusual and less familiar plant species were photographed and later identified using taxonomical guides. Plant species that are considered strictly ornamental and planted on-site were generally not identified, unless they were considered to be a dominant plant species on the project site. Plant nomenclature used in this memo report follows the Jepson Flora Project (2024) and scientific names are provided immediately following common names of plant species (first reference only). Wildlife detections were made through aural and visual detection, as well as observation of sign including scat, trails, tracks, burrows, and nests. Field guides used to assist with identification of species during the habitat assessment included *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (Sibley 2014) for birds, *A Field Guide to Western Reptiles and Amphibians* (Stebbins 2003) for herpetofauna, and *A Field Guide to Mammals of North America* (Reid 2006). Although common names of wildlife species are well standardized, scientific names are provided immediately following common names of wildlife species in this report (first reference only).

## **Summary of Applicable Regulations**

### *State*

#### California Environmental Quality Act

CEQA provides for the protection of the environment within the State of California by establishing State policy to prevent significant, avoidable damage to the environment through the use of alternatives or mitigation measures. This applies to actions directly undertaken, financed, or permitted by State lead agencies. Some projects may be determined to be “exempt” from CEQA if they fit certain project categories and meet certain requirements, e.g. no habitat present for special-status species. In this case, the project is attempting to meet the requirements of the Class 32 exemption for infill development. To meet this exemption under biological resources, it must be demonstrated that the project site does not contain any habitat of value for endangered, rare, or threatened plant or animal species.

If a project is determined to be subject to CEQA, the lead agency will be required to conduct an Initial Study (IS); if the IS determines that the project may have significant impacts on the environment, the lead agency will subsequently be required to prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR). A finding of no significant effects by the IS will require preparation of either a Negative Declaration or a Mitigated Negative Declaration instead of an EIR. Section 15380 of the CEQA Guidelines independently defines “endangered” species as those whose survival and reproduction in the wild are in immediate jeopardy, while “rare” species are defined as those who are in such low numbers that they could become endangered if their environment worsens.

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## Local

### Central/Coastal Orange County Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan

The Central/Coastal Orange County Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP) is a comprehensive, multi-jurisdictional habitat conservation plan focusing on conservation of species and their associated habitats in Orange County (R.J. Meade 1996). The Orange County NCCP/HCP focuses on protection of coastal sage scrub habitat and three designated “Target Species”: the coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*; a federally threatened species and California species of special concern (SSC)), coastal cactus wren (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus sandiegensis*; a California SSC), and orange-throated whiptail (*Aspidoscelis hyperythra*; a California SSC). A Habitat Reserve area was created to meet the ecological requirements of these three (3) species and thirty-six (36) other “Identified Species,” with the understanding that the three target species would serve as “surrogates” for the broader suite of organisms that depend upon coastal sage scrub for their continued survival in the NCCP/HCP planning area. The Implementing Agreement (IA) satisfies the State and federal mitigation requirements for designated development and adequately provides for the conservation and protection of the 39 species and their habitats identified in the NCCP/HCP.

## Results

### *Existing Site Conditions*

The project site is located at an elevation of approximately 100 to 110 feet above mean sea level, sloping gently downward from east to west. Based on historic aerial imagery, the project site has been in use since at least 1938 and appears to have been developed with its primary street-facing structures since at least 1972 (Google, Inc. 2024; HistoricAerials.com 2024). Based on the 1938 imagery, it is likely that the site was cleared before then and even appears to have been partially used for agriculture at that time, with what appears to be row trees on the southern end of the project site. Therefore the project site has had little to no biological value since at least 1938, a period of 87 years as of this writing. There are currently three buildings on the contemporary project site: a larger northern building and a smaller southern building, both facing Camino Capistrano, and a large, corrugated metal barn located in the open lot behind these two buildings. The project site is surrounded by development on all sides, with the western half of the site being the only undeveloped land in the immediate vicinity.

### *Vegetation Communities and Land Cover Types*

Three (3) land cover types were mapped within the project site: landscaped/ornamental, disturbed, and developed (refer to Figure 2, *Vegetation Communities and Other Land Uses*). These land cover types are described in further detail below; they do not constitute suitable habitat for special-status species or qualify as protected habitat types.

#### Landscaped/Ornamental

Approximately 0.13 acre of the project site was mapped as landscaped/ornamental, encompassing a small area behind the southern building. This area is vegetated primarily with fruit trees including orange (*Citrus x sinensis*), lemon (*Citrus x limon*), avocado (*Persea americana*), and apricot (*Prunus armeniaca*), with other traditional landscaping plants such as pines (*Pinus* sp.), Indian hawthorn (*Rhaphiolepis indica*), bird of paradise (*Strelitzia* sp.), and rose (*Rosa* sp.).

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## Disturbed

Approximately 0.88 acre of the project site was mapped as disturbed, encompassing the entire western half of the site and a portion of the eastern half. This area is unpaved and unmaintained, generally vegetated with a high volume of both native and non-native weeds. Dominant species in this land cover type include horseweed (*Erigeron canadensis*), pigweed (*Amaranthus albus*), prickly lettuce (*Lactuca serriola*), tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum*), orange trees, castor bean (*Ricinus communis*), and bristly ox-tongue (*Helminthotheca echioides*).

## Developed

Approximately 0.66 acre of the project site was mapped as developed, encompassing most of the eastern half of the project including the street-facing buildings, existing barn, and paved blacktop surface. This land cover type generally consists of paved areas with little or no naturally-occurring vegetation (landscaping may be present). Vegetation on-site within this land cover type generally consisted of more weeds growing in holes in the pavement as well as traditional landscaping plants such as bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea* sp.) and hydrangea (*Hydrangea* sp.).

## *Wildlife*

The project site is located in the highly-disturbed downtown district of a suburban city and as a result is host to a limited variety of wildlife species. A total of ten (10) wildlife species were detected during the field survey, including one (1) reptile and nine (9) species of birds. None of the species that were detected are considered to be endangered, rare, or threatened. The on-site barn was examined for signs of potential bat roosts, but none were found.

## *Special-Status Biological Resources*

### Special-Status Plants

Thirty-three (33) special-status plant species were identified in the project vicinity by reviews of the CNDDDB CIRP, and IPaC online databases (refer to Attachments C through E). Of these 33 species, none are expected to occur within the project site based on a review of specific habitat preferences, known occurrences and distributions, and elevation ranges. Therefore, special-status plants are not considered to be a constraint to project implementation and take of special-status plants is not expected.

### Special-Status Wildlife

Thirty-two (32) special-status wildlife species were identified in the project vicinity by reviews of the CNDDDB and IPaC online database (refer to Attachments C and E). Of these 32 species, Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*; CDFW Watch List [WL] species) has a high potential to occur as a foraging bird and there are numerous records in the surrounding vicinity (eBird 2024), but this species is unlikely to nest on-site due to a lack of suitable on-site nesting habitat. The corrugated metal barn was examined for any sign of potential usage by bats, but no bat sign was observed and based on the lack of bat sign and general lack of bat roosting habitat inside the barn, bats are not expected to occur on-site. None of the remaining 32 special-status wildlife species are expected to occur within the project site based on a review of specific habitat preferences, known occurrences and distributions, and elevation ranges. Therefore, special-status wildlife are not considered to be a constraint to project implementation and take of special-status wildlife is not expected.

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### Critical Habitat

According to the most recent final designations at the time of writing, the project site is not located within federally designated Critical Habitat. Therefore, Critical Habitat is not considered to be a constraint to project implementation.

### *State and Federal Jurisdictional Resources*

There were no State or federal jurisdictional aquatic resources observed within the project site during the field study conducted on September 11, 2024, which included a thorough on-site review using the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' methodology, and none would be directly impacted by the proposed project. Therefore, a jurisdictional delineation is not expected and State and/or federal jurisdictional aquatic resources are not considered to be a constraint to project implementation.

### *Orange County Central/Coastal NCCP/HCP*

The project site is not located within any preserved areas, does not contain any coastal sage scrub habitat or other covered habitat types, does not contain any other special-status vegetation communities, and does not pose any other potential conflicts to the project's consistency with the Orange County Central/Coastal NCCP/HCP (R.J. Meade 1996). In addition, none of the three NCCP/HCP target species were found within the project site, and there is no suitable habitat for any of them within the project site. Therefore, the project is considered to be consistent with the NCCP/HCP. Other than implementation of any applicable Best Management Practices (BMPs) and general compliance with standard environmental regulations such as those pertaining to protection of nesting birds under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and California Fish and Game Code, no additional mitigation pursuant to the NCCP/HCP is expected and the project is expected to be fully consistent with the goals of the NCCP/HCP.

### **CEQA Class 32 Exemption**

Eligibility for the CEQA Class 32 Exemption is contingent upon the project proponent demonstrating that the proposed project site has no value as habitat for endangered, rare, or threatened species. There is no suitable habitat within the project site to support endangered, rare, or threatened plant or animal species, and nearly all plant species in the project site are non-native, weeds, and/or ornamental plants in a landscaped setting. Cooper's hawk may occasionally forage on the site, especially because the site is the only undeveloped habitat in the immediate area, but this species is unlikely to nest on-site. Neither Cooper's hawk, nor any other plant or wildlife species that could be reasonably expected to occur on-site, is considered endangered, rare, or threatened as defined under the CCR Title 14, Section 15380 (refer to the report introduction above). In addition, the Class 32 Exemption specifies that on-site habitat should have value for endangered, rare, or threatened species, and there is no habitat on-site, inside or outside of existing buildings, that could be considered of particular value to wildlife due to its regular usage and routine disturbance both by people on-site and by the immediate proximity of the Amtrak/Metrolink railroad tracks directly adjacent to the west. At the time of writing, the San Juan Capistrano train station is visited by thirty-four (34) trains per day during the week and twenty-eight (28) trains per day on the weekends, with station arrival times ranging from as early in the morning as 0508 on weekdays (Metrolink) to as late in the night as 2326 every day of the week (Amtrak).<sup>2</sup> Because the project site is only approximately 300 feet southeast of the train station stop, the frequent trains, frequent stops, and wide range of service hours further

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<sup>2</sup> [https://metrolinktrains.com/globalassets/schedules/timetables/2023/web\\_alllines\\_23-11-06\\_spreads.pdf](https://metrolinktrains.com/globalassets/schedules/timetables/2023/web_alllines_23-11-06_spreads.pdf)

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contribute to the lack of biological value of the project site. Therefore, the project does not contain any habitat of value for endangered, rare, or threatened plant or animal species and qualifies for a CEQA Class 32 Exemption from biological resources review.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the results of Michael Baker's literature review and vegetation/land cover mapping in September 2024, the entire project site consists of manipulated and exotic-dominated land cover types and is composed almost entirely of native and non-native weeds and ornamental vegetation, as well as multiple buildings that are regularly used. No special-status plant or wildlife species were observed during the field surveys and there is no habitat of value within the project site for endangered, rare, or threatened species. Based on the results of the field survey and a review of specific habitat preferences, occurrence records, known distributions, and elevation ranges, it was determined that Cooper's hawk (CDFW WL) has a high potential to forage on-site but a low potential to nest. None of the other special-status species identified by the CNDDDB, CNPS, and IPaC are expected to occur within the project site, and the project site does not contain any habitat of value for any endangered, rare, or threatened species. Based on Michael Baker's assessment of the project site, the project qualifies for a CEQA Class 32 Exemption from biological resources review for infill development.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at (949) 533-0918 or [ryan.winkleman@mbakerintl.com](mailto:ryan.winkleman@mbakerintl.com) should you have any questions or require further information regarding this report.

Sincerely,



Ryan Winkleman  
Senior Biologist/Project Manager  
Natural Resources

#### Attachments:

- A. *Figures*
- B. *Site Photographs*
- C. *CDFW CNDDDB Species Lists*
- D. *CNPS Species List*
- E. *USFWS IPaC Species List*
- F. *References*