

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION CHECKLIST

Project: Create and Pilot a Merced Vernal Pool Education Program at the Elementary School Level

Date: November 16, 2011

Nature of Action: Reclamation proposes to provide \$25,000 from the Central Valley Project Conservation Program (CVPCP) to Carol W. Witham to create a vernal pool outdoor education program in Merced County based on the award-winning Sacramento Splash curriculum. Ms. Witham will pilot the program in classrooms and in the field in Merced County. This project will be conducted in the Madera core area of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2005 *Recovery Plan for Vernal Pool Ecosystems of California and Southern Oregon*.

Exclusion Category: 516 DM 2 Appendix 1, 1.10: Activities which are educational, informational, advisory, or consultative to other agencies, public and private entities, visitors, individuals, or the general public.

Evaluation of Criteria for Categorical Exclusion

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| 1. | This action or group of actions will have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. | No ☒ Uncertain ☐ Yes ☐ |
| 2. | This action or group of actions will involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources. | No ☒ Uncertain ☐ Yes ☐ |
| 3. | This action will have significant adverse effects on public health or safety. | No ☒ Uncertain ☐ Yes ☐ |
| 4. | This action will have an adverse effect on unique geological features such as wetlands, wild or scenic rivers, rivers placed on the nationwide river inventory, refuges, floodplains, or prime or unique farmlands. | No ☒ Uncertain ☐ Yes ☐ |

5. This action will have highly controversial effects. No ☒ Uncertain__ Yes__
6. This action will have highly uncertain environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risk. No ☒ Uncertain__ Yes__
7. This action will establish a precedent for future actions. No ☒ Uncertain__ Yes__
8. This action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulative significant environmental effects. No ☒ Uncertain__ Yes__
9. This action will adversely affect properties listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historical Places. No ☒ Uncertain__ Yes__
10. This action will adversely affect a species listed or proposed to be listed as endangered or threatened. No ☒ Uncertain__ Yes__
On June 17, 2011, Reclamation initiated informal consultation with the Service on the activities for projects in the CVPCP for Fiscal Year 2011. The Service concurred on November 8, 2011 that the projects, including the establishment of this vernal pool educational program, are not likely to adversely affect listed species.
11. This action threatens to violate Federal, state, local, executive or Secretarial orders, or tribal law or requirements imposed for protection of the environment. No ☒ Uncertain__ Yes__
12. This action will affect Indian Trust Assets. No ☒ Uncertain__ Yes__

13. This action will have a disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on low income or minority populations. No ☒ Uncertain ___ Yes ___
14. This action will limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites. No ☒ Uncertain ___ Yes ___
15. This action will contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species. No ☒ Uncertain ___ Yes ___

NEPA Action: Categorical Exclusion ☒ EA ___ EIS ___

Environmental commitments, explanation, and/or remarks:

The CVPCP, managed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), was developed by Reclamation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during the Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultation process to ensure that the existing operation of the Central Valley Project (CVP) and renewal of CVP water service contracts would not jeopardize listed or proposed species or adversely affect designated or proposed critical habitat. Accordingly, the CVPCP implements actions that will protect, restore, and enhance special-status species and their habitats affected by the CVP. The creation and piloting of a vernal pool education program for elementary school students, which will inform students and teachers about the uniqueness and importance of vernal pool habitats and species, is a desirable activity that is consistent with CVPCP objectives. The locations where the program will be implemented fall within the priority project area of the CVPCP. They include the Virginia Smith Trust or Cyril Smith Trust parcels owned by the University of California and The Nature Conservancy, respectively. Verbal approval from the landowners has been obtained, but a more formalized agreement will be necessary and is forthcoming.

Proposed Tasks:

In November 2010, Carol W. Witham submitted a proposal to the CVPCP for a project titled ***Create and Pilot a Merced Vernal Pool Education Program at the Elementary School Level*** seeking funding for the establishment of a Project Implementation Team (Team) to craft a place-based vernal pool curriculum to educate elementary school children and teachers about the biology and ecology of vernal pools in the Merced area. The objectives of the project will be achieved by way of the following tasks:

1. Establish an Implementation Network:

Beginning in November 2011, the Project Implementation Team will work with the University of California at Merced, the Margaret Sheehy Elementary School, and the Grasslands Environmental Education Center to establish a Project Implementation Network (Network). The Network will work with the Team and its partners to seek the participation of stakeholders who will help support and deliver the Merced Vernal Pool (MVP) Education Program. Stakeholders may include local teachers, administrators, outdoor education programs, NGOs, University faculty, students, parents, and/or volunteers from the Merced area.

During March or April 2012, Sacramento Splash (Splash) will host a visit by the Merced Team to the Splash Education Center at Mather Field in Sacramento to learn how vernal pool field trips can build on classroom curricula. The group of invitees will include participants in the Network, potential field trip leaders, teachers, and administrators who are considering participating in the MVP Education Program. After observing Splash guides and students in action, the Merced Team will debrief at the Splash Education Center and chart a course for the Merced vernal pool field trips. To facilitate participation in the field trips by teachers, the project will provide transportation and funding for substitute teachers.

2. Transform the Splash Elementary Curriculum into the "Merced Vernal Pool Education Program" Curriculum

The Team will revise the Sacramento Splash curriculum to create a place-based curriculum for the Merced County vernal pools. The lessons contained in the Splash curriculum have been well-tested, so no modifications will be required for the teacher preparation materials. However, Splash student materials often refer to local Sacramento features and landscapes. It will be necessary to modify the materials to include key features of the vernal pools of Merced County so that the new program reflects the local landscape. This will include identifying the most appropriate Merced County animals and plant species to include in the curriculum.

3. Implement the Merced Vernal Pool Education Program on a Pilot Scale

As it did in Sacramento, the pilot project will create the "buzz" that draws the attention of Merced County teachers, administrators, parents and youth advocates. In so doing, the MVP Education Program will expand local awareness of the benefits of a place-based, environmental science curriculum for children, and the opportunities it presents for University students and the broader community to connect youth with the surrounding landscape. It is this connection that

seeks to establish improved access to science and outdoor experiences for disadvantaged youth, and to build awareness of vernal pools as an educational resource for the community.

With assistance from the Network, the Project Team will identify up to 12 candidate teachers who are willing and able to: (1) attend training in January 2013; (2) use the MVP Education Program in their class from January to April 2013; and (3) arrange transportation and bring their students on a class field trip to Merced vernal pool sites in March or April 2013.

Sacramento Splash will conduct a teacher training session in Merced in early January 2013 to train up to eight teachers in the use of the MVP Education Program. Between January and May, Splash will respond to questions from teachers, work with them to schedule their field trips, and evaluate the experience of both teachers and students. Field trips will be scheduled for March and April 2013, and will be attended by the teacher, at least three chaperones, and three field guides from the Splash staff.

Prior to the field trips, members of the Network will scout potential field trip sites, identify constraints, and determine how to use the landscape to minimize impacts to vernal pools while maximizing opportunities for hands-on, outdoor education for students. The Network will identify a person or organization to solicit and organize people to train who will deliver Merced vernal pool field trips in the future. Splash will provide training materials to support the training of these future field guides. Potential guides will also be invited to visit the Splash Education Center and attend the Merced field trips to gain experience.

After the MVP Educational Program has been completed, the Project Implementation Team will conduct an evaluation of the process and its outcomes by participants so as to guide improvements to the framework for future implementation. A list of potential sponsors and donors identified by the Network will be approached to continue to support the MVP Education Program in the subsequent year(s).

Preparer's Name and Title: Douglas Klemm Date: 11/17/11
Environmental Specialist

Regional Archeologist concurrence with Item 9:

See attached concurrence memo

ITA Designee concurrence with Item 10:

See attached concurrence memo

Concurrence:

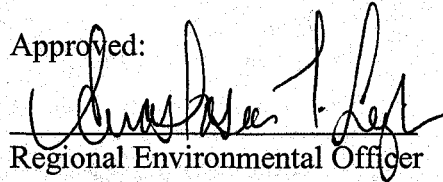


Date:

11/17/11

Program Manager, Central Valley
Project Conservation Program

Approved:



Date:

11/18/2011

Regional Environmental Officer

From: Overly, Stephen A

Sent: Friday, June 10, 2011 2:35 PM

To: Strait, Daniel H

Cc: Perry, Laureen (Laurie) M; Nickels, Adam M; Barnes, Amy J; Bruce, Brandee E; Goodsell, Joanne E; Dunay, Amy L; Fogerty, John A; Williams, Scott A; Soule, William E

Subject: Section 106 Review for Reclamation funding of Merced Vernal pool Education Program

Project #11-SCAO-146

Hi Dan,

The proposed action to provide federal funding for a Merced Vernal Pool Education Program has no potential to cause effects to historic properties pursuant to the regulations at 36 CFR Part 800.3 (a)(1).

Proposed Action: The Bureau of Reclamation proposes to subsidize the creation and piloting of an outdoor education program in Merced County to be managed by Carol W. Witham and based on the Sacramento Splash curriculum *Life in Our Watershed: Investigating Vernal Pools* (Splash 2005). The program will be piloted in six Merced classrooms. Additionally, through outreach, a local constituency of educators and others interested in outdoor education will be formed as a program implementation network. The network will serve as the incubator for the Merced Vernal Pool Education Program following the pilot phase that will ultimately accommodate all interested teachers and students in Merced County.

Location: Education will consist of classroom and field trips to observe Vernal Pools in the Madera core area of the *Recovery Plan for Vernal Pool Ecosystems of California and Southern Oregon* (2005).

This concludes the National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106 process for the proposed undertaking. Please retain a copy of this concurrence with the administrative record for this action. It is my understanding that an EA is being prepared for this action. I can review the cultural resources section when the Environmental Document is prepared.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to comment.

Tony

Stephen (Tony) Overly, M.A. Archaeologist
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2800 Cottage Way, MP-153
Sacramento, CA 95825
916-978-5552

From: Rivera, Patricia L
Sent: Friday, July 08, 2011 6:29 AM
To: Kleinsmith, Douglas H
Subject: FW: ITA request for all 6 2011 CVPCP projects

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
Flag Status: Flagged

Doug,

I reviewed the proposed actions and determined that there are no potential affects to Indian Trust Assets as a result of any of the actions.

1. **Panorama Vista Preserve Habitat Restoration**
2. **Riparian Brush Rabbit Propagation, Reintroduction and Monitoring**
3. **Merced Vernal Pool Education Program Santa Theresa County Park Serpentine**
4. **Soils Grazing**
5. **Peek Ranch Conservation Easement**
6. **Kelsey Ranch Conservation Easement**

1. Restoration of alkali shrub and riparian woodlands on 20 acres of degraded Kern River floodplain and adjacent upland at the Panorama Vista Preserve in Bakersfield. The nearest ITA is a Public domain Allotment approximately 33 miles E of the project location.

2. Complete the controlled propagation and reintroduction of riparian brush rabbits onto the San Joaquin River NWR and adjacent lands. The nearest ITA is Chicken Ranch Rancheria approximately 41 miles NE of the project location.

3. Create a vernal pool outdoor education program in Merced County based on the award-winning Sacramento Splash curriculum. Pilot the program in classrooms and in the field. The nearest ITA is a Public Domain Allotment approximately 25 miles NE of the project location.

4. Installation of grazing infrastructure (fencing, water troughs, water tanks, well and solar pump, etc.) to introduce cattle to three pastures containing 492 acres at Santa Teresa County Park for management and enhancement of serpentine grasslands and associated species. The nearest ITA is Lytton Rancheria approximately 58 miles NW of the project location.

5. Acquisition of a conservation easement on the 2,407-acre Peek Ranch. The property is actively grazed. The native habitats on the property are primarily grasslands containing vernal pools, along with riparian habitats along Deer Creek. The nearest ITA is Paskenta Rancheria approximately 9 miles SW of the project location.

6. Acquisition of a conservation easement on the 6,148-acre Kelsey Ranch north of the town of Snelling. The property is actively grazed, and contains some farmed crops. The native habitat on the property is primarily grasslands containing vernal pools, along with a year-round creek and some land in active agriculture. The nearest ITA is a Public Domain allotment approximately 21 miles East of the project location.

Patricia