Burrowing Owl Survey Report

Sanger Substation Expansion Project

Fresno County, California

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Introduction

Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) proposes to expand the existing Sanger Substation, which is approximately 2 miles west of Sanger and approximately 3 miles southeast of Fresno in unincorporated Fresno County, California. The existing substation occupies approximately 4.5 acres at the northwest corner of East Jensen Avenue and South McCall Avenue (Figure 1). The expansion would cover approximately 7 acres adjacent to and generally north and west of the existing substation. Some lines, poles, and towers outside of the substation will be removed and others will be newly installed. Collectively, these areas are referred to hereafter as the Project Site. The surrounding land cover is predominately agricultural, with scattered rural residences, paved roadways, and a small commercial space (a general store) on the northeast corner of East Jensen Avenue and South McCall Avenue. There is no natural land cover within 0.5 miles of the Project Site.

The proposed project was subject to environmental review under both the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) internal process and the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The CPUC, as the lead agency under CEQA, issued the Final Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND) in March 2017. The IS/MND is available at the following link:

http://www.cpuc.ca.gov/environment/info/ene/sanger/sangerFinal.html#appendices

The IS/MND identified burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*) as having a low potential to occur in the project area based on marginal habitat conditions and the lack of occurrence records from within 5 miles of the Project Site. Burrowing owl is designated as a California Species of Special Concern by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

To protect burrowing owl, should it occur in the project area, the IS/MND's Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan includes Mitigation Measure (MM) BIO-6, which calls for conducting pre-construction surveys and implementing avoidance measures in accordance with the Staff Report on Burrowing Owl Mitigation (CDFG 2012) if the species is detected. Pursuant to MM BIO-6, we conducted the initial pre-construction survey on October 21, 2018. The relevant portion of that measure is as follows:

> **MM BIO-6: Specific Requirements for Burrowing Owl (Supersedes APM BIO-13).** A CPUC-approved qualified avian biologist familiar with burrowing owl biology and survey methods shall conduct a pre-construction survey for this species no more than 30 days prior to construction activities during the non-breeding season and no more than 14 days prior to construction during the breeding season (February 1 to August 31 with some variance by geographic location and climatic conditions; CDFW 2012). The biologist shall confirm whether the owls are occupying the site

and whether they are actively nesting. If any burrowing owl or sign of an occupied burrow is observed, the CPUC shall be informed as soon as possible (and within 48 hours). Surveys shall include the irrigation ditch and any area with suitable habitat within 656 feet (200 meters) of the project activities. If access to areas with suitable habitat is restricted, the biologist shall visually survey with a spotting scope, binoculars, or other visual techniques.

If an occupied burrow is identified, the CPUC-approved qualified biologist shall immediately implement a minimum 200 meter (656 foot) buffer. Then an appropriate burrow-specific buffer shall be recommended by the CPUC-approved qualified biologist based on the circumstances (e.g., owl tolerance and construction activity level) and as explained by the Staff Report on Burrowing Owl Mitigation (CDFW 2012 or more recent), which shall be approved by the CPUC and then implemented.

In areas where owl presence or owl sign is not found, weekly surveys for burrowing owl and its sign shall be conducted for the remainder of the first breeding season and all following breeding seasons.

Figure 1. Site vicinity map.

Methods

CPUC-approved qualified avian biologist Jeff Davis conducted a pre-construction survey for burrowing owl on October 21, 2018. The survey encompassed the Project Site and a surrounding 656-foot (200-meter) buffer (Figure 2). The survey was conducted between 0710 and 0900 hours during favorable weather conditions (50–57 degrees Fahrenheit, 20% cloud cover, 0–2 mile-per-hour wind, no precipitation). The irrigation ditch and all open land cover in the survey area was walked in a manner that ensured 100% visual coverage of the ground. Binoculars (10x42 Swarovski) were used regularly to scan distant areas for owls. The CPUC-approved biologist searched for burrowing owls, burrows and burrow surrogates that could be used by burrowing owls (i.e., those with openings > 4 inches in diameter), and sign of burrowing owls such as whitewash, pellets, feathers, and prey remains.

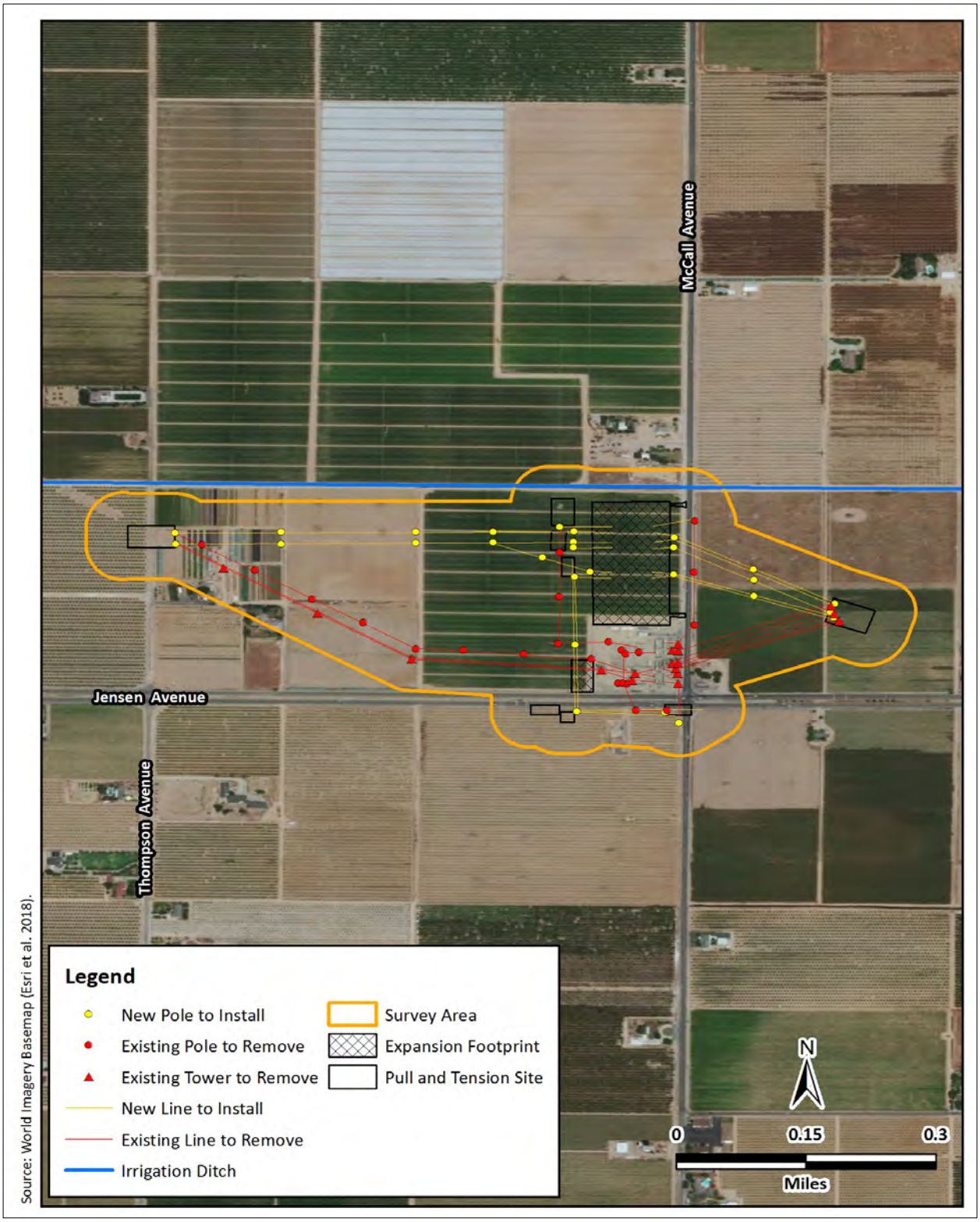

Figure 2. Survey area map.

Results

No burrowing owls, their sign, or suitable burrows or burrow surrogates were found in the survey area. The irrigation ditch (Figure 3) supported numerous open gopher burrows, but all had openings < 3 inches in diameter.

Figure 3. Photograph of the irrigation ditch, looking west, north of the expansion footprint.

Most agricultural fields in the survey area had been recently disked and were devoid of vegetation (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Photograph of the expansion footprint, looking south, showing a recently disked field.

Discussion

Due to the lack of suitable burrows or burrow surrogates in the survey area and the apparent absence of ground squirrels to create such burrows, burrowing owl is unlikely to occur in the survey area in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, pursuant to MM BIO-6, weekly surveys for burrowing owl and its sign will be conducted during all breeding seasons during project construction.

Literature Cited

California Department of Fish and Game [CDFG]. 2012. Staff Report on Burrowing Owl Mitigation. State of California Natural Resources Agency, March 7, 2012. [Note: As of 2013, CDFG is the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.]