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May 23, 2016

California State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection
Attention: Edith Hannigan, Board Analyst
VTP Draft PEIR Comments
via email: VegetationTreatment@bof.ca.gov

**Vegetation Treatment Program Draft Program
Environmental Impact Report Comments**

Dear Ms. Hannigan:

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (Conservancy) provides the following comments on the Vegetation Treatment Program (VTP) Draft Program Environmental Impact Report (DPEIR). The Conservancy, in conjunction with our joint powers authority, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, owns, or is responsible for the maintenance of, over 73,000 acres of parkland and public open space. To preserve the value of the substantial public investments made toward the protection of these natural areas, any fire safety and fuel modification program must be custom-tailored to these many unique and sensitive habitat areas. In a letter dated February 25 2013, the Conservancy commented on an earlier version of the VTP.

According to the DPEIR, the California State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection (Board) is proposing to initiate the VTP (DPEIR, p. E-1). The mission of the Board and the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CALFIRE) is to serve and safeguard the people and protect the property and resources of California (p. E-2). The VTP organizes treatments into three general types (p. E-3):

- **Wildland Urban Interface (WUI):** treatments will be focused in WUI-designated areas, and generally consist of fuel reduction to prevent the spread of fire between wildlands and structures, or vice versa.
- **Fuel Breaks:** strategically placed vegetation treatments that actively support fire control activities.
- **Ecological Restoration:** projects will generally occur outside the WUI in areas that have departed from the natural fire regime as a result of fire exclusion. Ecological restoration treatments will focus on restoring ecosystem resiliency by moderating uncharacteristic wildland fuel conditions to reflect historic vegetative composition and structure, including cultural landscapes. (Ecological restoration could be implemented by grazing, thinning, understory burning, or other methods [p. 2-29].)

Section 2.1 “Overview of the VTP” (p. 2-2) states that the VTP is projected to treat approximately 60,000 acres of this landscape annually, or 600,000 acres over a 10-year time frame. Vegetation treatment activities will be implemented primarily on privately owned land within the State Responsibility Area (SRA), and only on a voluntary basis (p. E-4). The only exception would be in circumstances where proposed VTP projects are located on lands controlled by the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

The Conservancy’s primary concerns focus around anticipated loss of habitat, resulting loss of diversity within the habitat, and the apparent inability of the proposed VTP to protect lives, property, and natural environment from wildland fire. Notably, the Conservancy has serious concerns with several areas of controversy listed in the DPEIR (p. E-12):

- Cumulative impacts to chaparral communities from program treatments and wildfires.
- Impacts to water quality, biological resources, and human health.
- Ability to address the ecological and social complexities of the state in a single Program.

First, and foremost, a better approach for Board and CAL FIRE than simply “treating vegetation” would be to address how to comprehensively and effectively protect homes, property, and natural resources. A comprehensive approach should address siting, construction, and management of houses and other developments. In our February 25, 2013 letter, we recommended that the alternatives section of the DPEIR include recommendations for alternative siting and increased setbacks for homes and other developments in high risk fire areas, as part of the overall fire prevention solution. Research has shown that structure protection results from directed fuel modification in the immediate vicinity of the house¹. The design and construction of, alternative siting of, increased setbacks for, and strategic vegetation management immediately around houses and other development are all valuable tools. If the proposed project does not incorporate this comprehensive approach, at the very least the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) document should include an alternative that does.

There appear to be inaccurate representations of scientific literature and/or incorrect conclusions based on current scientific literature. For example, research has shown that a substantial number of fuel breaks are never intersected by fire¹. However, fuel breaks are proposed as one of the three components of the VTP. Vegetation treatment of chaparral should be considered a negative biological impact in the CEQA document, unless scientific evidence clearly demonstrates otherwise. The Conservancy is also concerned because it appears that old data for the fire hazard analysis/WUI model was used in the DPEIR. The

¹See reference in October 27, 2015 comment letter from California Chaparral Institute and California Native Plant Society to California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection regarding Vegetation Treatment Program (Notice of Preparation).

project should not be implemented unless the most recently available databases and scientific information are used and accurately represented.

According to the DPEIR, the wildland-urban interface (WUI) (p. E-1), the transition between developed areas and the wildland, is of primary concern due to the high risk posed to life and property. The WUI has been defined as 1.5 miles in the DPEIR (p. 4-36). According to the project description, treatments will be focused within the WUI. There needs to be a solid scientific justification for this distance in the CEQA document; currently there is not.

The DPEIR concludes that the impacts to biological resources would be less than significant with implementation of Standard Project Requirements (p. E-11). Table 2.3-1 (p. 2-38) "Proposed program treatment acreage by Bioregion," indicates an approximate annual acreage is 60,000 acres. The approximate annual acreage for the South Coast Bioregion is 5,204 acres. There is not enough specific information in specific areas to justify the conclusion that this is a less than significant impact. For example, for the Santa Monica Mountains in the South Coast Bioregion, there should be a detailed zoomed-in map that shows the WUI and the areas targeted for treatment for three prong approach (i.e., WUI treatments, fuel breaks, and ecological restoration). If implemented, any vegetation treatment must be custom-tailored to these many unique and sensitive habitat areas. Figure 4.1-17 "Modeled Treatment Areas for the VTP" shows all of California on one page and is an extremely broad scale. It is impossible for a viewer to understand what the actual impacts are for example, to the Santa Monica Mountains area. The document appears to be a broad-brush sign-off for statewide extensive vegetation treatment, without actually adequately acknowledging and analyzing the impacts. As we stated in our February 25, 2013 letter, if an overly broad vegetation clearance project is applied to the lands under our agency's jurisdiction, it would significantly degrade the habitat quality throughout this region and negate the value of multiple substantial public investments.

The Conservancy has serious concerns with the potential significant adverse cumulative impacts to biological resource resulting from the VTP projects. Specifically, there would be substantial loss of plant communities and habitat and loss of biodiversity in habitats, notably pertaining to chaparral and coastal sage scrub. The PDEIR arrives at a "less than significant impact" threshold for biological resources. However, the PDEIR has not provided adequate identification and analysis of significant adverse cumulative impacts to biological resources in Chapter 4 "Affected Environment, Effects and Mitigations," with respect to loss of quantity and quality of shrub plant communities. (Once, and if, it becomes adequately addressed in Chapter 4, then that analysis should be carried over the Chapter 5 "Cumulative Effects Analysis," in addressing the environmental effects from the VTP projects, plus other non-VTP projects.)

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Passing the responsibility of assessing impacts and avoiding significant impacts to biologist resources to a project coordinator via a Project Scale Analysis (Chapter 7) in the form of a checklist on a project-by-project basis later in time is simply inadequate.

The Biological Standard Project Requirements provide little certainty that potentially significant adverse impacts to biological resources will be adequately avoided or mitigated. For example, BIO-5 provides in Los Angeles County and other southern counties that vegetation treatment projects that are not deemed necessary to protect critical infrastructure or forest health shall not take place in old-growth chaparral without consulting regarding the potential for significant impacts with the CDFW [California Department of Fish and Wildlife] and the CNPS [California Native Plant Society] (p. 2-57). However, if CNPS were to identify a significant impact, there is no requirement for CAL FIRE do anything with that information, particularly if there may be a difference of opinion. This biological measure is weak, non-committal, and inadequate for CEQA compliance.

The Executive Summary and Program Description of the CEQA document must state the clearly defined program timeframe, after which the VTP will expire and any treatments from that time forward must be addressed in a new CEQA document. The Program Description suggests 10 years (p. 2-2). The public must be assured that the program will not continue until it is comprehensively evaluated and a new CEQA document is prepared for continuing treatments. The DPEIR includes a section on monitoring and adaptive management, but this is limited to an informal process until funding can be secured to employ more formal adaptive management strategies (ADM-3 and ADM-4; p. 2-48). Although the DPEIR includes this section on monitoring and adaptive management (Section 2.4.3), given the enormity of the potential adverse impacts to habitats and the lack of assurances of reaching a “less than significant impact” threshold, it is critical that there is commitment that the entire program be reviewed at the end of that time certain program period, in an accessible open public forum to all stakeholders.

Because of the potential for enormous adverse impacts on the State’s valuable biological resources and the questionable analyses of the DPEIR, the Conservancy recommends that the Board and CAL FIRE incorporate changes to the VTP and CEQA document to fully address the concerns addressed in this letter, as well as the concerns regarding biological impacts coming from other involved stakeholders. If you have any questions, please contact Paul Edelman, Deputy Director of Natural Resources and Planning, by phone at (310) 589-3200, ext. 128 or via email at edelman@smmc.ca.gov. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

IRMA MUÑOZ
Chairperson