

Comment Set A0024, cont.
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish & Game

**WILDLIFE AGENCY
COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
ON THE DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT/ENVIRONMENTAL
IMPACT STATEMENT
FOR THE SUNRISE POWERLINK PROJECT**

Project Description

1. Operations and maintenance activities (O/M) for the proposed transmission line and associated facilities are beyond the scope of SDG&E's existing NCCP/HCP. Therefore, the final EIR/EIS should include a more detailed discussion regarding how O/M activities will be mitigated, tracked, and reported. This discussion should focus on reducing indirect impacts to biological resources, especially impacts from new utility roads extending into remote areas of the backcountry. Further, the Draft EIR/EIS does not discuss the potential for permanent loss of habitat associated with O/M activities. Loss of habitat could occur should the facilities (e.g., towers, poles) have to be moved to another location, or if road maintenance or vegetation clearing activities does not occur at least once every two years. The final EIR/EIS should include a discussion regarding how permanent impacts from O/M would be mitigated.

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Regional Conservation Planning

1. Section D.2.1.2.1, Overview of Special Habitat Management Areas, does not identify all conservation lands owned and/or managed by the Department. The properties listed below are directly and/or indirectly affected by the Proposed Project alignment and alternative route proposals. The final EIR/EIS should correctly identify these lands and discuss the potential impacts the Proposed Project (and alternative routes) would have on the long-term management objectives of these areas. Also, Table A-1 (Section A.6.5) should be revised to add easements to the list of requirements under the Permit or Regulatory Requirement column for the Department.

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Anza Borrego Link

- San Felipe Valley Wildlife Management Area (referenced in Draft EIR/EIS as San Felipe Creek Ecological Reserve Area)

Inland Valley Link

- Iron Mountain (undesignated)
- Sycamore Canyon/Goodan Ranch (under joint ownership with the Department and County of San Diego)
- Cañada de San Vicente (proposed Ecological Reserve)/a.k.a Monte Vista Ranch

Coastal Link

- Del Mar Mesa/Lopez Ridge Ecological Reserve

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Interstate 8 Alternatives

- Walker Canyon Ecological Reserve

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2. The Department is concerned with the increased potential for off-road vehicles and other damaging activities resulting from upgraded or new maintenance roads providing improved access onto Department lands and into other sensitive habitat areas. The Department has had reoccurring issues with illegal off-road vehicles using existing SDG&E utility maintenance roads to gain entry into otherwise inaccessible areas. For example, Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve is fenced, gated, and patrolled to prevent illegal off-road activity; however, the utility road for the Southwest Powerlink that runs through the Ecological Reserve has lead to several incursions by off-road vehicles contributing to adverse impacts to biological resources in the reserve.

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Building new roads into undeveloped areas, especially for those areas that were set aside for habitat conservation, without implementation of long-term enforcement creates significant problems for Department land managers. Without adequate enforcement, fences and gates do not provide sufficient protection for an area. Off-road vehicle enthusiasts regularly cut fences, destroy gates and move barriers to access areas not routinely patrolled. SDG&E should consider funding sufficient off-road vehicle enforcement patrols to adequately protect the areas that would potentially be exposed to the additional impacts from off-road vehicle activity. The mitigation measures currently proposed for maintenance of utility service roads (e.g., MM B-12) in the Draft EIR/EIS should be revised to address the aforementioned potential long-term resource impact concerns. Current law enforcement is not adequate to address the impacts from existing utility roads.

3. Goodan Ranch Preserve

Goodan Ranch is jointly owned by the Department, County of San Diego, and the Cities of Poway and Santee. A primary concern for the Department is the double circuit 230 kV line that is proposed to cross the Goodan Ranch Preserve and the potential impacts the Proposed Project would have on sensitive habitat that is used to mitigate for impacts from various projects. Any future impacts on Goodan Ranch would be considered cumulative, because the habitat the may be impacted by the Proposed Project has already been allocated as mitigation for impacted habitat elsewhere. Therefore, mitigation ratios for impacts to habitat within this preserve would need to be doubled, since the Proposed Project would be impacting an existing mitigation area.

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4. Cañada de San Vicente (Monte Vista)

Portions of the Chuck Wagon Road alternative for the Inland Valley Link (CWR-1, CWR-2, and CWR-3) would significantly impede access for residents and Department staff responsible for this property, as only one access road to the property is currently available. Sensitive wildlife occurring on site includes golden eagle, arroyo toad, two-striped garter snake (*Thamnophis hammondi*) and San Diego horned lizard (*Phrynosoma coronatum blainvillei*). The access road is located in close proximity to San Vicente Creek and known

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occurrences of arroyo toad. Sensitive plant species include delicate clarkia (*Clarkia delicata*), and habitat (including dwarf plantain [*Plantago erecta*] for the Quino checkerspot butterfly (however this species has not been detected on the property). The impacts from mileposts 124 to 127 along the Proposed Project route would be similar to those likely to occur on the Chuck Wagon Road alternative (CWR 1-3) for San Diego thornmint and those sensitive species listed above. Portions of this property (totaling 392 acres) were purchased by the San Diego County Water Authority as mitigation lands for impacts from prior projects. Therefore, any future impacts would be considered cumulative as the habitat being impacted has already been allocated as mitigation for impacted habitat elsewhere. As with Gooden Ranch, mitigation ratios for impacts to habitat within this preserve would need to be doubled, since the Proposed Project would be impacting an existing mitigation area.

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The Department is also concerned with potential effects to existing infrastructure and maintenance of preserve facilities. The existing roads, bridges, and culverts could be damaged by proposed construction activities or widening of current SDG&E access roads. Furthermore, alternative route CWR near milepost 2 to 3 could create a flight hazard for golden eagles, which use the area for foraging and as a travel corridor. This impact is not adequately addressed in the Draft EIR/EIS and needs to be discussed in the final EIR/EIS.

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5. Iron Mountain (Proposed Ecological Reserve)

The additional transmission line (i.e., 230 kV from MP 128 to MP 130) proposed to parallel the existing 69 kV lines could lead to new roads being needed to service the towers. As the property was purchased to protect coastal sage scrub (CSS) habitat, new roads would likely result in further impacts to sensitive habitat and associated species. This area is currently recovering from fire and the new lines could potentially increase the incidence of fire, limiting the re-establishment of the native vegetation communities.

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6. San Felipe Valley Wildlife Area

The proposed alignment traverses substantial portions of the San Felipe Valley Wildlife Area that were originally purchased with Transportation Enhancement Activities (TEA) Program funds and are encumbered with restrictive covenants. Restrictions include, but are not limited to, no vehicular use, no destruction of native vegetation, no commercial uses, no degradation of water quality, and no roads.

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The partial underground alternative would impact areas where regrowth is slow to establish. All impacts to vegetation/habitat should be revegetated, but mitigated as permanent impacts if this alternative is selected. The TEA funding mechanism for the purchase of these lands also included restrictions against allowing above ground powerlines to be placed within the wildlife area boundary. Therefore, all powerlines should be undergrounded if this alignment is selected.

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7. The City of Santee draft MSCP Subarea Plan should be included under the discussion for the Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan Areas (Section D.2.1.2.1). Furthermore, due to the Lake Elsinore Advanced Pump Storage Project (LEAPS) location within western Riverside County and the Margarita Peaker in Orange County, references should be provided in corresponding sections of the final EIR/EIS for the Riverside MSHCP and Southern Orange County HCP, respectively. A review of project consistency with those plan guidelines should also be provided.
8. Further discussion should be provided in the final EIR/EIS regarding use of regional habitat assessment models (e.g., preliminary gap analysis data for the East County Multiple Species Conservation Plan) to assist in identifying suitable habitats to fulfill mitigation requirements (i.e., demonstrate that the habitat is suitable to support special status plant and animal species). Considering the Proposed Project (including alternate routes) extends from the western end of Imperial County, bisects the length of San Diego County, and terminates at the coastal region of the City of San Diego, emphasis should be directed at identifying unfragmented core blocks of biologically equivalent or better habitat that clearly offsets impacts in the broader vegetation communities, as opposed to piecemeal conservation. Moreover, species-based and habitat-based mitigation needs to be considered depending on the extent of the specific impact. This type of discussion should also be provided in the alternative generation and route proposals. Mitigation land acquisition should focus on acquiring land identified as high value habitat or as pre-approved mitigation areas within existing and proposed NCCP/HCP's areas.

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State Laws and Regulations

1. Under the heading Lake and Streambed Alteration Program (page D.2-69), the following statement should be incorporated into the discussion: "prior to the project applicant's commencement of any activity that would substantially divert or obstruct the natural flow or substantially change the bed, channel, or bank (which may include associated riparian resources) of a river, stream or lake, or deposit or dispose of debris, waste, or other material containing crumbled, flaked, or ground pavement where it may pass into any river, stream, or lake, the project applicant shall submit a complete Lake or Streambed Alteration Program notification package and fee to the California Department of Fish and Game." Similarly, this statement should be incorporated into Section D.12.3 (Page D.12-16), under the topic heading "State."
2. Ephemeral desert streams and washes are considered jurisdictional. Nearly all of the alternatives impact these types of jurisdictional waters of the state. The Department opposes the elimination of watercourses and/or their channelization or conversion to subsurface drains. All wetlands and watercourses, whether intermittent or perennial, must be retained and provided with substantial setbacks which preserve the riparian and aquatic values and maintain their value to on-site and off-site wildlife populations.

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3. For projects with impacts to jurisdictional lakes or streambeds, the Department is emphasizing that alternatives and mitigation measures be addressed in CEQA certified documents prior to submittal of an application of a Streambed Alteration Agreement (SAA). Any information which is supplied to the Department after the CEQA process is complete will not have been subject to the public review requirements of CEQA. Therefore, please ensure all impacts to jurisdictional waters are accounted for in the final EIR/EIS.
4. For the Department to process a SAA agreement, the CEQA-certified documents must include an analysis of the impacts of the Proposed Project on the lake or streambed, an analysis of the biological resources present on the site, copies of biological studies conducted on the site, biological survey methodology, and a discussion of any alternative, avoidance, or mitigation measures which will reduce the impacts of the proposed development to a level of insignificance. In addition, a discussion of potential adverse impacts from any increased runoff, sedimentation, soil erosion, and/or pollutants on streams and watercourses on or near the project site, with mitigation measures proposed to alleviate such impacts, must be included in the CEQA-certified documents.

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Biological Resource Impacts

1. It is difficult to determine what the actual impacts of the Proposed Project would be, in a specific sense, as the Proposed Project has areas where biological surveys were not conclusive because of drought conditions or restricted access, and specific mitigation lands were not identified (see Sections D.2.1, D.2.11, and E.1.2.3). Moreover, because the “environmentally superior” options were derived using all environmental criteria (noise, visual, etc.), the routes selected may not be superior from a biological resource standpoint. For example, there is a reduction in temporary impacts to native vegetation communities between the Interstate 8 Alternative and Proposed Project; however, a consolidated matrix was not provided that would assist reviewing agencies and members of the public with comparing the varying extent of impacts.

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In addition, the Draft EIR/EIS states that impacts to occupied and unoccupied suitable habitat for listed species would require off-site mitigation to offset impacts, yet specific parcels that would satisfy this requirement are not articulated. Finally, there are several instances in the Draft EIR/EIS where a significant impact was identified that could not be offset (i.e., Class I impacts). In these cases, it is difficult to know whether the impacts could be mitigated or not, because potential off-site mitigation options were not discussed in the Draft EIR/EIS (see General Concerns above). A more detailed analysis of what lands would be needed and what lands are available would possibly eliminate some of these Class I situations. The Wildlife Agencies recommend narrowing the scope of the final EIR/EIS so that a more thorough analysis of project impacts can be assessed and appropriate mitigation articulated to ensure impacts to rare, sensitive, and declining biological resources are offset to the maximum extent practicable.

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2. Under the Impacts Identified section (Section D.2.4.3), a distinction should be provided between direct and indirect impacts that were considered during environmental analysis for the Proposed Project. Currently, this distinction is limited to a discussion within the Cumulative Scenario and Impacts section of the Draft EIR/EIS. It would have been helpful to have provided this discussion within the Environmental Assessment Methodology (Section D.1.4) and a distinction made between impact analysis on the direct, indirect and cumulatively significant levels. Depending on the circumstances, indirect effects of a project may be as significant as the direct effects of the project (e.g., alteration of a dynamic portion of a system, such as stream flow characteristics; or the loss of a needed buffer, resulting in edge effects and long-term degradation of habitat). These are critical elements of CEQA for ensuring a thorough analysis was conducted and adequately demonstrating that efforts have been made to substantially avoid or lessen significant environmental impacts (CEQA Guideline §15126.2(a)). Furthermore, in considering feasible mitigation measures, the discussion topic in D.1.4.1 should emphasize avoidance and minimization at the onset of all phases of the Proposed Project. A0024-22
3. The discussion provided in Section D.2.4.3 identifies temporary disturbance and/or permanent loss to biological resources. Given the intent of this section to provide substantive public disclosure, it would have been beneficial to define the key indirect effects that were considered or anticipated, particularly as they relate to the Proposed Project (e.g., reference in Table D.2-6 for indirect effects of noise and lighting impacts from on-going operational activities; introduction of urban runoff into biological system; loss of a biological buffer). This information should be included in the final EIR/EIS A0024-23
4. Section D.2.5 mentions that impacts to vegetation communities within the Multi-Habitat Planning Area (MHPA) or Pre-Approved Mitigation Area (PAMA) would occur and those impacts, including conflicts with established conservation plans, would be discussed in Section D.16. However, no discussion was provided in Section D.16, Policy Consistency, regarding the scope or intent of these plans and the effect the Proposed Project or alternative routes would have on the biological value of those preserves. The final EIR/EIS should identify inconsistencies with, and impacts to, the biological value of all current or draft NCCP/HCP's preserve areas within the Proposed Project area (and the alternative routes). A0024-24
5. The final EIR/EIS should provide a summary table for impacts to special status plant species, similar to the table prepared for the broader-based acreage impacts to Vegetation Communities (i.e., Table D.2-7). Likewise, a summary table should be provided for listed or sensitive wildlife species, particularly for purposes of identifying proposed mitigation ratios (e.g., pages D.2-109 - D.2-140). All other mitigation ratios agreed upon by the applicant and the Wildlife agencies should be folded into a consolidated table. A0024-25
6. Although the future transmission system expansion (section D.2.18) is referenced as being analyzed at the programmatic level (future approval required by CPUC), at a minimum, a summary table of anticipated biological impacts should be included for this portion of the A0024-26