

Merced River Ranch Land Acquisition and Development Merced County - 318 acres

I. Executive Summary

Applicant California Department of Fish and Game (DFG)
Region 4
1234 East Shaw Avenue
Fresno, California 93710

Project Description and Primary Biological/Ecological Objectives

The property proposed for acquisition is known locally as the Merced River Ranch. The acquisition consists of one, 318-acre parcel. Protection, enhancement and restoration of the valuable riparian, wetland and aquatic habitats along the Merced River is the primary purpose of the acquisition. Restoration of the 318 acres would be implemented incrementally over approximately 15 years. The large deposits of gravel (dredger tailing) on the property would be used for the construction of chinook salmon restoration projects within the San Joaquin River basin. It is conservatively estimated that 1.2 to 1.6 million cubic yards of usable construction materials, valued at \$2 to \$3 million, exist on site. Mineral and riparian water rights are included with the acquisition and can be used to fulfill the project's objectives.

Approach/Tasks/Schedules

The DFG would acquire in full fee title, restore and manage the 318-acres parcel in perpetuity. The land would be purchased, a surface mining/reclamation plan developed and the necessary environmental documents prepared, adopted and certified within three years of the close of escrow. Funding necessary to implement the restoration plan will be developed and pursued simultaneous with adoption and certification of necessary environmental documents. We anticipate these tasks would be completed during 1998 through 1999. Phased restoration of the site and utilization of materials on site would begin in 2000. We anticipate use of surface gravel deposits (tailings) may be linked to other channel and floodplain restoration projects in the San Joaquin basin.

Justification for Project and Funding by CALFED

Increased water usage, linked to population growth, agricultural production, power production and gravel mining have caused severe losses to the riparian habitat of the San Joaquin Valley. San Joaquin Basin chinook salmon populations have declined to seriously low levels in recent years. Legislation has been passed that mandates restoration of anadromous fish (salmon and steelhead) populations in the Central Valley, including the San Joaquin River basin. Much of the work necessary to restore these populations has centered around salmon spawning and rearing habitat restoration.

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Expensive amounts of gravel excavated from the river floodplains have been purchased and used in these projects, and many more are being planned. Gravel supplies are a critical part of salmonid restoration efforts, long-term maintenance of river habitats and the natural river function. Utilization of dredger tailing on the property proposed for acquisition for salmonid restoration while returning the property itself to a more natural state makes good economical and ecological sense.

Budget Costs and Third Party Impacts

The DFG Lands Committee and Management Team have reviewed the Land Acquisition Evaluation and have recommended to the DFG Director that the acquisition proceed. The property owners are willing sellers. After reclamation of the total 318 acres, DFG would develop and adopt an appropriate management designation for the restored habitat. An agreement with Merced Irrigation District (MID) would need to be established in order to provide access to the property unless a bridge crossing over the Merced River is established. The total cost of acquisition, develop plan, environment documents and permits (Phase 1) is estimated at \$1,325,000. Floodplain and restoration and "gravel mining" operations would be funded separately in Phase 2 which may extend over many years.

Applicants Qualifications

The DFG manages 821,017 acres of land. The DFG headquarters (several functions) and Region 4's anadromous fisheries staff have worked closely with the various other state, federal and private personnel, to construct and repair chinook salmon and riparian habitats in the San Joaquin River basin over the past 10 years. The DFG has the clerical, fiscal and contractual personnel necessary to support the biological and technical experts to administer this project.

Monitoring and Data Evaluation

Minimal monitoring of Phase 1 of this project is necessary. Monitoring plans for Phase 2 will be developed as part of the planning required in Phase 1.

Local Support/Coordination w/ other Projects/Compatibility with CALFED Objectives

Cursory discussions with Merced County Planning Department suggest no problems with the proposed land use. Slight opposition to the purchase can be expected from local residents and existing gravel companies. The project will fulfill the objectives of the CALFED program by improving and increasing the aquatic and terrestrial habitats in the San Joaquin Valley. The utilization of surplus raw materials for other habitat restoration projects is an economical bonus attached to this project.