



County of Alpine
Community Development Department
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CEQA Categorical Exemption Analysis

Project: Markleeville Disc Golf Course (Terrapin Pines)

Lead Agency: Alpine County (Community Development Department)

Location: Markleeville, CA; Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Carson Ranger District (T. 10 N., R 19 E., sec 19, Alpine County, CA)

Determination: Project qualifies for a Section 15304, Class 4 Categorical Exemption for Minor Alterations to Land, as well as a Section 15303, Class 3 Categorical Exemption for New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures

Project Description

The proposed Markleeville Disc Golf Course project is located on National Forest System lands administered by the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Carson Ranger District, immediately east of Grover Hot Springs State Park in Alpine County. The project includes construction and operation of a 27-hole disc golf course utilizing existing forested lands and the Charity Valley Trailhead parking area. Improvements include disc golf baskets, tee pads, benches, directional signage, a kiosk, practice basket, picnic/waiting area, limited trail construction, hazard tree removal, vegetation management, a vault toilet, waste receptacles, and minor parking area improvements. The project will operate under a 20-year U.S. Forest Service Special Use Permit.

Section 15304 Class 4 Exemption – Minor Alterations to Land

The proposed project qualifies for a Class 4 Categorical Exemption pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15304, Minor Alterations to Land.

Section 15304 consists of minor public or private alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry or agricultural purposes. The physical improvements associated with the project are limited in scope and involve minor alterations to existing forested lands. The U.S. Forest Service biological evaluation determined that project activities will result primarily in: minor understory vegetation removal, removal of approximately 24 dead standing hazard trees, limbing and thinning of approximately 30 to 40 live trees in dense clusters, construction utilizing hand crews and small equipment to minimize disturbance.

As mentioned above, the project includes limited removal of dead standing hazard trees and selective thinning of clustered live trees. Such activities are consistent with recognized forestry objectives including hazard reduction, forest health improvement, stand management, and wildfire risk reduction. The tree removal is selective in nature, affects a limited number of trees, and does not constitute extensive clearing or conversion of forest land. Accordingly, the proposed vegetation management is consistent with CEQA Guidelines Section 15304, which allows removal of healthy, mature trees when undertaken for forestry purposes. Biological review identified less than one acre of actual vegetation disturbance associated with project implementation and no vegetation removal will occur within the Hot Springs Creek riparian corridor.

The disc golf course itself consists largely of passive recreational infrastructure, including rubber-mat tee pads, steel basket sleeves and baskets, benches, directional signage, information kiosks, small picnic and gathering areas, and limited trail connections between holes. These improvements are dispersed throughout the site and do not require extensive grading, excavation, or permanent structural development.

The proposed parking lot improvements remain limited in nature and consist primarily of drainage improvements, parking delineation, curb stops, equestrian parking accommodations, and installation of a single vault toilet. The parking area will remain unpaved and designed to blend with the surrounding environment.

The project therefore constitutes a minor alteration of existing land and vegetation consistent with the activities contemplated under CEQA Guidelines Section 15304.

National Environmental Policy Act Review

The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest completed environmental review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and issued a Categorical Exclusion following biological, cultural, and resource evaluations.

The biological evaluation concluded:

- No effect to federally listed Gray Wolf, Wolverine, Northwestern Pond Turtle, or California Spotted Owl.
- No adverse effect to species viability.
- No contribution toward federal listing of Forest Service sensitive species.
- No significant cumulative biological effects.

The Forest Service NEPA document will be utilized in the project implementation and includes best management practices such as: erosion control measures, protection of Hot Springs Creek, weed prevention measures, nesting bird protections, and hazard tree review and approval requirements.

Alternative and Independent Basis for Exemption – CEQA Guidelines Section 15303 (Class 3: New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures)

In addition to qualifying for a Class 4 Categorical Exemption under CEQA Guidelines Section 15304, the Markleeville Disc Golf Course Project independently qualifies for a Class 3 Categorical Exemption pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures). Section 15303 provides an exemption for the construction and location of limited numbers of new, small facilities or structures, installation of small new equipment and facilities, and accessory (appurtenant) structures. The exemption expressly applies to construction of small facilities and accessory structures that are limited in size and intensity.

The proposed project includes numerous small-scale recreational and support facilities that fall within the types of improvements contemplated by the Class 3 Exemption. These improvements include:

- Disc golf baskets and basket sleeves.
- Rubber-mat or similar tee pads.
- Benches and seating areas.
- Directional and interpretive signage.
- Information kiosk.
- Practice basket area.
- Picnic and waiting areas.
- Waste receptacles.
- Vault toilet.
- Minor trailhead support facilities and associated appurtenances.

These improvements consist of small, dispersed recreational facilities that occupy a very limited footprint and are accessory to the primary recreational use of the site. None of the proposed structures involve substantial building construction, hazardous materials, industrial activity, or intensive land development. The vault toilet, kiosk, benches, signs, waste receptacles, and similar amenities are analogous to the accessory structures specifically identified in Section 15303(e), which exempts accessory (appurtenant) structures and related facilities. Section 15303 has routinely been applied to small public recreational amenities, park facilities, trailhead improvements, restrooms, kiosks, and similar accessory improvements where the structures are limited in scale and environmental effect.

As mentioned previously in this report, the Forest Service NEPA environmental review documents demonstrate that the project's environmental disturbance footprint is small relative to the overall project area. The proposed facilities therefore constitute small recreational support structures rather than substantial development.

Section 15303 Class 3 Exemption – New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures

The proposed Markleeville Disc Golf Course Project includes only limited numbers of small recreational facilities and accessory structures with a negligible environmental footprint. The improvements are consistent with the types of facilities contemplated by CEQA Guidelines Section 15303 and do not involve substantial construction or environmental disturbance.

Accordingly, the project independently qualifies for a Class 3 Categorical Exemption pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures). This exemption provides an additional and independent basis for determining that the project is exempt from CEQA.

Review of CEQA Exceptions (14 CCR §15300.2)

Although the project qualifies for Class 3 and Class 4 Categorical Exemption, CEQA requires evaluation of the exceptions contained in Section 15300.2.

(a) Location Exception. *Classes 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11 are qualified by consideration of where the project is to be located--a project that is ordinarily insignificant in its impact on the environment may in a particularly sensitive*

environment be significant. Therefore, these classes are considered to apply in all instances, except where the project may impact on an environmental resource of hazardous or critical concern where designated, precisely mapped, and officially adopted pursuant to law by federal, state, or local agencies.

The USFS reviewed the project area for sensitive resources. Botanical and wildlife surveys, alongside database research, concluded that habitat for Threatened, Endangered, Proposed, and Candidate (TEPC) species is not present, and no TEPC species are expected to occur or be impacted by the project. A "no effect" determination was reached for species including the California spotted owl, Gray wolf, North American wolverine, and Northwestern pond turtle. Furthermore, while floodplains and wetlands are present in the project area, the USFS determined there are no extraordinary circumstances related to these resources. The project will not affect any waters, including wetlands, and complies with the Clean Water Act. Based upon the analysis performed, there is no substantial evidence that the project location would result in significant impacts to environmentally sensitive resources. Therefore, the location exception does not apply.

(b) Cumulative Impact Exception. *All exemptions for these classes are inapplicable when the cumulative impact of successive projects of the same type in the same place, over time is significant.*

The cumulative impact exception applies where successive projects of the same type in the same place over time create a significant cumulative effect. The Forest Service biological evaluation specifically evaluated cumulative effects and concluded that the project would not adversely affect species viability, recovery, or population persistence. The project largely utilizes an existing recreation area and trailhead and does not establish a pattern of incremental land conversion or urbanization. Therefore, there is no substantial evidence of a significant cumulative environmental impact and the exception does not apply.

(c) Significant Effect Due to Unusual Circumstances Exception. *A categorical exemption shall not be used for an activity where there is a reasonable possibility that the activity will have a significant effect on the environment due to unusual circumstances.*

The unusual circumstances exception applies when unusual circumstances create a reasonable possibility of a significant environmental effect. The project consists of recreational improvements within an existing National Forest recreation setting. Similar trail systems, trailhead facilities, and dispersed recreation improvements are common throughout National Forest System lands. The Forest Service's biological review, cultural review, permit conditions, and environmental protections demonstrate that the project will not result in significant environmental effects. The project avoids Hot Springs Creek, avoids the Charity Valley Trail, limits vegetation disturbance, and incorporates extensive resource protection measures. No substantial evidence has been identified demonstrating a reasonable possibility of a significant environmental effect due to unusual circumstances.

(d) Scenic Highways Exception. *A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may result in damage to scenic resources, including but not limited to, trees, historic buildings, rock outcroppings, or similar resources, within a highway officially designated as a state scenic highway. This does not apply to improvements which are required as mitigation by an adopted negative declaration or certified EIR.*

The scenic highway exception applies where a project may damage scenic resources within a state scenic highway corridor. No evidence has been identified that the project would damage scenic resources, including

scenic trees, rock outcroppings, historic buildings, or views from an officially designated state scenic highway. The nearest scenic highway is State Route 89 in Markleeville, which is approximately 2.5 miles from the site and significant elevation changes and vegetation prevent views of the area from the highway. Additionally, the Special Use Permit issued for the project by the USFS requires protection of scenic values during construction and operation. Therefore, the scenic highway exception does not apply.

E. Hazardous Waste Sites Exception. *A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project located on a site which is included on any list compiled pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code.*

The project site does not appear on any list compiled pursuant to Government Code Section 65962.5. While a former burn dump (Grover Hot Springs Disposal Site (0249002)) has been mapped in the area along Hot Springs Road, but the dump site is approximately 600 feet east and across a ridgeline. Additionally, in 2024 CalRecycle performed a remediation of the site and all surface debris, tin cans, metal was removed and clean soil was applied by the contractor. No evidence has been identified indicating the presence of hazardous waste contamination within the project area. Therefore, the hazardous waste exception does not apply.

F. Historical Resources Exception. *A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource.*

The Forest Service completed cultural resource investigations and consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The Area of Potential Effects encompassed approximately 101 acres. Cultural resource surveys identified three archaeological sites, all of which were determined ineligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The California State Historic Preservation Officer concurred with those determinations. The State Historic Preservation Officer further concurred with the Forest Service finding of "No Historic Properties Affected." No Traditional Cultural Properties or other historic properties were identified within the project area. Discovery procedures remain in place should previously unknown resources be encountered during construction. There is no substantial evidence that the project may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource. Therefore, the historical resources exception does not apply.

Conclusion

The Markleeville Disc Golf Course project consists of minor alterations to land, vegetation, and existing recreational facilities on National Forest System lands. Physical disturbance is limited, biological and cultural resource reviews have been completed, and substantial environmental protections have been incorporated through the U.S. Forest Service permit and environmental review process.

The County finds that the Markleeville Disc Golf Course Project is categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Sections 15304 (Class 4 – Minor Alterations to Land) and 15303 (Class 3 – New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures). Each exemption independently applies to portions of the project, and none of the exceptions identified in CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2 are applicable.