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April 19, 2023

Public Comments Processing

Attn: FWS-R8-ES-2022-0166,
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, MS: PRB/3W
5275 Leesburg Pike,
Falls Church, VA 22041-3803

Introduction

The Mountain Counties Water Resources Association writes to provide comments on the proposed rule, published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, concerning the Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; California Spotted Owl (CSO): Endangered Status for the Coastal-Southern California Distinct Population Segment and Threatened Status with Section 4(d) Rule for the Sierra Nevada Distinct Population Segment. 88 Fed. Reg. 11,600 (Feb. 23, 2023).

Mountain Counties Water Resources Association (MCWRA) advocates for the water interests of its 58 members in 12 of California's mountain counties within the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) of woodland and forested lands in the Sierra Nevada. These foothill and mountain areas contain the headwaters for half of California's developed water supply, providing beneficial uses including domestic and business consumption, hydropower generation, irrigation for food production, recreation, tourism, wildlife habitat, and environmental flows that support the State's sustained well-being and fuel the engine of California's economy.

The common interest of our member agencies is to protect the long-term health of our mountain headwaters and the reliability of public water supplies and associated infrastructure and operations.

As high-severity megafires continue to ravage the state, California is learning the hard way that headwater protection requires removing fuels from overstocked forest conditions. Every year these fires threaten MCWRA communities and the beneficial uses derived from healthy watersheds.

Our members are actively engaged in fuel-reduction projects aimed to reduce the potential for large high-severity fires. We support the application of the best scientific considerations to this process and work with professional foresters following appropriate regulations to ensure that this is done. These projects are the only hope to reduce severity as each fire season looms. We are in a race against time and the next ignition event.

Support for Proposed Endangered Species Act Section 4(d) Rule Exempting CSO Take Prohibition for Forest or Fuels Management to Reduce the Risk or Severity of Wildfire

Each large high-severity fire occurring in the Sierra Nevada indelibly alters the quality and reliability of the emanating water resources. Burned forest soils lose cohesive organic matter and become hydrophobic, unable to absorb precipitation and eroding into water ways. Hundreds of thousands of tons of this eroded forest topsoil clog reservoirs after major fires and affect the quality of water entering treatment facilities for human consumption. The root systems of incinerated vegetation lose their ability to hold slopes in place, leading to debris flows threatening safety and infrastructure while depositing more sediment into creeks, rivers, reservoirs, ultimately affecting water treatment facilities. These erosion events can occur for many years after the fire as intense storms repeatedly scour burned areas.

Stewards of healthy headwaters and public water supplies are investing at local, regional, state, and federal levels – both public and private – to plan and implement forest and fuels management projects to reduce the risk of high-severity wildfires in the Sierra Nevada. The urgency of the need cannot be overstated.

Representing a major group of these stewards, the Mountain Counties Water Resources Association underscores the need for fuels management projects and supports the proposed Endangered Species Act section 4(d) rule exception to the CSO take prohibition for forest or fuels management to reduce the risk or severity of wildfire.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or find more information helpful, please feel free to contact Justin Caporusso, MCWRA Executive Director, at (916) 412-0571.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Scott Ratterman', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Scott Ratterman, President
Mountain Counties Water Resources Association