

**CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION**

CENTRAL COAST DISTRICT OFFICE  
725 FRONT STREET, SUITE 300  
SANTA CRUZ, CA 95060  
PHONE: (831) 427-4863  
FAX: (831) 427-4877  
WEB: WWW.COASTAL.CA.GOV



# F21a

**Prepared September 30, 2021 for October 15, 2021 hearing**

**To:** California Coastal Commission and Interested Parties

**From:** Dan Carl, Central Coast District Director  
Madeline Cavalieri, Statewide Planning Manager  
Shana Gray, Statewide Planning Supervisor  
Mary Matella, Environmental Scientist

**Subject:** **PWP PWP-3-SLO-21-0004-1 (Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan)**

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## SUMMARY OF STAFF RECOMMENDATION

The Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District (RCD) prepared the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan (PWP) to allow the RCD to help facilitate the planning, review, and authorization of vegetation treatment projects to improve forest health, restore ecosystems, and increase wildfire resilience within San Luis Obispo County's coastal zone stretching from the boundary with Monterey County in the north to the northern border of the City of Morro Bay in the south (essentially the northern half of the County's coastal zone area extending into the Santa Lucia Mountains along the southern Big Sur coast). Due to historic fire suppression that has led to an accumulation of fuel loads (including dead, dying, and diseased trees), coupled with drought, a warming climate, and the spread of invasive species, larger and more catastrophic wildfires are threatening the County's communities and natural resources. The PWP is designed to address these risks through vegetation treatment that will align fire prevention planning with the protection of coastal resources to create healthy and resilient ecosystems.

This PWP builds on the work of similar PWPs for the RCDs of San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties, which were approved by the Commission about three months ago (in July 2021). Like those PWPs, this PWP is designed to dovetail with the California Vegetation Treatment Program (CalVTP), which was developed under the direction of the California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection (BOF) and in cooperation with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFIRE) to reduce wildfire risks as one component of the range of actions being implemented by the State to respond to

California's wildfire crisis. Importantly, the State's overall strategy relies on an increase in the pace and scale of vegetation treatment in order to help reduce those risks. In addition to compliance with the State's fire planning efforts, the PWP applies additional efficiencies over and above implementation of the CalVTP by addressing specific local coastal issues and ensuring consistency with the San Luis Obispo County Local Coastal Program (LCP), which is the standard of review for this PWP. The PWP provides for efficient programmatic streamlining of both California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) compliance and Coastal Act authorizations through a framework within which identified vegetation treatment projects can be analyzed and implemented under a coordinated plan that relies on the standards (called Standard Project Requirements, or SPRs) and mitigation measures adopted as part of the CalVTP Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR), as well as coastal-specific vegetation treatment standards (Coastal VTS) developed by Commission and RCD staff.

The PWP would enable the RCD and project partners to design and implement multiple fire resilience projects throughout the PWP program area over a 10-year period. Proposed vegetation treatment activities under this PWP are categorized as either "forest health" projects designed to restore and enhance ecosystems, including to prevent fire behavior to which the ecosystem is not adapted, or "fire prevention" projects designed to protect existing structures and infrastructure, such as through strategic fuel breaks and defensible space clearances. Both types of projects are intended to enhance habitat values as much as possible when they affect habitat areas in the County. Vegetation treatment could be carried out using prescribed burning, mechanical treatment (e.g., use of masticators), manual treatment (e.g., use of chainsaws), prescribed herbivory, and/or herbicide application. As proposed under the PWP, projects would be designed in a manner that protects coastal resources while meeting fire resiliency goals. Qualifying projects must be covered by the PWP, must incorporate CalVTP PEIR and Coastal VTS requirements, and must include project and program monitoring.

Staff believes that the PWP will provide an important tool for helping to reduce fire danger in the northern part of the County while simultaneously protecting ecosystem health, including for some of the County's sensitive forest areas such as the native Monterey pine forest area in and around the community of Cambria. Importantly, although the PWP is designed to allow the RCD to facilitate regulatory authorizations for interested land managers and landowners in the County's coastal zone, it should be noted that such land managers and landowners are not limited to the PWP for permitting vegetation treatment projects. On the contrary, the PWP simply provides a streamlined Coastal Act authorization vehicle for such projects, but vegetation treatment activities may also continue to be authorized directly through the County pursuant to the LCP. In the latter cases, including in the southern portion of the County where this PWP would not apply, this PWP and its underlying coastal resource protection requirements may help in crafting projects to be LCP consistent in those cases as well.

In addition, should the PWP be certified by the Commission, RCD is also requesting that the Commission find the first proposed project under the PWP (for vegetation treatment activities at Covell Ranch in Cambria) consistent with the LCP and PWP, and

to approve it as an integral component of the PWP. That project should increase the health and vigor of the native Monterey pine forest through ecologically restorative forest health treatments that increase climate resilience and biological diversity and reduce the severity of wildfire risk near the community of Cambria. Staff's analysis has concluded that the PWP is consistent with the San Luis Obispo County LCP, and that there are no other feasible alternatives or mitigation measures available that would further lessen any significant adverse effect that the approval would have on the environment. **Thus, staff recommends that the Commission certify the proposed PWP, as submitted.** Further, staff has analyzed the proposed Covell Ranch vegetation treatment project and has concluded that it is also consistent with the LCP, as well as the PWP. Thus, staff further recommends that the Commission approve the Covell Ranch project. The necessary motions, of which there are two—one for the PWP and one for the project—are found on page 9 of the staff report.

### **PWP Action Deadline**

This proposed PWP was filed as complete on September 27, 2021, and the 60-day deadline for the Commission to take action on it is November 26, 2021. Thus, unless the Commission extends the action deadline (it may be extended by up to one year by the Commission per the Coastal Act), the Commission has until November 26, 2021, to take a final action on this PWP.

### **Additional Information**

The proposed PWP and attached appendices (i.e., the proposed PWP, also attached as Exhibit 1) can be accessed at: <https://www.us-ltrcd.org/usltrcd-forest-health-and-fire-resilience-public-works-plan>. The certified CalVTP Program Environmental Impact Report can be accessed at: <https://bof.fire.ca.gov/projects-and-programs/calvtp/calvtp-program-eir/>. For questions and comments on the proposed PWP, please contact the Commission's Statewide Planning Unit at: [statewideplanning@coastal.ca.gov](mailto:statewideplanning@coastal.ca.gov).

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**EXHIBITS**

[Exhibit 1](#) – Proposed Public Works Plan

[Exhibit 2](#) – Covell Ranch Project-Specific Analysis

## 1. MOTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

### A. Certification of Public Works Plan

Staff recommends that the Commission, after public hearing, certify the proposed PWP as submitted. To do so, staff recommends a **YES** vote on the motion below. Passage of this motion will result in certification of the PWP as submitted and adoption of the following resolution and findings. The motion to certify passes only by affirmative vote of a majority of the appointed Commissioners.

**Motion:** *I move that the Commission certify Public Works Plan PWP-3-SLO-21-0004-1 as submitted by the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District, and I recommend a yes vote.*

**Resolution to certify:** *The Commission hereby certifies the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan as submitted and adopts the findings set forth below on the grounds that the Plan conforms with the San Luis Obispo County Local Coastal Program. Certification of the Plan as submitted complies with the California Environmental Quality Act because either 1) feasible mitigation measures and/or alternatives have been incorporated to substantially lessen any significant adverse effects of the Plan on the environment, or 2) there are no further feasible mitigation measures or alternatives that would substantially lessen any significant adverse impacts of the Plan on the environment.*

### B. Approval of Public Works Plan Project 1

Staff recommends that the Commission, after public hearing, determine that the proposed PWP project for Covell Ranch is consistent with the County's certified LCP. To do so, staff recommends a **YES** vote on the motion below. Passage of this motion will result in approval of the Covell Ranch public works project as an integral component of the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas RCD Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan, and adoption of the following resolution and findings. The motion to approve passes only by affirmative vote of a majority of the Commissioners present.

**Motion:** *I move that the Commission approve the proposed Covell Ranch public works project contained in the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas RCD Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan as submitted, and I recommend a yes vote.*

**Resolution to find LCP consistency:** *The Commission hereby approves the Covell Ranch public works project as an integral component of the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas RCD Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan PWP-3-SLO-21-0004-1 and adopts the findings set forth below on the grounds that the project conforms with the San Luis Obispo County Local Coastal Program. Approval as submitted complies with the California Environmental Quality Act because either 1) feasible mitigation measures and/or alternatives have been incorporated to substantially lessen any significant adverse effects of the project on the environment, or 2) there are no further feasible mitigation measures or alternatives that would substantially lessen any significant adverse impacts of the project on the environment.*

### **C. Back-up motion if Commission does not act on PWP at this hearing**

If the Commission fails to take a final action in this case (e.g., if the Commission instead chooses to postpone/continue PWP amendment consideration), then staff recommends that, as part of such non-final action, the Commission extend the deadline for final Commission action on the proposed PWP by one year. To do so, staff recommends a **YES** vote on the motion below. Passage of the motion will result in a new deadline for final Commission action on the proposed PWP. The motion passes only by an affirmative vote of a majority of the Commissioners present.

***Motion:** I move that the Commission extend the time limit to act on the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan to November 26, 2022, and I recommend a yes vote.*

## **2. PROCEDURAL BACKGROUND**

The Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District (RCD) has prepared the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District Forest Health and Fire Resilience proposed Public Works Plan (PWP) to function as a document for planning, reviewing, and authorizing vegetation treatment projects pursuant to the Board of Forestry's certified programmatic Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) for the California Vegetation Treatment Program (CalVTP). The PWP provides for efficient programmatic streamlining of both California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) compliance and Coastal Act authorizations through a framework within which identified vegetation treatment projects can be analyzed and implemented under a coordinated plan that relies on the standards (called Standard Project Requirements, or SPRs) and mitigation measures adopted as part of the CalVTP Program Environmental Impact Report (PEIR), as well as coastal-specific standards (Coastal VTS) developed by Commission and RCD staff. The PWP creates a framework within which identified projects can be analyzed and implemented under a coordinated plan. The goal of this process is to optimize the suite of proposed vegetation treatment types and activities so that wildfire management and ecological restoration goals are met in a manner that maximizes protection and enhancement of the County's significant coastal resources.

### **A. Public Works Plans**

Coastal Act Section 30114 defines public works to include, among other things, "All publicly financed recreational facilities, all projects of the State Coastal Conservancy, and any development by a special district." Coastal Act Section 30605 goes on to describe such plans, stating:

*To promote greater efficiency for the planning of any public works ... and as an alternative to project-by-project review, plans for public ... may be submitted to the commission for review in the same manner prescribed for the review of local coastal programs set forth in Chapter 6 (commencing with Section 30500). ... If any such plan for public works is submitted after the certification of local coastal programs, any such plan shall be approved by the commission only if it finds,*

*after full consultation with the affected local governments, that the proposed plan for public works is in conformity with certified local coastal programs in jurisdictions affected by the proposed public works. ... Where a plan for a public works ... has been certified by the commission, any subsequent review by the commission of a specific project contained in the certified plan shall be limited to imposing conditions consistent with Sections 30607 and 30607.1. ...*

Thus, a PWP is one of the alternatives available to the Commission and project proponents for Commission review of large or phased public works projects, and remains under the authority of the Commission irrespective of local government coastal permit jurisdictional boundaries (here, as applies to San Luis Obispo County). A PWP is an alternative to project-by-project review for public works (which, in this situation would require multiple coastal development permits (CDPs)). PWP's must be sufficiently detailed regarding the size, kind, intensity, and location of development and proposed mitigations to allow the Commission to determine consistency with the policies in Chapter 3 of the Coastal Act (pre-LCP certification) or the certified LCP (post-LCP certification). Once the Commission approves a PWP, no CDP is required for a specific project described within it; rather, before commencing each specific project, the project proponent needs to submit notice in the form of a Notice of Impending Development (NOID), which requires the Commission to determine whether the submitted project is consistent with the standards within the PWP, or if conditions are necessary to make it consistent.<sup>1</sup>

## **B. PWP Project Review**

Consistency determinations for individual projects proposed as part of the PWP are made by the Coastal Commission and are subject to public review and comment and a public hearing. Sections 30605 and 30606 of the Coastal Act and Title 14, Section 13359 of the California Code of Regulations (CCR) govern the Coastal Commission's review process for development proposed pursuant to a certified PWP. Section 30606 of the Coastal Act requires the applicant proposing the PWP project to provide a NOID to the Coastal Commission (and other interested parties, organizations, and governmental agencies), along with data demonstrating the project is consistent with the certified PWP. Once a NOID is deemed complete, it is scheduled for a public hearing within 30 working days, at which time the Coastal Commission is tasked with determining whether the project is PWP-consistent, or if it can be made PWP-consistent through conditions. If a project cannot meet those tests, then it is not covered by the PWP, and would need its own separate authorization through a CDP.

As applicable to this proposed PWP, development submitted to the Commission for review under the NOID process shall not be authorized unless it is of a type, location, and size as identified in Section III of the proposed PWP ([Exhibit 1](#)), and it is demonstrated that project implementation is in compliance with all SPRs and Mitigation Measures of the CalVTP (Project Standard 2), as well as the more coastal-specific Coastal VTS development standards (Project Standard 3). Projects may also be

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<sup>1</sup> If a project is not identified in a PWP and/or there aren't conditions available to ensure that a project is PWP-consistent, a project can still be proposed through normal CDP processes separate from the PWP.

conditioned by the Commission to ensure consistency with the PWP; however, the Commission cannot reject a proposed project if it is included within the listed projects approved as a part of the Commission's original PWP review and it is otherwise PWP-consistent.

The proposed PWP also identifies specific filing content requirements regarding future NOID submittals under Section VI, including preparation and submittal of draft and final Project-Specific Analyses, as required by the CalVTP PEIR, to determine whether the project qualifies as within the scope of the PEIR, or that the project will not result in any new or substantially more significant impacts than as described in the PEIR or CalVTP.

### **C. PWP Reporting Mechanisms**

Proposed PWP Project Standard 4 requires PWP projects to adhere to the reporting and monitoring requirements as provided in the PEIR SPRs. More specifically, the administrative SPRs contained within the CalVTP PEIR ensure that projects are reported on and project data is available to the public. For example, SPR AD-7 of the PEIR requires a completed Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program to be submitted to CalFIRE and the BOF for all proposed, approved, and completed stages of vegetation treatment projects. This information will be posted to an online database available to the public and will ensure that the requirements of all relevant SPRs that are implemented are verified and monitored by the agency or organization responsible for ensuring that the SPRs are implemented. Similarly, SPR AD-6 ensures that public notifications for treatment projects are posted in conspicuous locations describing treatment activities and timing, as well as contact information. SPR-GHG-1 also requires project proponents subject to AB 1504<sup>2</sup> to provide all vegetation treatment data for carbon inventory tracking to the U.S. Forest Service and CalFIRE. Further, the PWP requires that individual projects be noticed in conjunction with Commission regulations.

In addition, pursuant to proposed PWP Project Standard 4, the PWP requires the RCD to prepare a five-year programmatic review identifying: the status of individual projects implemented under the PWP, as well as projects expected to be implemented under the PWP; level of program completion (e.g., number of acres treated, high priority areas for the subsequent five years); collective monitoring results; constraints and lessons learned; and program success. The programmatic review must be submitted to San Luis Obispo County and the Executive Director of the Coastal Commission for review. At the ten-year mark following certification of the PWP, a final programmatic review is to be prepared by RCD and submitted to the County and Coastal Commission for review.

### **D. Public Participation**

A public review draft of the proposed PWP was first released to the public on August 5, 2021 for a six-week public review period. A final draft of the proposed PWP was adopted by the RCD Board on September 16, 2021. During that local hearing, the RCD considered additional public testimony. Following submittal of the locally-adopted PWP

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<sup>2</sup> See [https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=200920100AB1504](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=200920100AB1504).

to the Commission on September 17, 2021, Commission staff continued to accept public comment on the PWP.

In addition, members of the public will have additional opportunities to comment on future projects designed and implemented under the PWP. As part of the project design stage, the RCD must consult with parties interested in, with jurisdiction over, and/or affected by the proposed project. Further, persons residing within 100 feet of the project boundary, as well as within greater distances that may need to be noticed pursuant to the CalVTP SPRs and mitigation measures, or those persons, parties, and agencies who have requested to receive such notice, will receive a notice of any completed NOID that is to be submitted to the Commission for consistency review under the PWP. Once a NOID is submitted to the Commission and agenda'd for hearing, interested parties may also submit written comment to the Commission prior to the scheduled hearing on the NOID, and/or request to provide public testimony during the Commission hearing on the NOID (see the Procedures for PWP Filing and Certification section starting on page 24 of the PWP in [Exhibit 1](#)).

#### **E. Local Government and Stakeholder Consultation**

This PWP was designed in collaboration with staff from the Coastal Commission, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFIRE), and the San Luis Obispo County Fire Safe Council (SLO FSC). The development of the coastal-specific vegetation treatment standards (see Coastal VTS in [Exhibit 1](#)) and the PWP has also been a collaborative process with representatives of CalFIRE and State Parks (in addition to RCD staff) participating at various stages. San Luis Obispo County staff are supportive of a programmatic and streamlined approach to authorizing these types of vegetation treatment projects and have not identified any inconsistencies of the PWP with its LCP. Commission staff will continue to coordinate with County staff as the PWP process unfolds.<sup>3</sup>

RCD also notified tribal individuals of the Northern Chumash Tribe and the Yak Tityu Tityu Yak Tithini tribal board. Tribal entities were notified of the availability of the public review draft PWP. Consultation with these and any other applicable tribes will also be undertaken during the project design and implementation stages consistent with the requirements of the CalVTP PEIR, including SPR CUL-1 through SPR CUL-8. These standards generally require pre-treatment research, surveying, and consultation with affected tribes, as well as compliance with stringent standards if cultural resources are discovered during treatment, including cessation of development activities and further consultation with tribal entities and qualified professionals. For a more detailed description of these standards, see the Cultural Resources section in this report. Through outreach to indigenous peoples in their district and allying with cultural burn practitioners throughout the west, the RCD will strive to incorporate cultural fuel management practices into future projects.

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<sup>3</sup> Commission staff received written correspondence from the County indicating their support on August 26, 2021.

In addition, disadvantaged communities within San Luis Obispo County will also be contacted for input during the project design stage where such projects may impact these communities. The RCD is making a concerted effort to include Environmental Justice groups in the decision-making process. With the RCD's outreach to underserved communities within their district and the coastal zone, they aim to focus 25% of projects within the PWP area on historically underserved communities. These and other stakeholders will have the opportunity to consult with the RCD and/or provide comments to the RCD and the Commission during the project design stage, including through the NOID submittal and Commission adoption process (see the procedures for PWP filing and certification, and NOID processing, starting on page 26 of the PWP in [Exhibit 1](#)).

## **F. Environmental Documents**

Section 30605 of the Coastal Act and CCR Sections 13353 and 13357 require PWPs to include environmental information sufficient in detail to enable the Commission to determine the consistency of the plan with the policies of the Coastal Act or LCP, as applicable. Consistent with these requirements, the PWP relies, in part, on the analysis and conclusions in the Board of Forestry's certified Program Environmental Impact Report of December 2019 to examine potential environmental impacts of vegetation treatment projects being considered in the coastal zone. The CalVTP PEIR provides evidence that supports the Commission's analysis of the PWP's coastal resource impacts and contains standards that help protect coastal resources in a manner consistent with the LCP. Specifically, the PEIR provides a comprehensive framework for implementing vegetation treatment projects through the adherence to Standard Project Requirements and Mitigation Measures that will result in the avoidance and minimization of adverse impacts to environmental resources.

In addition to the CalVTP, the coastal-specific vegetation treatment standards (see Coastal VTS in [Exhibit 1](#)) provide additional guidance and clarity for projects to be implemented within the Coastal Zone, including related to specific habitat considerations. All PWP projects must be consistent with all project standards outlined in Section IV of the PWP, including the CalVTP SPRs and Mitigation Measures and the Coastal VTS.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DECLARATIONS**

### **A. PWP Background**

#### ***CalVTP Background***

Following Governor Brown's 2018 Executive Order B-52-18, which mandated a substantial increase in the pace and scale of vegetation treatment in California for the purpose of reducing wildfire threats, the BOF certified its final PEIR for the CalVTP in December 2019. As one approach to addressing the wildfire crisis, the CalVTP PEIR serves as the primary analysis tool to help reduce risks to life, property, and natural resources by targeting vegetation reduction and/or modification in the State Responsibility Area (SRA) for fire prevention and suppression. Based on the PEIR, the objectives of the CalVTP are to:

- Serve as the vegetation management component of the State’s range of actions underway to reduce risks to life, property, and natural resources by managing the amount and continuity of hazardous vegetative fuels that promote wildland fire consistent with California’s 2018 Strategic Fire Plan (BOF and CalFIRE 2018).
- Substantially increase the pace and scale of vegetation treatments to contribute to achieving a statewide total of at least 500,000 acres per year on non-federal lands, consistent with the former Governor’s EO B-52-18, which results in a CalVTP target up to 250,000 acres per year after considering other types and areas of vegetation treatments.
- Increase the use of prescribed burning as a vegetation treatment tool, consistent with the provisions of Senate Bill 1260, Statutes of 2018, and Public Resources Code (PRC) Section 4483(a).
- Contribute to meeting California’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emission goals by managing forests and other natural and working lands as a net carbon sink, consistent with the California Forest Carbon Plan (Forest Climate Action Team 2018), California’s 2017 Climate Change Scoping Plan (California Air Resources Board 2017), Fire on the Mountain: Rethinking Forest Management in the Sierra Nevada (Little Hoover Commission 2018), and California 2030 Natural and Working Lands Climate Change Implementation Plan (California Environmental Protection Agency et al. 2019).
- Improve ecosystem health in fire-adapted habitats by safely mimicking the effects of a natural fire regime, considering historic fire return intervals, climate change, and land use constraints.

Vegetation treatment consists of three treatment types, as described in the PEIR, including:

- Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Fuel Reduction: Located in WUI-designated areas, fuel reduction would generally consist of strategic removal of vegetation to prevent or slow the spread of non-wind driven wildfire between structures and wildlands, and vice versa.
- Fuel Breaks: In strategic locations, fuel breaks create zones of vegetation removal and ongoing maintenance, often in a linear layout, that support fire suppression by providing responders with a staging area or access to a remote landscape for fire control actions.<sup>4</sup>
- Ecological Restoration: Generally outside of the WUI in areas that have departed from the natural fire regime as a result of fire exclusion, ecological restoration would focus on restoring ecosystem processes, conditions, and resiliency by moderating

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<sup>4</sup> While fuel breaks can passively interrupt the path of a fire or halt or slow its progress, this is not the primary goal of such fuel breaks.

uncharacteristic wildland fuel conditions to reflect historic vegetative composition, structure, and habitat values.

Within each of the three treatment types listed above, five treatment activities are identified in the PEIR, including:

- Prescribed Burning: Includes pile burning (prescribed burning of piles of vegetative material to reduce fuel and/or remove biomass following treatment) and broadcast burning (prescribed burning to reduce fuels over a larger area or restore fire resiliency in target fire-adapted plant communities; would be conducted under specific conditions related to fuels, weather, and other variables).
- Mechanical Treatment: Use of motorized equipment to cut, uproot, crush/compact, or chop existing vegetation.
- Manual Treatment: Use of hand tools and hand-operated power tools to cut, clear, or prune herbaceous or woody species.
- Prescribed Herbivory: Use of domestic livestock to reduce a target plant population thereby reducing fire fuels or competition of desired plant species.
- Herbicides: Chemical application designed to inhibit growth of target plant species.

To avoid and minimize environmental impacts, the PEIR stipulates that project proponents must adhere to the PEIR's SPRs, which are development standards or best management practices (BMPs) designed "to integrate environmental protection into a comprehensive approach to reduce wildfire risk statewide through vegetation treatment." When designing projects to implement the CalVTP, project proponents are also required to complete a Project-Specific Analysis (PSA) to determine whether the proposed vegetation treatment project is "within the scope" of the PEIR or requires additional environmental documentation and review. As the PEIR states:

*The purpose of the PSA is to evaluate the proposed site and the later activity to determine whether the environmental effects of the activity are addressed within the scope of this PEIR, consistent with Section 15168 of the CEQA Guidelines for later activities consistent with a program and its PEIR. The PSA also requires the project proponent to determine that all applicable SPRs and mitigation measures identified in the CalVTP PEIR have been incorporated into the project, and whether additional mitigation would be necessary.*

### **San Luis Obispo County Existing Conditions**

The San Luis Obispo County coastal zone is particularly vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires. Like many areas of the State, forest, woodland, scrub, and grassland landscapes in the San Luis Obispo coastal zone are undergoing significant change. The climate is becoming warmer and drier, endemic species are at risk, invasive species are on the move. Altered fire regimes and increased fuel loads are also driving larger and more catastrophic wildfire. The result has been damaging changes to ecosystems that

require environmentally sensitive landscape-level treatments to adapt to changing climates and address ecological conditions impacting the area.

In the wake of recent wildfire crises, partners across San Luis Obispo County are redoubling their efforts to design, permit, and implement critical, high-priority vegetation treatment activities to reduce future risk of catastrophic, severe intensity fires and create a mosaic of climate and fire resilient native ecosystems. The Upper Salinas-Las Tablas RCD, in partnership with CalFIRE, SLO FSC, the Coastal Conservancy, San Luis Obispo County Planning and Building Department, public and private landowners, technical advisors, and the Coastal Commission will identify, design, permit, and implement multiple mission-critical forest health and fuel load reduction projects within the Coastal Zone Program Area over the proposed ten-year timeframe of this PWP.

The Upper Salinas-Las Tablas RCD Forest Health and Fire Resilience PWP covers an area within the County's LCP jurisdiction that stretches from the boundary with Monterey County in the north to the northern border of the City of Morro Bay in the south. The PWP Program Area encompasses nearly 93,000 acres where potential future project activities could take place. The RCD does not expect PWP activities to be implemented across the entirety of the Program Area, but at various locations and properties within it. Map 1 (on page 9 of [Exhibit 1](#)) shows the geographic context within which the PWP fits.<sup>5</sup> Map 2 (on page 10 of [Exhibit 1](#)) displays the PWP Program Area overlaid on CalFIRE's Fire Hazard Severity Zone Maps to provide context for future planning efforts within the PWP Program Area. Map 3 (on page 11 of [Exhibit 1](#)) shows the CalVTP Treatable Landscapes map and how that program overlaps with the PWP Program Area. While the PWP has been developed as a companion to the CalVTP, it is expected that some high priority projects will be developed and authorized through the PWP that will include some area outside of the modeled treatable landscape. Map 4 (on page 12 of [Exhibit 1](#)) provides additional context by illustrating the vegetation types within the PWP Program Area.

### ***San Luis Obispo County Local Coastal Program***

The California Coastal Commission certified the San Luis Obispo County LCP in 1988. The LCP's Land Use Plan (LUP) is the County General Plan's Land Use Element for the Coastal Zone, and it is comprised of three components: the Framework for Planning document, which serves as a type of "roadmap" describing the County's coastal zone and how the rest of the LCP functionally works to regulate development; the Coastal Plan Policies document, which identifies the overarching coastal resource protection policies governing development throughout the coastal zone; and four area plans that identify additional policies specific to each of the LCP's four geographic areas (i.e., North Coast, Estero, San Luis Bay, and South County Area Plans). The PWP is subject to the LUP's North Coast Planning Area, extending from the Monterey/San Luis Obispo County Line on the north, to Point Estero on the south, and inland generally to the main

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<sup>5</sup> The PWP Program Area does not include any lands within incorporated cities with their own certified LCPs (i.e., Cities of Morro Bay, Pismo Beach, and Grover Beach), but rather is limited to the northern unincorporated San Luis Obispo County coastal zone area.

ridge of the Santa Lucia range. The PWP also includes a portion of the Estero Planning Area that includes Cayucos and lands north of the City of Morro Bay up to the North Coast Planning Area.

The LCP's Coastal Zone Land Use Ordinance (CZLUO, Title 23 of the County Code) and related maps form the Implementation Plan (IP) for the LUP policies, and together they comprise the County's LCP. Although the County has no plans for a comprehensive LCP update at this time, the County continues to pursue modifications to components of the LCP on a regular basis. County staff are supportive of a programmatic and streamlined approach to authorizing these types of vegetation treatment projects and have not identified any inconsistencies of the PWP with its LCP.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan Description***

The PWP provides a cost-effective and programmatic approach to compliance with the California Coastal Act in order to increase the pace and scale of implementation of critical projects that will improve both ecological conditions (i.e., forest health) and the resilience of County landscapes to future climate change-induced wildfire (i.e., fire prevention). Over the proposed ten-year period of the PWP, the RCD plans to conduct high priority forest health and fire prevention projects with voluntary collaborating landowners within the PWP Program Area in moderate to very high wildfire hazard coastal zone areas.

While forest health projects will be explicitly designed to directly improve ecosystem health, fire prevention projects will also be designed to directly improve ecosystem conditions to the extent feasible (e.g., removal of dead, diseased, and overgrown vegetation, removal of non-native invasive plant species, management that mimics natural disturbance regimes, etc.). Fire prevention projects that cannot be designed to directly improve or restore ecosystems or ecosystem processes will be limited to projects that are required to protect existing structures and/or infrastructure, and will provide indirect ecosystem benefits by reducing the intensity, rate of spread, and extent of catastrophic wildfire on adjacent habitats and ecosystems. Approved projects will be designed to:

- Proactively restore forest health, improve ecosystem resiliency, and conserve working forests by conducting ecologically minded forest health treatments, including by promoting a mosaic of native vegetation types and improving habitat for rare, threatened, and endangered plant and animal species.
- Protect State water supply sources by strategically implementing ecological restoration projects across priority watersheds.
- Encourage the long-term storage of carbon in forest and woodland trees and soils through the reduction of dense understory thus promoting larger healthier stands of mature trees.

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<sup>6</sup> Commission staff received written correspondence from the County on June 17, 2021.

- Minimize the loss of forest carbon from large, intense wildfires, through reduction of ladder fuels and brush resulting from years of fire suppression.
- Promote public safety, health, and welfare and protect public and private property through the implementation of ecologically restorative fuel reduction treatments in the wildland urban interface.

Five treatment activities may be carried out depending on the goals and objectives of each specific project, including prescribed burning, mechanical treatment (e.g., use of masticators), manual treatment, prescribed herbivory, and herbicide application. For a detailed description of these treatment activities, see the CalVTP Background section above, as well as Section III of the proposed PWP in [Exhibit 1](#).

## **B. Coastal Habitats**

### ***General Ecological Considerations***

For the last century, fire suppression, and more recently, climate change, have resulted in unhealthy forests that set the stage for disease, pest infestations, and larger and more intense fires than would naturally occur in the absence of human interventions. Fire suppression has resulted in many ecosystems characterized by dense overgrowth including too many trees and an unnaturally thick and impenetrable understory. These crowded forests, particularly when stressed by drought conditions, provide a ladder for flames to reach high into treetops or crowns and produce more intense fires that are challenging to manage. Additionally, buildup of live and dead understory vegetation reduces fire and drought resiliency. Without the more frequent burns that were associated with natural fire regimes and their generally lower intensity, forests are less healthy, wildlife habitat is lost, and communities and infrastructure are threatened by the increased risk of major fire events. The warmer temperatures, drier conditions, and extended droughts associated with climate change further exacerbate the problems facing forests and the likelihood of catastrophic fires.

Fires that are more frequent than the natural fire regimes that various native habitats (forests, woodlands, scrublands, grasslands) have historically faced and adapted to are also problematic. In southern California many areas have experienced fire return frequencies in the range of 5 to 10 years which are unnaturally short for this region. The result has been habitat conversion where non-native invasive species adapted to take advantage of disturbance are increasing in cover at the expense of native species.

Fire has been essential to the health of forest ecosystems for thousands of years. Untamed burns sparked by lightning have shaped the structure and diversity of forests around the world. Nearly 80 percent of the native vegetation in North America evolved with fire.<sup>7</sup> The intention of forest health projects is to restore forest communities to conditions mimicking the respective fire frequencies they would naturally be exposed to, including to remove dead, diseased, and pest infested trees and brush, thin young

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/united-states/idaho/stories-in-idaho/wildfires-and-forest-management/>.

saplings to allow mature trees to attain full growth, and to clear unnaturally thick understory vegetation while restoring wildlife habitat.

Commission ecologists helped develop the coastal-specific vegetation treatment standards (Coastal VTS) for forest health and fire prevention projects in sensitive habitats. The Coastal VTS previously underwent several iterations following review and discussions with CalFIRE, the Counties of San Mateo and Santa Cruz, and the RCDs in both San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties throughout the development of the PWPs in those counties, including to ensure it was not redundant with the CalVTP PEIR.<sup>8</sup> The Coastal VTS provides additional guidance and clarity for projects to be implemented within the Coastal Zone and within and/or in proximity to Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHAs). The Commission's ecologists indicate that the Coastal VTS are suitable for the ecological communities in this PWP's Program Area.

California forests where fire has been suppressed and under the stress of climate change are ecologically impaired. The Commission's ecologists believe that forest health projects that adhere to the biological SPRs and the Coastal VTS constitute restoration projects because they are designed to improve overall forest health by restoring natural forest community structure, diversity, and associated ecological services and functions.

Fire prevention projects involve fuel reduction or vegetation management to protect existing structures and/or infrastructure to create defensible space that addresses public safety concerns. In addition to public safety, fire prevention projects are integral to a range of strategies that mitigate fire hazard on a regional and community scale to reduce the risk of uncontrolled fires which can adversely affect ecosystems in addition to life and property. Recent wildfires have demonstrated that if vegetation is allowed to grow unchecked, it becomes a hazard not only for an individual property, but for the neighboring properties, surrounding community, and adjacent natural areas. Without adequate vegetation management, catastrophic wildfires are likely to be more frequent and larger across the region, thereby causing damage or destruction to homes, businesses, utility lines, roads (including due to landslides caused by post-fire erosion events), other structures, and potentially natural lands subjected to unnatural fire regimes. Fuel reduction and fuel breaks are often necessary during an active fire and these cannot be designed with the typical ecological considerations under duress. As a result, proactively implemented fire prevention projects can be designed to use the CalVTP and Coastal VTS to minimize impacts to ecosystems in comparison to actions required under emergency conditions.

Under the PWP, fire prevention projects that affect coastal habitat resources are required to follow standards to first implement the strategies that would benefit forest health (e.g., removal of dead, diseased, and pest infested trees and brush, thinning young saplings to allow mature trees to attain full growth, and clearing unnaturally thick understory vegetation while restoring wildlife habitat, and maintaining dead tree snags

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<sup>8</sup> See San Mateo County [PWP No. PWP-2-VTP-21-0002-2](#) and Santa Cruz County [PWP No. PWP-3-VTP-21-0003-1](#).

and downed trees important for wildlife habitat) and secondarily, implement additional vegetation management measures only if necessary to achieve fire protection goals. While some fire prevention projects, for example, may need to remove more vegetation than might benefit forest health, Commission ecologists believe that in some cases, fire prevention projects will be able to apply all the standards laid out in the Biological SPRs of the CalVTP PEIR and the Coastal VTS for forest health projects. Where fire prevention projects must go beyond forest health strategies to reduce fire risk for public safety, such projects must also be designed to avoid and minimize any adverse impacts to sensitive resources (including through habitat conversion) to the maximum extent feasible. Given the care and concern for protecting such resources provided by the CalVTP, along with the Coastal VTS, and the requirement to provide benefits to the habitat to the greatest extent possible, the Commission's ecologists believe that the fire prevention projects can be implemented while imposing the least amount of ecological impact possible. Further, fire prevention projects are an integral part of an overall vegetation management regime and thus, though they may not directly provide restoration benefits in certain individual cases, they are a component of the overall effort to managing wildfire and enhancing forest health, and thereby can provide benefits to forest health in addition to protecting people and property.

### ***Applicable LCP Coastal Habitat Provisions***

The San Luis Obispo County LCP considers environmentally sensitive habitat areas (ESHA) as settings in which plant or animal life (or their habitats) are rare or especially valuable due to their special role in an ecosystem. Though not an exhaustive definition, Coastal Plan Policies Chapter 6 designates four types of ESHA as: 1) wetlands and marshes; 2) coastal streams and adjacent riparian areas; 3) habitats containing or supporting rare and endangered or threatened species; and 4) marine habitats containing breeding and/or nesting sites and coastal areas used by migratory and permanent birds for resting and feeding. Coastal Plan Policies ESHA Policy 1 only allows for resource dependent land uses within or adjacent to ESHA (within 100 feet) and when such uses are carried out in a manner that will not significantly disrupt the resource, mirroring Coastal Act Section 30240 in this regard. ESHA Policy 2 requires that "proposed development or activities will be consistent with the biological continuance of the habitat." ESHA Policy 29 provides for the protection of environmentally sensitive terrestrial habitats and states "emphasis for protection should be placed on the entire ecological community." Other LCP policies specifically protect wetlands, coastal streams, riparian vegetation, and terrestrial environments that include unique plant habitats and rare and endangered animal habitats by imposing buffers and other avoidance and minimization measures to limit impacts.<sup>9</sup>

Environmentally sensitive habitat areas are also identified in the LCP with combining designations, which are special overlay categories such as areas of hazards, Sensitive

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Coastal Plan Policies ESHA Policies 7 (Protection of Environmentally Sensitive Habitats), 17 (Wetland Buffer), 20 (Coastal Streams and Riparian Vegetation), 26 (Riparian Vegetation), 28 (Buffer Zone for Riparian Habitat), 29 (Protection of Terrestrial Habitats), 30 (Protection of Native Vegetation), and 35 (Protection of Vegetation).

Resource Areas,<sup>10</sup> ESHA, historic or archaeologically sensitive areas.<sup>11</sup> In these areas there is a focus on clustering development, tree preservation, and safeguards for the biological continuance of the habitat.<sup>12</sup> Sensitive habitat defined in the Estero Area Plan includes ecologically significant areas of oak woodland, coastal strand, coastal sage scrub, dune scrub, and maritime chaparral communities and requires clustered development and habitat protection as well. The Estero Area Plan also states that site disturbance in ESHA does not include activities that are consistent with the restoration and maintenance of native plant habitats as guaranteed by project approval.<sup>13</sup> These LUP ESHA provisions are further amplified by corresponding IP sections.<sup>14</sup>

Generally, these standards ensure protection of sensitive habitat and species by avoiding extensive changes to vegetation or significant reductions in habitat areas; avoiding adverse impacts to wildlife habitat and riparian habitat; and avoiding other impacts from noise, sediment, and other disturbance. Development within ESHA is allowed for habitat creation and enhancement, as well as restoration of damaged habitat.

Thus, ESHAs are a type of Sensitive Resource Area under the LCP, and policies provide that only resource dependent uses that do not significantly disrupt the resource are allowed in ESHA. In past cases, the Commission has only found very limited types of uses to be dependent on ESHA resources. These include low-intensity access and recreation uses (such as interpretive trails), nature study, scientific research, and habitat enhancement/restoration. These same types of uses are identified in the IP Section 23.07.170 as allowed uses in ESHA. As such, the PWP must be consistent with the LCP's sensitive habitat framework, including providing for restorative projects that do not significantly disrupt habitat values.

### ***PWP Coastal Habitat Protection Standards***

Under the PWP, vegetation treatment activities that have the potential to adversely impact ESHA, special-status species, and other biological resources in the County's treatable landscape must be designed and implemented to protect these resources

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'Sensitive Resource Area' is defined in IP Section 23.07.160 as a combining designation/overlay meant to identify and map "areas with special environmental qualities, or areas containing unique or endangered vegetation or habitat resources." The section then lists the four types of habitats that are ESHA (wetlands, streams and riparian vegetation, marine habitats, and terrestrial habitats) and includes development standards specific to them. In essence, the SRA overlay is meant to help map known areas ESHA at a planning level scale.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the North Coast Area Plan and associated maps identify all of the native Monterey Pine Forest in and around Cambria as a "terrestrial habitat" Sensitive Resource Area.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, North Coast Area Plan Chapter 7 (Planning Area Standards).

<sup>13</sup> See Estero Area Plan Chapter 7 (i.e., Planning Area Standards for Land Division and Development Design ... [and] Development Location).

<sup>14</sup> IP Section 23.11.030 includes a definition of ESHA similar to the Coastal Act, while also being specific about certain types of habitats that fall under the broader definition; it also specifies that ESHA may be mapped or unmapped in the LCP. All ESHA is further protected by standards in CZLUO Chapter 23.07.107.

consistent with the SPRs and the Coastal VTS. If vegetation treatment activities were not required to adhere to these protections, they could cause adverse impacts to biological resources (such as through vegetation removal that disrupts and displaces sensitive habitat and species). In addition, workers carrying out treatment activities could adversely impact sensitive species if buffers and flagging (of sensitive species) are not carried out properly.

To protect ESHA and sensitive biological resources, the CalVTP and Coastal VTS include a significant number of safeguards (pursuant to Project Standards 2 and 3). In general, these safeguards aim to ensure review of site-specific records and reconnaissance-level surveying to determine the potential for sensitive species and habitat within treatment areas; resource-protection training for crews carrying out treatment activities; measures to protect against impacts to sensitive habitats and species; and other appropriate mitigations designed to address habitat concerns. The SPRs and Coastal VTS standards are described in more detail below.

For biological resources, a number of SPRs provide for design and treatment measures that protect against significant impacts. For example, SPR BIO-1 requires a qualified professional, such as a biologist, to conduct a data review and reconnaissance-level survey prior to commencing with treatment activities. Where sensitive biological resources are found pursuant to this survey, SPR BIO-3, SPR BIO-7, and SPR BIO-10 require protocol-level surveys for special status plants and habitats, special-status plant species, and special-status wildlife species. Treatment must then be designed to protect against adverse impacts (e.g., SPR BIO-4 and -5). Further, work crews must undergo biological resource training, including proper implementation of biological SPRs and mitigation measures, as well as identification and avoidance of sensitive biological species (SPR BIO-2). A number of best management practices must also be implemented to prevent the spread of plant pathogens and invasive species, such as cleaning and sanitizing equipment, staging equipment in designated areas, and treating invasive biomass on-site (SPR BIO-6 and SPR BIO-9). Treatment will also help protect habitat by prioritizing retention of larger, healthy, native trees (e.g., SPR BIO-4 and BIO-8). Project proponents must also consult with Commission staff through the preparation of NOIDs to ensure projects are designed to avoid impacts to ESHA (SPR BIO-8). For a more detailed summary of these SPRs, see Exhibit B in [Exhibit 1](#).

In addition, the CalVTP includes numerous mitigation measures for addressing any residual impacts to biological resources. In general, these mitigation measures require avoidance and protection of listed and non-listed special status plants, habitats, and wildlife species through no-disturbance buffers (Mitigation Measures BIO-1a, 1b, 2a, and 2b). Compensatory impact mitigation is also required, typically through the preservation and enhancement of similar species and/or habitat outside the treatment area, or through the purchasing of mitigation credits from conservation or mitigation banks (Mitigation Measures BIO-1c and 2c). Further, Mitigation Measure BIO-4 requires avoidance of impacts to wetlands, including through buffers and restrictions on mechanical treatment, as well as herbicide and prescribed herbivory usage. For a more detailed summary of these mitigation measures, see Exhibit B in [Exhibit 1](#).

On top of these CalVTP requirements, the coastal-specific vegetation treatment standards contained in the Coastal VTS provide additional standards for the protection of ESHA and biological resources in the County's coastal zone (see Exhibit A in [Exhibit 1](#)). The Coastal VTS requires that forest health projects restore and enhance ecosystems and forests, protect watersheds, and promote long-term storage of carbon; restore and maintain vegetation cover to thresholds reflecting appropriate fire-return intervals; maintain vegetation cover and composition to comply with the standards set forth in the second edition of the Manual of California Vegetation so that habitat type conversion is avoided; and provide for a mosaic of native plants. Fire prevention projects are required to follow these standards to the extent feasible, while still achieving fire protection goals, and are limited to projects that are required to protect existing structures and/or infrastructure. Critically, the Coastal VTS requires that all vegetation treatment activities, excluding prescribed burning, follow a vegetation removal hierarchy that prioritizes thinning and removal of dead, dying, and diseased vegetation, followed by removal of invasive species, and lastly, removal of native species that are not endangered, threatened, rare or otherwise especially valuable.

The Coastal VTS also provides for additional standards that tier off the CalVTP SPRs. For example, the use of heavy machinery, herbicides, and prescribed herbivory must be limited to projects where their use is required and where demonstrated that they are the least environmentally damaging alternative. Further, the use of accelerants is limited to prescribed fire application where such use will not significantly disrupt or degrade ESHA, while riprap and chemical soil stabilizers that could significantly disrupt or degrade ESHA is prohibited. Similarly, wildlife-friendly fencing used pursuant to SPR BIO-11 must also allow for adequate ground clearance for smaller species to avoid entrapment and/or entanglement.

### ***LCP Consistency Analysis***

Proposed forest health projects aim to restore ecosystems and forests, including by restoring and maintaining appropriate vegetative cover, and are thus consistent with the LCP's first test to allow for development within ESHA since habitat restoration is a use dependent on the habitat resource. For the second test regarding not significantly disrupting habitat values, the restoration activities will be designed to sustain species composition and habitat integrity. As described above, the County LCP permits such management and restoration activities within sensitive habitat areas if adequate protection measures are implemented to minimize adverse impacts. Since the PWP relies on the SPRs, mitigation measures, and Coastal VTS to safeguard sensitive habitats and species, including through protocol-level and reconnaissance surveys prior to treatment activities (SPR BIO-1, SPR BIO-3, and SPR BIO-7), wetlands protection (Mitigation Measure BIO-4), design of treatment in a manner that avoids impacts to sensitive species (e.g., SPR BIO-1, SPR BIO-4, SPR BIO-5, SPR BIO-6, SPR BIO-8, and SPR BIO-12), and mitigation for significant environmental impacts within any sensitive habitat area (Mitigation Measures BIO 1c, 2c, and 3c), the PWP follows County LCP standards for both protection of ESHA and its restoration.

Further, forest health projects comply with the LCP's requirement to ensure that projects do not have a significant adverse impact on sensitive habitat areas and that

development in areas adjacent to sensitive habitats be sited and designed to prevent impacts that could significantly degrade the sensitive habitats. As described above, a suite of measures will ensure that these projects are carried out in a sensitive manner in which, for example, adequate canopy cover is retained, treatments will be limited to the removal of uncharacteristic fuel loads, and treatment activities will be scheduled to avoid active nesting seasons. The requirement for retention of plant cover also ensures that these projects will be consistent with the LCP's habitat protections. In addition, the PEIR requires that a qualified biologist or other individual familiar with the ecology of the treatment area monitor all treatment activities in ESHAs to ensure that the various standards are met. Project proponents must also submit PSAs that will describe each project, potential alternative locations that could minimize impacts of the project, and other measures that will be taken to address project impacts. In addition, SPR AD-7 requires proponents of projects covered by the VTP PEIR to submit a completed Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program after project completion.

Moreover, the PWP is consistent with the County's Tree Removal Standards (IP Section 23.05.064) because it prioritizes and requires the retention of large, live, healthy, native trees (e.g., SPR BIO-4), and PWP removal criteria are broadly aligned with the LCP as dead, diseased, and hazardous trees as well as vegetation areas that require thinning are permitted in order to address hazards and fire safety. The Coastal VTS and other standards will also ensure that use of herbicides will not cause significant disruption of ESHA. For example, Coastal VTS standard 6 states: "Herbicides shall be avoided to the maximum extent feasible and may be used only if such treatment activities are the least environmentally damaging feasible alternative and will not result in significant adverse impacts to sensitive ecological resources (e.g., when used to control of invasive species). Projects shall adhere to CalVTP SPRs HAZ-5, 6, 7, 8, and 9." As described above, other standards will also limit the use of herbicides in order to protect sensitive habitats (e.g., SPR BIO-4 disallows their use within wetland buffers). These standards ensure consistency with the LCP's various resource protection policies.

Recent wildfires have demonstrated that if brush is allowed to grow unchecked, it becomes a hazard not only for an individual property, but for the neighboring properties and surrounding community as well. Without adequate vegetation management, catastrophic wildfires are likely to be more frequent and larger, thereby causing damage or destruction to homes, businesses, utility lines, roads (including due to landslides caused by post-fire erosion events), and other structures, as well as habitat degradation in certain cases. Fire prevention projects, which will generally be implemented as defensible spaces around existing structures in the WUI, or as fuel breaks along existing roads to provide strategic fire breaks and staging areas for fire fighters, can also be found consistent with the LCP. Unlike forest health projects, these projects are not explicitly designed for the purpose of ecological restoration, and by extension may have a greater likelihood of impacting coastal habitats and species. However, fire prevention projects are consistent with the LCP's allowance for maintaining the integrity of existing structures, roads, and other such development because they are necessary to maintain the safety, integrity, and utility of such development, and they are required to minimize and mitigate impacts to the extent feasible.

Specifically, like the Coastal Act, the County's IP identifies that authorizations for the maintenance of existing, legally-established structures, roads, and other such development is somewhat different than the manner in which most new development is authorized.<sup>15</sup> For situations involving Commission review of maintenance activities that take place in sensitive areas, and as it applies to vegetation treatment, the Commission does not generally analyze whether the existing underlying development that is being maintained is consistent with the LCP, provided it was already authorized as required by the Coastal Act and LCP (or pre-dated such required authorization). Rather, the Commission generally analyzes and regulates the methods of conducting the maintenance activities to ensure they are carried out in a manner most protective of coastal resources. Here, this means that the PWP may allow fire prevention activities that may affect coastal habitats, because such projects will help maintain the safety, integrity, and utility of existing structures, roads, and other development. However, it must impose measures to avoid, reduce, or mitigate for any impacts to coastal resources caused by the projects, including by following the forest health project guidelines as much as possible.<sup>16</sup> In this case, PWP implementation overall is also premised on overall habitat enhancement in the County, and in fact the RCD's proposal makes clear that the majority of affected PWP acreage will be forest health projects, and thus by definition will result in overall ecological enhancement. And even for the minority of PWP acreage that might be the subject of fire prevention projects, these projects are required by the PWP to incorporate ecological enhancement principals as much as possible, and thus the cases where there may be fire prevention projects that don't lead to overall habitat enhancement are expected to be fairly limited.

In conclusion, the PWP provides a detailed series of prescriptions for protecting coastal habitats in the Program Area of northern San Luis Obispo County (including CalVTP PEIR and Coastal VTS requirements), protects coastal habitats and species, and provides appropriate mitigation for residual impacts. Therefore, the proposed PWP is consistent with the LCP's coastal habitat provisions.

### **C. Water Quality**

The County's LCP generally prohibits water quality degradation. For example, policies for coastal watersheds in Chapter 9 of the Coastal Plan Policies document generally protect groundwater basins, coastal streams, and provide techniques for minimizing sedimentation (Coastal Watersheds Policy 9). Coastal Plan Policies document ESHA Policy 21 requires that all development in or adjacent to coastal streams prevent

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<sup>15</sup> See Coastal Act Section 30610(d), 14 CCR Section 13252, County LUP Public Works Policy 7.a, and County IP Section 23.03.040.

<sup>16</sup> Further, and as described above, the PWP includes both CalVTP PEIR and related standards and mitigation measures that are designed to protect coastal habitats in fire prevention projects. For example, surveys will be conducted for sensitive species, project activities will halt if nesting birds are discovered, and non-shaded fuel breaks will mostly occur away from riparian areas and will include appropriate runoff control measures to ensure that sediment does not enter sensitive wetland or aquatic habitats. The Coastal VTS requires that removal of vegetation for fire prevention projects be "the minimum necessary to protect existing structures and infrastructure" and that such projects comply, to the maximum extent feasible, with various ecosystem protection measures.

impacts which would significantly degrade the coastal habitat. ESHA Policy 26 addresses cutting or alteration of naturally occurring vegetation that protects riparian habitat and requires that permitted actions must not have a “detrimental effect on water quality or quantity.” Similarly, IP Section 23.06.100 provides standards for preventing polluted runoff impacts from non-point sources to protect water quality. Water quality standards provide protections from “significant adverse impacts to wetlands, streams, tidepools, sensitive plants, riparian vegetation, agricultural lands, and other environmentally sensitive habitat areas from surface water runoff and wastewater.” Thus, water quality protection is notably important for maintaining healthy coastal habitats.

Vegetation treatment activities under the PWP must be designed and implemented to protect water quality (consistent with Project Standard 2 and 3 of the PWP). Without these requirements, adverse impacts to water quality could result, such as through soil erosion or release of pollutants in surface and ground waters. The equipment used for mechanical removal of vegetation is also a potential risk to water quality through leaks and spills of fuels and other chemicals if such equipment is not maintained correctly, or if maintenance occurs near or within sensitive water resource areas. Lastly, where herbicides are applied, the risk for runoff, drift, and misapplication or spills can all threaten water quality, including leaching into groundwater.

To address these potential impacts, the CalVTP includes six SPRs that ensure the protection of water quality. For example, SPR HYD-1 requires project proponents to comply with the appropriate Waste Discharge Requirements and/or Basin Plan Prohibitions of the Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) to ensure that waste is disposed of in an appropriate manner. Similarly, prescribed herbivory must follow certain standards to guard against water quality impacts, including through the use of fencing or active herding within buffers adjacent to sensitive water resources and the provision of water sources outside of sensitive habitat for grazing animals (SPR HYD-3), while Watercourse and Lake Protection Zones are to be established to ensure buffers between heavy machinery and prescribed burning activities (SPR HYD-4). For herbicide use, SPR HYD-5 protects non-target vegetation and special-status species by restricting herbicide use within and/or adjacent to various waterbodies. Relatedly, SPR HYD-6 requires treatment activities adjacent to roadways with existing stormwater drainage infrastructure to be maintained. Lastly, SPR HYD-2 prohibits the construction or reconstruction of any new roads, including temporary roads. For a summary of these hydrological SPRs, see Appendix B in [Exhibit 1](#).

The CalVTP also includes a number of other SPRs that contribute to water quality protection, which are discussed in more detail under the relevant findings of this report (see Coastal Habitats and Coastal Hazards sections). These include measures for incorporating buffers around water resources (SPR BIO-1); designing treatment activities to prevent the spillage of pesticides (SPR HAZ-5); requiring measures to maintain heavy equipment and follow proper herbicide disposal procedures (SPR HAZ-1 and SPR HAZ-7); minimizing erosion through soil stabilization, restrictions on heavy machinery use, and monitoring (SPR GEO-1 through SPR GEO-4, as well as SPR GEO-8); prohibiting the use of heavy equipment in sensitive resource areas (SPR GEO-

7); designing prescribed burning to avoid high-intensity, severe burns (SPR AQ-3); and requiring drainage features and conditions to remain unchanged following treatment activities (SPR BIO-4 and SPR BIO-5).

Given the above standards, vegetation treatment activities carried out under the PWP would be designed and implemented consistent with the LCP through a number of measures that would avoid potential adverse impacts to water quality (consistent with PWP Project Standards 2 and 3). As such, the PWP protects water quality and is consistent with the County LCP.

#### **D. Visual Resources**

The San Luis Obispo County LCP protects coastal zone visual and scenic resources, particularly with regards to natural landforms, scenic vistas, and sensitive habitats (see generally Coastal Plan Visual and Scenic Resources Policy 1). Visual and Scenic Resources Policy 2 directs new development to “protect views to and along the ocean and scenic coastal areas” and minimize visual intrusion. Visual and Scenic Resources Policy 7 for the preservation of trees and native vegetation requires new development minimize the need for tree removal and is implemented through various zoning regulations, including Section 23.05.064 of the IP, which provides tree removal standards. IP Section 23.04.210 further provides for protection standards in Critical Viewsheds, Scenic Corridors and Sensitive Resource Area (SRA) Combining Designations.

Treatment activities under the PWP are not generally anticipated to result in visual resource impacts given that proposed treatments will be designed to guard against significant, visible alterations (consistent with PWP Project Standards 2 and 3). Indeed, the SPRs and Mitigation Measures ensure that project sites will be screened with sufficient vegetation within, at the edge of, or adjacent to treatment areas to screen views from outside the project area (SPR AES-3). Similarly, for mechanical and manual treatment, vegetation must be thinned and feathered to break up or screen linear edges to mimic forms of natural clearings to the extent feasible (SPR AES-1). Lastly, all treatment types must also avoid staging equipment, including vehicles and vegetation debris, within viewsheds to the extent feasible (SPR AES-2).

In general, proposed PWP vegetation treatment would be designed and implemented consistent with the county’s scenic and visual resource protection policies because PWP development standards would avoid and minimize potential adverse visual resource and aesthetic impacts, which would be further evaluated and reduced during project-level analyses pursuant to future environmental review and/or NOIDs, as applicable. Therefore, the proposed PWP is consistent with the LCP provisions protecting scenic and visual resources.

#### **E. Coastal Hazards**

The County’s LCP addresses hazards with policies and ordinances that ensure that new development minimizes risk. Chapter 9 of the Coastal Plan Policies document and the IP specifically describe two combining designations to identify Geologic Study Areas and Flood Hazard Zone Areas that require careful project review. Hazards Policy 9 of

the Coastal Plan Policies document also specifically calls out high fire risk areas as “defined as those having potential for catastrophic fire.” This policy requires the County to designate and show high fire risk areas as delineated by the State Division of Forestry on Hazards maps and IP Section 23.05.080 provides for Fire Safety.

Many developed and undeveloped areas in San Luis Obispo County are at risk from wildfires. The County’s Hazard Mitigation Plan (2019) finds the County experiences several relatively smaller wildfires per year, with a major damaging fire every 7-8 years, with the last several decades exhibiting continual increase in the number of fires and acreage burned per year.<sup>17</sup> In San Luis Obispo County, CalFIRE mapped most of the area that has been designated as a “Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone” as located in the Santa Lucia Mountains, which extends from Monterey County to the north, to Santa Barbara County to the south. These areas with extreme fire hazard potential are a result of a combination of vegetative fuel, topography, and developed areas. The County’s Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan also identifies climate change as a driver of catastrophic wildfires, with an expected increase in area of the County burned by wildfire from 3.7% to 6.8-7.3% by 2045 and to 8.1-8.5% by 2085.

IP Section 23.05.036 provides for protection from erosion when extensive changes to vegetative cover are proposed, and Section 23.07.066 requires the County to employ numerous measures to reduce flood problems, including but not limited to the prohibition or restriction of uses that result in increased erosion or flooding. Toxic and hazardous materials are generally regulated by zoning district standards, where applicable, in the County LCP. IP Section 23.06.108 requires the projects with potential to release toxic or hazardous materials to minimize the amounts of potential contaminants that may be stored or handled, assure proper containment, and prevent release of contaminants into the environment. Section 23.06.123 also places standards on storage of flammable or combustible liquids and requires it to be set back 50 feet from property lines or as set forth in the Uniform Fire or Building Code.

Vegetation treatment activities proposed under the PWP will be designed and implemented to protect coastal resources and avoid and/or minimize risks from hazards (consistent with PWP Project Standards 2 and 3). If these measures were not implemented, existing or new coastal hazards could result in hazardous situations, including the uncontrolled spread of wildfires, post-fire flooding or landslides, or the inadvertent discharge of hazardous materials (e.g., accelerants, herbicides) into the environment. Further, a number of SPRs address the potential for hazards to affect health and safety, including exposure to hazardous materials or to physically hazardous situations. For hazards associated with machinery and equipment, the CalVTP requires that all machinery and equipment be maintained in accordance with manufacturing guidelines, as well as State and federal emissions requirements, including the use of spark arrestors for mechanized hand tools (SPR HAZ-1 and SPR HAZ-2). Tree cutting crews must also carry one fire extinguisher for every inventoried chainsaw, while every

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<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.slocounty.ca.gov/Departments/Planning-Building/Forms-Documents/Plans-and-Elements/Elements/Local-Hazard-Mitigation-Plan/San-Luis-Obispo-County-Multi-Jurisdictional-Hazard.pdf>.

vehicle must be equipped with one long-handled shovel and one axe consistent with PRC Section 4428 (SPR HAZ-3). For herbicide use, a licensed Pest Control Advisor is required to prepare a Spill Prevention and Response Plan prior to beginning any herbicide treatment activities to provide protection to onsite workers, the public, and the environment from accidental leaks or spills of herbicides, adjuvants, or other potential contaminants (SPR HAZ-5). Project proponents must also coordinate all herbicide use with the County Agricultural Commission and obtain all required licenses and permits and follow all recommendations and regulations pertaining to the safe use of pesticides, including adherence to herbicide application parameters during application to minimize drift into public areas (SPR HAZ-6 and SPR HAZ-8). Disposal of herbicide containers must also adhere to regulations to ensure the prevention of contamination of waterbodies (SPR HAZ-7). Lastly, project proponents must post signage of herbicide usage occurring within or adjacent to sensitive areas such as schools and residential areas, as well as within 500 feet of any public area (SPR HAZ-9). A summary of the hazard SPRs can be found in [Exhibit 1](#).

In addition, the CalVTP includes a mitigation measure that requires the identification and avoidance of known hazardous waste sites. Because mechanical treatment and prescribed burning may result in soil disturbance that could disperse existing hazardous materials in the soil, Mitigation Measure HAZ-3 stipulates that project proponents must “make reasonable efforts...to determine if there are any sites known to have previously used, stored, or disposed of hazardous materials.” Where hazardous materials are discovered, no soil disturbing activities or prescribed burning is to occur within 100 feet of the site boundaries. This would ensure that hazardous waste sites are identified and avoided so that “exposure-related risks associated with the disturbance of a hazardous waste site” would not occur.

Related to unstable geology and soils, the CalVTP includes eight geological SPRs. In general, these standards ensure that treatment activities do not contribute to erosion. For example, mechanical treatment and herbicide use must cease under specified environmental conditions, such as precipitation (SPR GEO-1 and SPR GEO-2). Project proponents must also stabilize soil disturbed during mechanical treatment, prescribed herbivory treatments, and prescribed burns through the use of mulch or an equivalent medium immediately after treatment activities, to the maximum extent feasible, to minimize the potential for substantial sediment discharge (SPR GEO-3). Potential for erosion must be assessed prior to treatment activities, while inspections for erosion during and following treatment activities are also required, including remediation where necessary (SPR GEO-4). Other erosion control measures address storm runoff (SPR GEO-5) and slope gradients through limitations on heavy equipment (SPR GEO-7 and SPR GEO-8), while burn piles must not exceed specified land area so that soil damage is minimized (SPR GEO-6). Overall, the various SPRs and other measures will ensure that there is not removal of vegetation to such a significant degree that would lead to uncontrolled runoff or hazardous erosion conditions, and that would ensure protection of safety as well as biological resources. A summary of these geological hazard SPRs can be found in [Exhibit 1](#).

Lastly, the Coastal VTS limits the use of herbicides, herbivory and heavy equipment and machinery to the maximum extent feasible. These standards will help ensure that sensitive resources and communities are protected from inadvertent exposure to hazardous materials and from adverse impacts stemming from the use of heavy machinery or herbivory, such as on slope stability.

The PWP development standards (i.e., SPRs and Coastal VTS) are therefore consistent with the San Luis Obispo County LCP provisions for hazards. Accordingly, the PWP is consistent with the hazard provisions of the County's LCP.

## **F. Cultural Resources**

The County's LUP includes a suite of policies for the protection of archaeological, paleontological, and historical resources (hereafter collectively referred to as cultural resources). For example, Coastal Plan Policies document Archaeological Resources Policy 1 protects known and potential archaeological resources. Archaeological Resources Policy 3 requires the identification of potential archaeological resources in areas where new development is proposed, and Policy 5 requires a mitigation plan where substantial archaeological resources are found. Individual buildings or general districts can be identified in Historic Site combining designations to allow for additional review to ensure that new uses and alterations to existing uses are designed with consideration for preserving and protecting the historic resource. The Archaeologically Sensitive Area combining designation prescribes similar standards.

The County's IP carries out the aforementioned cultural resource protection policies of the LUP in greater specificity. For example, IP Section 23.07.104 defines archaeologically sensitive areas and requires cessation of all development activities that could damage archaeological sites when such resources are discovered<sup>18</sup> during construction activities. A qualified professional archaeologist must then prepare a mitigation plan to be reviewed and approved by the Environmental Coordinator.

The PWP provides for the protection of cultural resources through a number of measures. Without these measures, vegetation treatment activities could potentially impact known and unknown cultural resources through treatment that involves soil disturbance. For example, the removal of vegetation through manual treatment activities will result in the presence of workers in geographic areas that may include unknown cultural resources. Similarly, mechanical treatment could also result in the physical disturbance of land surfaces (e.g., masticator churning up the surface), which could impact shallow, undiscovered artifacts.

The CalVTP includes significant measures to protect cultural resources. Only qualified professionals or trained workers are authorized to implement the SPRs and Mitigation Measures, while pre-treatment research and reconnaissance surveying of treatment areas is required for treatment activities. For example, SPR CUL-1 requires an archaeological and historical resource record search to be conducted pursuant to local

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<sup>18</sup> In the event archeological resources are discovered during development, the standards of Section 23.05.140 apply.

or state agency procedures; SPR CUL-2 stipulates that California Native American Tribes in the counties where the treatment activity is located to be contacted and provided with a written description of the project objectives and location; SPR CUL-3 necessitates a pre-field research to “inform survey design, based on the types of resources likely to be encountered within the treatment area, and to be prepared to interpret, record, and evaluate these findings within the context of local history and prehistory”; and SPR CUL-4 requires an archaeologist to conduct a site-specific survey of the treatment area and to provide a survey report.

Where cultural resources are known to exist or are discovered through project activities, the CalVTP requires additional protection measures. First and foremost, SPR CUL-8 requires that all project crew members and contractors be trained in the protection of cultural resources, including halting work where archaeological resources are encountered and treatment activities involve soil disturbance. Relatedly, SPR CUL-5 and SPR CUL-6 both necessitate consultation with the culturally affiliated tribes to develop protection measures for cultural resources in the treatment area. Such protection measures may include adjustments to the treatment location so that impacts to cultural resources are avoided, and/or changing the treatment design so that adverse impacts to cultural resources do not occur. Lastly, SPR CUL-7 requires project proponents to avoid treatment activities near historical resources (as defined by Section 15064.5 of the State CEQA Guidelines), including by prohibiting prescribed burning and mechanical treatment within 100 feet of such resources.

Despite the aforementioned measures to protect cultural resources, the CalVTP recognizes that ground disturbance during vegetation treatment activities could result in inadvertent damage to or destruction of cultural resources that are discovered during project operations. As such, Mitigation Measure CUL-2 requires all ground-disturbing activities within 100 feet of a discovered cultural resource to cease where such resources are discovered. A qualified archaeologist is also required to assess the resource and develop procedures to protect its integrity, including in-situ preservation amongst other measures.

Given that the PWP adheres to the cultural resource SPRs and Mitigation Measures of the CalVTP PEIR, proposed vegetation treatment projects would be designed and implemented consistent with the County’s cultural resource policies that require protection of such resources (consistent with PWP Project Standards 2 and 3). The PWP also requires surveys of treatment areas and consultation with tribal entities with regard to design treatment activities where known cultural resources exist or are discovered during treatment activities. As such, the proposed PWP is consistent with the LCP provisions protecting cultural resources.

### **G. Public Access and Recreation**

The County’s LCP ensures that coastal public access and recreation is protected and maximized by defining these resources and amenities and requiring their protection and provision based on locational criteria and minimum development criteria. In general, the LUP encourages the provision of public access to appropriate beach and coastal areas (see Coastal Plan Policies document Chapters 2 and 3).

The proposed PWP includes measures to ensure impacts to public access and recreation are avoided and minimized. Without such measures, vegetation treatment activities could impact public access and recreation in that certain treatment activities, such as herbicide application and prescribed burning, could require temporary closure of such areas and facilities to ensure public safety. Indeed, vegetation treatment could result in access restrictions or nuisance impacts (e.g., dust and smoke) to the extent that access and recreation is disrupted temporarily. SPR REC-1 addresses these impacts by requiring project proponents to coordinate with the owner or manager of any public recreation area or facility that would require temporary closure to post notifications of the closure at least two weeks prior to the commencement of the treatment activities. This would help to avoid and minimize disruptions to recreational users by notifying them in advance of their proposed recreational use. Similarly, SPR HAZ-9 requires project proponents utilizing herbicide application within or adjacent to public recreation areas to post signs at each end of herbicide treatment area and any intersecting trails. Further, SPR TRAN-1 would require the preparation of a Traffic Management Plan (TMP) “if traffic generated by the project would result in obstructions, hazards, or delays exceeding applicable jurisdictional standards along access routes for individual vegetation treatments.” Measures included within a TMP could mitigate traffic impacts through signage, flaggers, or treatment schedule restrictions that aim to avoid peak vehicle traffic times.

In addition, the coastal-specific standards in the Coastal VTS (see Exhibit A in [Exhibit 1](#)) include a public access and recreation provision requiring the protection of public access and public recreational areas and facilities during project operations to the maximum extent feasible. Measures to be implemented include minimization of trail closures, limiting the use of public parking spaces for staging operations, posting available accessway signage, and using flaggers, and designing construction access corridors in a manner that has the least impact on public access. Completed vegetation treatment projects must also ensure that any impacted coastal public access and recreational amenities are restored to existed conditions. Thus, this standard ensures that impacts to access and recreational amenities are avoided and minimized, as well as restored upon project completion.

Overall, proposed PWP vegetation treatment projects would be designed and implemented consistent with the County’s public access and recreation policies because PWP development standards would ensure that adverse impacts to public access and recreation would be avoided where possible, or minimized where avoidance is not feasible (consistent with PWP Project Standards 2 and 3). Any potential disruption of public access and recreational use would also be temporary, while such resources would be restored to existing conditions following project implementation, pursuant to the Coastal VTS. Therefore, the proposed SCC PWP is consistent with the LCP provisions protecting public access and recreation.

#### **H. Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

The County’s LCP addresses air quality in the Coastal Plan Policies document Air Quality Policy 1 which states “[t]he county will provide adequate administration and enforcement of air quality programs and regulations...”. Within the IP, Section

23.06.082 provides for San Luis Obispo County Air Pollution Control District (APCD) review. This section establishes a procedure for the notification of the County APCD when development is proposed to include equipment or activities that involve combustion, or the storage or use of hydrocarbons or other air contaminants. Development is also prohibited from introducing significant noxious odors into the environment (Section 23.06.084).

The PWP includes measures to avoid and minimize impacts to air quality. Without these measures, vegetation treatment within the County coastal zone could adversely impact air quality. Primary impacts could occur from prescribed burning activities that would release smoke and odors from the burning of vegetation. Similarly, the use of heavy machinery, such as off-road equipment, vehicles for worker transport and hauling materials, machine-powered hand tools, and masticators could result in the release of air pollutants.

However, the PWP includes measures to reduce adverse impacts from prescribed burning, including limitations on the duration of prescribed burning activities; restrictions on the types and amounts of materials authorized for burning, as well as location; and adherence to appropriate climatic and meteorological conditions to lower smoke impacts. Further, one of the main goals of the PWP is to reduce the risk of wildfires, which are a major contributor to GHG emissions in the State, and therefore, implementation of the PWP is expected to actually lead to reduced GHG emissions over time. In fact, one of the main objectives of the CalFIRE VTP is to contribute to statewide GHG emissions reduction goals by reducing carbon emissions associated with wildfire.

Six SPRs provide for the protection of air quality under the CalVTP, with four specifically addressing prescribed burning. SPR AQ-1 requires all project proponents undertaking prescribed burning activities to comply with the applicable air quality requirements of the air district in which the project is located. This standard will ensure that prescribed burns are carried out under the standards set by the San Luis Obispo County APCD. SPR AQ-2 requires project proponents to prepare and submit a smoke management plan for prescribed burning activities to the applicable air district, unless the burn is less than 10 acres and will not be conducted near smoke sensitive areas (unless otherwise directed by the applicable air district). This SPR ensures that burning will be conducted in compliance with an authorized burn plan that identifies the location of smoke sensitive areas and the appropriate meteorological conditions necessary for burning; provides for contingency actions (such as fire suppression or containment) that will be taken if conditions deviate from those specified in the plan; requires vegetation to be in a condition that will minimize the smoke emitted during combustion when feasible, considering fire safety and other factors; and requires piled materials to be prepared so that it will burn with a minimum of smoke. Relatedly, SPR AQ-3 requires that project proponents prepare a Burn Plan (with input from a qualified professional) for all prescribed burns. For more detail on these SPRs, see Exhibit B in [Exhibit 1](#).

In addition to prescribed burning, all treatment activities must adhere to SPR AQ-4 and SPR AQ-5. Under the former, project proponents must implement measures to minimize dust during vegetation treatment, including: limiting the speed of vehicles and

equipment traveling on dirt roads to 15 miles per hours; wetting appurtenant, unpaved, and dirt roads with non-toxic chemical dust suppressants if road use creates excessive dust; removing visible dust, silt, or mud tracked-out on to public paved roadways where access to available water supplies is sufficient; and suspending ground-disturbing treatment activities, such as land clearing and bulldozer lines, if dust transport is visible outside the treatment boundary and it may cause public health impacts. Under the latter, project proponents must avoid ground-disturbing activities in areas identified as containing naturally occurring asbestos.

The proposed PWP vegetation treatment projects would thus be designed and implemented consistent with the county's standards for air quality and GHG emissions reductions (consistent with PWP Project Standards 2 and 3). Moreover, air quality impacts from controlled burns would generally be favorable to uncontrolled, extreme wildfires. As such, the proposed PWP is consistent with the County's LCP provisions protecting air quality and GHG emissions.

### **I. PWP Project: Covell Ranch Project-Specific Analysis**

Under Section 13358 of the Commission's Regulations, the Commission may concurrently consider a PWP with a specific project or projects associated with it. As part of this PWP application, the RCD also proposes to conduct ecological restoration treatments (i.e., forest health) within the 665-acre Covell Ranch ([Exhibit 2](#)).

The project area is in the northwest portion of the County in the unincorporated community of Cambria, and it is located entirely within the property boundaries of a privately owned ranch (with a conservation easement held by The Nature Conservancy). Primary access to the property is located approximately 1 mile from Main Street along Bridge Street in Cambria ([Exhibit 2](#)). The forest on Covell Ranch is dominated by native Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*) forest and is intermixed with a moderate component of hardwoods including, but not limited to, coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) and a dense understory of perennial shrub species predominantly made up of toyon with scattered components of coffeeberry (and one small area of chaparral on the east side of the property that is not included in the proposed treatment area).

Monterey pine is the most widely planted pine tree in the world and is of great economic importance as a plantation species, forming the basis for a lumber and paper industry of world importance (e.g., in New Zealand, Chile, Australia, Spain, South Africa, Argentina, Uruguay, and Kenya). As a commercial species, Monterey pine trees can be found around the globe in great numbers; it has been estimated that there are some 10 million acres of plantation Monterey pine trees overall, primarily in the southern hemisphere. Notwithstanding this global distribution of the Monterey pine *tree*, though, *native* Monterey pine *forest* is extremely limited in distribution. In fact, although widely distributed along the California coast in the Pleistocene age, Cambria is home to one of

only three remaining populations of native Monterey pine forest in California (and one of only four in the world).<sup>19</sup>

As the southernmost stand in California, Monterey pine forest occupies roughly 2,300 acres in and around Cambria (making it the second largest forest stand globally),<sup>20</sup> with most of the remaining intact stand of Monterey pine forest located north of town, with smaller intact stand patches west and south of this location, generally following along the coastal ridge. The Covell Ranch project is right in the heart of this native forest. The native Monterey pine forest is a unique natural ecosystem containing a rare assemblage of plants and animals that have co-evolved over millennia. Although not listed formally under the State or Federal Endangered Species Acts,<sup>21</sup> native Monterey pine forest has been identified by both the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) as a rare and threatened natural resource.<sup>22</sup> The LCP recognizes this context, and includes provisions to protect native Monterey pine forest, including through a Terrestrial Habitat (TH) designation that applies to most of Cambria, including the Covell Ranch project site.

The project area also contains two Class II<sup>23</sup> watercourses (Leffingwell Creek and a tributary to San Simeon Creek). Leffingwell Creek is the primary Class II that drains the project area in the northern-central part of the project site and is moderately to densely vegetated with conifers, hardwoods, and various species of shrubs. The tributary to San Simeon Creek serves as the northern boundary of the project area and displays characteristics similar to those within the Leffingwell Creek corridor. Various Class III watercourses have been identified, mapped, and flagged in the field. A majority of the Class III channels throughout the property remain dry except for times of heavy rain.

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<sup>19</sup> In addition to native Monterey pine forest stands in three coastal areas in California (at Año Nuevo, Cambria, and the Monterey peninsula), there exist smaller native Monterey pine forest stands on two Mexican islands off the coast of Baja California (the Guadalupe and Cedros Islands).

<sup>20</sup> At over 9,000 acres, the Monterey peninsula native Monterey pine forest stand is the largest such native forest in the world.

<sup>21</sup> CNPS submitted a petition to the State Fish and Game Commission in August 1999 to list Monterey pine as a Threatened Species under the California Endangered Species Act. The petition was withdrawn in part to address the large volume of comments received on it and it has not been resubmitted.

<sup>22</sup> CDFW's Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) classifies native Monterey pine forest with a G1 global rank and an S1.1 state rank, indicating that both globally and within California there are fewer than six viable "element occurrences" (G1 and S1) and that it is considered "very threatened" (S1.1), and designates native Monterey pine forest as a rare community type. CNPS classifies Monterey pine as 1B.1, where the "1B" indicates that the species is considered "rare, threatened, or endangered in California and elsewhere," and the "0.1" modifier indicates that it is considered "seriously endangered in California (over 80% of occurrences threatened/high degree and immediacy of threat)."

<sup>23</sup> Per 14 CCR Section 916.5 of the California Forest Practice Rules watercourse classifications, where Class I means fish always or seasonally present onsite with habitat to sustain fish migration and spawning, Class II means aquatic habitat for nonfish aquatic species., and Class III means no aquatic life present with watercourse showing evidence of being capable of sediment transport to Class I and II waters.

The Covell Ranch project proposes to increase the health and vigor of the native Monterey pine forest by conducting ecologically restorative forest health treatments that increase climate resiliency and biological diversity and reduce the severity of wildfire risk near the community of Cambria. This project proposes an Ecological Restoration Treatment Type to restore ecosystem processes, native stand conditions, and forestland resiliency through the removal of dead, dying, or diseased trees, dense understory fuels, and invasive species. Implementing mechanical and manual treatment activities, pile and burning, and herbicide application will result in a modification of the existing vegetation to reduce the risk of stand-replacing fire events and support the restoration of native vegetative species and habitat conditions including, but not limited to, habitat quality and natural, low-intensity fire regimes.<sup>24</sup> This project focuses on restoring one of four naturally occurring native Monterey pine forests in the world to native ecological conditions for long-term forest health, wildlife abundance, carbon sequestration, and resilience of rare botanical alliances. Ultimately, ecologically restorative outcomes expected from this project include the release of a healthier, more vigorous and diverse understory and more resilient residual forest stand.

Numerous public agencies were contacted during the project design stage, including the SLO Fire Safe Council, CalFIRE, San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors, San Luis Obispo County Planning and Building Department, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board, CA Department of Parks and Recreation, and the US Forest Service.

LCP consistency analysis is provided for each applicable coastal resource below. For a detailed description of the applicable LCP policies and zoning regulations, as well as SPRs and mitigation measures, refer to the findings above.

### ***Coastal Habitats***

The Covell Ranch project involves mechanical and manual treatment activities to restore forest health. Treatment will entail alterations to ladder fuels through mastication of some understory vegetation, live trees up to 8 inches DBH, and dead, dying, and diseased trees, as well as manual treatment where heavy machinery is restricted from operating. Limited herbicide application may be considered where invasive species are present or expected to occur within the treatment areas to promote regeneration of native species and reduce the spread of invasive vegetation such as French broom (*Genista monspessulana*) and Cape Ivy (*Delairea odorata*). Vegetation within the Covell Ranch property is dominated by Monterey pine and is intermixed with hardwoods and a dense understory of shrub species. The treatments proposed for the project are focused on ecological restoration of the native Monterey pine forest, to promote a healthy and

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<sup>24</sup> The southwestern portion of the property was the site of a nearly 100-acre shaded fuel break project in 2012 along Bridge Street near the WUI (with the more developed portion of Cambria), but no initial treatments are proposed in this area. Maintenance treatments may be needed later in the fuel break area (for treatment connectivity and to control the spread of invasive species and dense understory fuels that impact the fire suppression objectives of the shaded fuel break), but that would require separate project authorization in the future.

resilient residual stand. Adequate spacing and vigor of the residual stand will help to mitigate forest pathogens and create a mosaic of diverse plant habitats. No direct treatments are proposed within 50 feet (30% slopes) of the creeks, and forested areas containing Douglas-fir will be limited to manual treatment. Neither chaparral nor coastal sage scrub habitat is located within the proposed treatment area.

The proposed project has been designed to safeguard ESHA and other sensitive biological resources in the project area from adverse impacts. Pursuant to SPR BIO-1, a data review of project-specific biological resources as well as reconnaissance surveys to identify sensitive species and habitats were conducted in April of 2021. In addition to native Monterey pine forest, two special status plants species, the harlequin lotus (*Hosackia gracilis*) and the Cambria morning glory (*Calystegia subacaulis* ssp. *episcopalis*), were detected in disturbed areas along trails in Units 1 and 2 and flagged for avoidance where larger patches occur.<sup>25</sup> Sensitive aquatic species were surveyed for at the reconnaissance-level in Leffingwell Creek in Unit 2 as it had some standing water when surveyed, but none were seen. The water quality in Leffingwell Creek was murky even with no sediment disturbance and showed methane bubbling in shallow pools. Pools in the creek were generally less than 8 inches deep, likely too shallow for California red-legged frog breeding. Nevertheless, due to the potential presence of special-status plant and wildlife species, many mitigation measures will be applied to minimize residual impacts if such species are discovered (Mitigation Measures BIO-2a, BIO-2b, BIO-3a, BIO-3b, and BIO-3c). These include measures such as avoiding treatment within occupied habitat by establishing a 100-foot no-disturbance buffer and/or implementing treatment outside the sensitive period of the species' life. The Commission's ecologist attended a site visit on September 27, 2021, to review how treatment activities will be designed to maintain, restore, and enhance habitat function for affected wildlife species (such as through the retention of habitat features that are critical for wildlife species' survival) and agreed that these protections are adequate.

In addition, the project proponent will require crew members and contractors to receive biological resources training from a qualified forester or biologist prior to commencing with treatment activities (SPR BIO-2). This will ensure that impacts to biological resources are minimized during treatment operations. Further, mechanical and hand work treatment within riparian habitats will be restricted to outside 50-foot buffers (100-foot wide corridor total) of Class II watercourses to ensure that habitat function is not lost or degraded. At least 75 percent of the overstory and 50 percent of the understory of riparian habitats will also be retained, while treatment will follow a vegetation removal hierarchy that prioritizes removal of uncharacteristic fuel loads (e.g., dead and dying vegetation) and invasive species, such as French broom.<sup>26</sup> BMPs (such as cleaning and

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<sup>25</sup> Harlequin lotus (*Hosackia gracilis*) and the Cambria morning glory (*Calystegia subacaulis* ssp. *episcopalis*) are both listed as 4.2 on the California Rare Plant Ranking meaning they are on the watch list of plants with limited distribution and moderately threatened in California.

<sup>26</sup> The Vegetation Removal Hierarchy was designed by multiple qualified resource professionals, including a Registered Professional Forester, to focus on thinning of dead, dying, and diseased trees, understory vegetation treatments, pile burning, the retention of snags and downed woody debris, all to

sanitizing vehicles and equipment) will also ensure that invasive species and plant pathogens, including Phytophthora (Sudden Oak Death), are not spread throughout sensitive habitat areas (SPR BIO-6 and BIO-9).

Limited herbicide application may be considered where invasive species are present or expected to occur to promote regeneration of native species and reduce the spread of invasive vegetation. Herbicide treatment is predominantly expected to occur near roads and trails where increased sunlight is present. Herbicide application will be conducted in accordance with applicable local ordinances and polices, SPRs and Mitigation Measures, labeling requirements, and manufacturer recommendations to protect non-target and special-status plant species. Herbicides will not be used within 50 feet of Class II watercourses or 25 feet of Class III watercourses and will be focused where invasive French broom is expected to occur (e.g., sunlight openings).

Site-specific surveying and mapping of sensitive natural communities were also conducted pursuant to SPR BIO-3. Since the proposed project contains a natural Monterey pine forest habitat, treatment has been designed to mimic the natural fire regime disturbance and stimulate the regeneration of Monterey pine alliances and potentially other sensitive species. This will be done through the removal of fuel loads, retention of root systems for resprouting, and understory thinning that will increase the site's carrying capacity for stand volume, which would increase the growth of the residual trees. Pile burning will be implemented in areas previously treated by way of mechanical or manual treatment methods to reduce or dispose of residual vegetative matter and stimulate the regeneration of Monterey pine, which is expected to reduce the spread of deadly forest pathogens, create more vigorous and diverse mosaics of wildlife habitat, and restore the structural integrity of the forest for public safety and fire resiliency. Treatment activities will thus result in modification of the existing fuels that will ultimately support native species regeneration and restore habitat conditions including, but not limited to, habitat quality and natural fire processes.

The County LCP requires that ESHA and other sensitive habitats and species be preserved, restored, and protected against significant disruptions, while any development authorized within or adjacent to ESHA must maintain or enhance the habitat. As proposed, the Covell Ranch project will restore native Monterey pine forest health and enhance the natural community while also directly benefiting nearby communities and assets at risk. Proposed treatment activities have been designed to protect ESHA through the identification of sensitive species (through data review and surveying) and the proposed implementation of protection measures to avoid direct and indirect adverse impacts, including the establishment of buffers to avoid sensitive resources, limiting vegetation removal to uncharacteristic fuel loads, and scheduling treatment to avoid active bird nesting seasons. No development is proposed in wetlands, while other measures will protect soil stability and water quality. Thus, the proposed project is consistent with the LCP provisions protecting coastal habitats.

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meet the membership rules of the 2nd edition of the Manual of California Vegetation at the Alliance level for Monterey pine forests.

### ***Water Quality***

The proposed project involves mechanical and manual treatment activities that will result in ground disturbance, which could degrade water quality through erosion, sedimentation, and discharge or runoff of pollutants from equipment if adequate controls are not implemented.

To guard against impacts to water quality, the project proponent will flag riparian buffers prior to commencing with treatment activities and adhere to the protection measures required for treatment within these buffer zones. The project proponent will “retain at least 75 percent surface cover and undisturbed area to act as a filter strip for raindrop energy dissipation and for wildlife habitat” (SPR-HYD-4). Vehicle and equipment use will also be restricted, including by prohibiting equipment servicing within these WLPZs and by limiting operation to existing roads or crossings that keep vehicle tracks or tires dry. Equipment will also be excluded 25 feet from Class III watercourses for slopes less than 30% and 50 feet for slopes greater than 30%. All equipment will be maintained per manufacturer’s specifications to minimize impacts resulting from fuel leaks, while treatment activities will ensure erosion is minimized, including by suspending heavy machinery use during precipitation events and restricting usage on steep slopes, as well as by monitoring for erosion and stabilizing disturbed soils. The project proponent will also comply with the Waste Discharge Requirements and/or related Conditional Waivers of Waste Discharge Requirements, and the water quality control plan for the Central Coast Basin, pursuant to the standards adopted by the California Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (Region 3). These standards generally prohibit discharge of sediment, felled trees, vegetation, slash, fuels, soil and other contaminants into watercourses, or storing these wastes near watercourses. No new roads will be constructed under the proposed project, and prescribed herbivory is not proposed.

Treatment activities include potential herbicide application, which can affect water quality through runoff, leaching, drift, and misapplication or spills. Pursuant to CalVTP requirements, herbicide treatment activities will be limited to ground-level application by hand and compliance to EPA labels is required. The proposed project treatment areas are located outside of any riparian buffers, and nonaquatic herbicide formulations are prohibited from being applied within 50 feet of a waterbody or riparian area. Application is prohibited during precipitation or within 24 hours of forecasted precipitation. In addition, a Spill Prevention and Response Plan will be prepared prior to herbicide treatment activities and all herbicide containers must be triple rinsed and hazardous waste materials must be disposed of at an approved site. SPR limitations ensure the project will not result in impacts to water quality, substantially degrade surface or ground water quality, or conflict with or obstruct the implementation of a water quality control plan through the ground application of herbicides.

Treatment activities proposed within the Covell Ranch property are therefore consistent with the County’s LCP provisions safeguarding water quality. As required by the LCP, the proposed project has been designed to avoid potential impacts to water quality through the establishment of buffer zones around sensitive waterbodies. The project also includes numerous BMPs to avoid or minimize erosion and sedimentation, including by retaining vegetative cover and avoiding development where environmental

conditions contribute to erosion. Further, pollutant discharge from heavy machinery and equipment use will be minimized through proper maintenance. Accordingly, the proposed project is consistent with LCP water quality provisions.

### ***Visual Resources***

The Covell Ranch project involves mechanical and manual treatment activities that will occur predominately in the understory. The project area perimeter is on private property and sits at a minimum distance of 1,000 feet away from California State Scenic Highway State Route 1, and it is unlikely that treatment activities, equipment, and vehicles associated with treatment activities would cause degradation of a view from Highway 1. While removal of understory will result in open areas, plants will regenerate and sprout shortly after the treatments are implemented. In addition, the Treatment Type proposed for this project is Ecological Restoration, designed to improve habitat quality and create a landscape appearance closer to historic vegetative conditions. Treatment activities along Bridge Street will be visible to the public; however, edges of the treatment area will be feathered, and sufficient vegetation will be preserved to screen treatments from public view. As such, impacts to visual resources are anticipated to be insignificant and temporary, as the proposed project involves removal of vegetation and trees that mimics natural vegetation densities. Treatment will thus result in more open understories with feathered vegetation densities. Accordingly, the proposed project is consistent with the County LCP because treatment activities would be designed to minimize potential adverse visual resource and aesthetic impacts, including by minimizing vegetation removal and maintaining landscape features along the edges of the project boundary to provide screening from public roads, and public view impacts are not expected to be significant.

### ***Coastal Hazards***

Treatment activities in Covell Ranch entail mechanical and manual vegetation removal that would likely slow a wildfire's rate of spread, thereby providing nearby communities time to escape and firefighters' additional area to contain a wildfire. The proposed project has been designed to avoid disturbing topsoil or increasing erosion impacts by complying with measures that avoid or reduce geological hazards. For example, any soil that is disturbed from treatment activities will be stabilized by using chipped materials to reduce the amount of exposed bare soil and the potential for substantial sediment discharge. Crew members will also monitor for erosion during treatment activities and adjust erosion control measures as needed.

Initial and maintenance treatments including mechanical treatments using heavy equipment and pile burning could exacerbate fire risk and expose people to uncontrolled spread of wildfire. Because treatment will involve heavy machinery and equipment containing fuels, oils, and other chemicals, the potential for leaks, exposure and resultant fires is also possible. However, the proposed project has been designed to comply with the protection measures of the PWP to ensure that such hazards are avoided and/or minimized. For instance, all equipment will be maintained to manufacturer's specifications to prevent leaks, as well as all State and federal emissions requirements. Mechanized hand tools will contain spark arrestors and crew members will carry fire extinguishers, shovels, and other equipment to address potential

ignitions. Pre-operational research has also been conducted to identify whether any known sites containing hazardous materials are present; based on this research, it has been determined that no such sites exist in the project area.

As such, the proposed project is consistent with the hazard provisions of the County's LCP.

### ***Cultural Resources***

The proposed project is designed to protect cultural resources through compliance with many protection measures that must be implemented prior to and during treatment activities. Research has been conducted for potential archaeological and historical resources (with results kept confidential pursuant to State law), applicable Native American tribes were contacted on April 13, 2021 (see Covell Ranch PSA in [Exhibit 2](#)), and an Archaeological Survey Report has been completed and submitted to the Central Coast Information Center. Further, crew members will undergo training on the protection of sensitive cultural resources that may be discovered during treatment activities. The proposed project has also been designed to adhere to cultural resource protection standards during treatment activities, including halting treatment activities if cultural resources are discovered, contacting qualified professionals and relevant tribal entities to consult with if such resources are encountered, and redesigning project activities to avoid and minimize impacts to any discovered cultural resources. Accordingly, the project proposed at Covell Ranch would be designed and implemented consistent with the county's LCP cultural resource provisions.

### ***Public Access and Recreation***

Covell Ranch is private property under a conservation easement. The property is not accessible to the public and no public recreational trails exist within the project area or its viewshed. Treatment equipment will temporarily travel in and out along Bridge Street during implementation of the proposed treatments. Smoke generated from prescribed burning activities (pile burning only) would not result in substantial short-term aesthetic impacts as burning would be temporary. Additionally, treatments adjacent to the existing shaded fuel break along Bridge Street will be implemented in a way that will effectively blend the proposed treatment areas into the existing aesthetic. Thus, the proposed project is consistent with the County LCP given that adverse impacts to public access and recreation would be negligible.

### ***Air Quality and Greenhouse Gas Emissions***

The proposed project will involve the use of mechanical equipment, including vehicles for transportation and hauling, as well as machinery like masticators, chippers, and chainsaws, that could expose nearby communities to increased diesel particulate matter emissions, odors, and dust from ground disturbing activities. However, the project has been designed to comply with the San Luis Obispo County Air Pollution Control District's (APCD's) regulations and will minimize air quality impacts by minimizing dust through vehicle restrictions (e.g., limiting the speed of vehicles, suspending ground-disturbing activities when climatic conditions exacerbate air pollution, and using water trucks to wet dusty roads) and implementing exhaust emission reduction techniques

(e.g., encouraging crew members to carpool, substituting gasoline-powered equipment for renewable fuel-based equipment where feasible).

Pile burning is also proposed within the treatment area to reduce excess residual fuels following understory treatments and could impact air quality. Pile burning will be implemented and supervised by CalFIRE; will be required to follow procedures for preparing Burn Plans, Smoke Management Plans, Incident Action Plans; and will require a burn permit from the County APCD. This permit will contain provisions for reducing the amount of potential smoke impacts to the community. Smoke will be minimized by burning when the fuels are relatively dry and when winds will carry the smoke away from the built environment. Smoke will be monitored onsite and off-site during burning operations. If the burning operation causes a public nuisance all ignitions must cease and/or the piles will be extinguished. As such, the proposed project is consistent with the County's LCP provisions protecting air quality.

#### **J. California Environmental Quality Act**

Pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 21067 and Sections 15050 and 15051 of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, the Board of Forestry is the lead agency for CEQA purposes, as it is the public agency with principal responsibility for carrying out the CalVTP, while the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District is a responsible agency tasked with implementing vegetation treatment under the PWP. As the lead agency under CEQA, the BOF certified its PEIR in December 2019 in accordance with State CEQA Guidelines Section 15168(c) for streamlining later vegetation treatment activities.

As an agency with a certified regulatory program under CEQA Section 21080.5, the Commission must consider alternatives and mitigation measures that would substantially lessen any significant adverse environmental effects that the proposal would otherwise have on the environment. Sections 13371 and 13356(b)(2) of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations require that the Commission not approve or adopt a PWP unless it can find that: "...there are no feasible alternatives, or feasible mitigation measures,...available which would substantially lessen any significant adverse impact that the development...may have on the environment."

Alternatives to the proposed PWP were analyzed for their potential to substantially lessen any significant adverse impacts that the development may have on the environment. No such feasible alternatives were found.

The No Project alternative was determined not to meet the primary project objectives. Risks from wildfire are present in many areas of California, including natural areas and habitats in the coastal zone. The PWP is intended to allow a streamlined process to help increase the pace and scale of vegetation management activities intended to prevent damaging wildfires. The PWP would help the State meet its goals by authorizing projects over a 10-year period that reduce those fire risks. Without a PWP, vegetation management projects could be authorized through other channels, such as individual CDPs, but likely at a slower pace. If fewer projects move forward, adverse impacts to coastal habitats and species caused by vegetation management might be

reduced, depending on which projects were undertaken. However, there would also be fewer habitat benefits from forest health projects, as fewer of these types of restoration projects would likely be carried out. Essentially, without a certified PWP, risk reduction through fuel management in the project area would be minimal, whereas risk reduction through fuel management is intended to be a key strategy in the State's fire prevention efforts. In addition, existing, artificially-high fuel loads in habitat areas would remain roughly the same, allowing for continued risk of hotter fires that risk damage to the habitat itself. In sum, without the PWP, there would be fewer restoration projects proposed and carried out, fewer fire prevention projects overall (which could lead to larger and more destructive wildfires), and potentially more requests for emergency permits and individual permits for smaller projects, which would fail to provide the region-wide, systematic approach to fuel management that the State has found is needed to deal with the fire risks in San Luis Obispo County and throughout the State. The "no project" alternative would not meet the project objectives, nor would it be less environmentally damaging overall, although it may reduce near-term impacts to some areas depending on which projects were undertaken per the PWP.

Another alternative would be to limit the types of projects that could be implemented under the PWP to only forest health projects as opposed to the mix of forest health projects and fire prevention projects proposed in the project area to accommodate all aspects of the State's CalVTP. The PWP commits to a majority of the total acreage of covered projects to be forest health projects to ensure that benefits to the environment are maximized through forest health and ecological restoration planning in the PWP Program Area. Under an alternative that only permits forest health projects, a majority of the areas proposed for treatment under the PWP would still be eligible for treatment, and the fire prevention projects, which are less directly beneficial to the immediate habitat where they would occur, would not be allowed under the PWP (though still might be permitted on a case-by-case basis through CDPs). This alternative could have fewer impacts on habitat areas. However, recent wildfires have demonstrated that if brush is allowed to grow unchecked, it becomes a hazard not only for an individual property, but for the neighboring properties and surrounding community as well. Fire prevention projects are a necessary part of fighting wildfires, as fuel breaks provide strategic locations for firefighters to stage equipment and potentially contain fires, while fire prevention around properties and infrastructure provide for a defensible space from approaching wildfires. Without these projects, the County could not achieve the fundamental objectives of the CalVTP to reduce wildfire risks and would not accommodate efforts to reduce the risk of wildfires with the most potential for harm to life and property. In the long-term, a suite of fire risk reduction measures is needed to protect habitat from severe fires, so the full benefits of a forest health only program wouldn't be achieved if the fire prevention projects weren't incorporated.

A third alternative is to reduce the overall PWP Program Area available for projects. The PWP Program Area covers approximately 93,000 acres of northern San Luis Obispo County coastal zone, encompassing moderate, high, and very high fire hazards areas. A reduced program area alternative would limit the area where vegetation treatment activities could occur. By their nature, the proposed Program activities must take place within wildland areas of the County, many of which include coastal habitats protected

under the LCP. As a result, projects will occur directly within these habitat areas. There are no alternative Program Area configurations that would avoid such areas. In addition, while the potential area for vegetation treatment projects is extensive, limiting the extent of the program area would not likely reduce impacts because implementation of the PWP treatment activities is not intended to occur throughout the entire Program Area. Rather, the PWP is designed to allow flexibility on the location of vegetation treatments based on treatment prioritization over a ten-year period, including by consideration of available funding, priority for high fire risk areas and communities in need, and available entities both willing and able to carry out treatment activities. The number and extent of projects in the proposed Program Area are not currently known; however, the Program Area is not anticipated to be the target of extensive funding and treatments. Maintaining a larger Program boundary allows the necessary flexibility to design projects that maximize effectiveness, as funding and circumstances arise. Therefore, the “reduced program area” alternative would not be less environmentally damaging overall, since the treatment activities will take place in habitat areas regardless of design and confining the projects to a smaller area would not reduce the potential number or extent of treatment activities but would merely limit flexibility on design and implementation.

The Commission incorporates its findings on LCP consistency at this point as if set forth in full. These findings address and respond to all public comments regarding potential significant adverse environmental effects of the project that were received prior to preparation of this report. For the reasons discussed in this report, the PWP, including the Covell Ranch specific project, is consistent with the County LCP, and the Covell Ranch specific project is also consistent with PWP requirements. There are no other feasible alternatives or mitigation measures available that would further lessen any significant adverse effect that the PWP, including the Covell Ranch project, would have on the environment. Thus, the PWP is consistent with CEQA.

#### 4. APPENDICES

##### **A. Substantive File Documents<sup>27</sup>**

- San Luis Obispo County Local Coastal Program
- Board of Forestry Certified Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (December 2019)
- Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District Forest Health and Fire Resilience Public Works Plan
- Covell Ranch Project-Specific Analysis

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<sup>27</sup> These documents are available for review from the Commission’s Central Coast District office.