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TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Vince Nicoletti, Director, Planning & Development Services
Jason Hemmens, Director, Parks and Recreation

Progress & Outreach Update on the North County Multiple Species Conservation Plan

On October 28, 2020 (6), the Board of Supervisors (Board) directed Planning & Development Services (PDS) and Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) staff to continue developing the draft North County Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) Plan (North County Plan) as a joint Habitat Conservation Plan/Natural Community Conservation Plan (HCP/NCCP). This direction was based on feedback provided by County staff and an assessment completed by a consultant in regional conservation planning. The goal is to achieve similar environmental, economic, and community benefits realized through the South County Subarea Plan, adopted on October 22, 1997 (1), such as streamlined housing permits and the conservation of wildlife habitat. Staff were also directed to continue working with all stakeholders, especially the Farm Bureau, and to analyze development opportunities along the Interstate 15 (I-15) corridor that allows for development and encourage conservation away from the corridor. Since the Board's last update in Fall 2025, staff has substantially completed the Draft North County Plan and supporting implementation documents in coordination with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), collectively referred to as the Wildlife Agencies, and is preparing to release them for public review in early 2027. This memorandum provides an update on the project's progress, stakeholder engagement, and the public review process leading to anticipated Board consideration in 2027. Following the Board's consideration for adoption, the County will also prepare a Procedures Manual to provide clarity on the County's implementation processes to ensure compliance with the North County Plan.

UPDATE ON NORTH COUNTY PLAN COMPONENTS

Since the last update in Fall 2025, staff have completed developing the Draft North County Plan, which is anticipated to be released for public review in early 2027. The Draft North County Plan, Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR), and its supporting documents are anticipated to be released in early 2027 for a 60-day public review period. Staff have a robust outreach strategy for the public review process that will communicate the following key benefits of the plan:

- Streamline development permitting (including housing) and other public and private activities, including expansion of agriculture, ongoing operations and maintenance, and preserve stewardship;
- Establish an interconnected preserve system and a comprehensive monitoring and management plan for the long-term protection of the 40 Covered Species;
- Facilitate fire suppression activities without additional mitigation requirements;

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- Provide accessible recreational and educational experiences for residents and visitors related to the natural and cultural resources of the region, where appropriate.

The Draft North County Plan is the primary planning document that establishes the conservation strategy and policy framework to streamline the development process for compliance with the federal and California Endangered Species Acts and ensure the long-term protection of the 40 Covered Species. Staff also prepared two supporting implementation documents – the North County Biological Mitigation Ordinance (BMO) and the Framework Resource Management Plan (FRMP) to implement the North County Plan following adoption. The North County BMO consolidates the mitigation requirements for compliance with the conservation strategy of the Draft North County Plan, as proposed and discussed during the stakeholder meetings, as well as mitigation exemptions. The BMO includes mitigation exemptions for new single-family residences on vacant parcels under 10 acres and agricultural clearing for new and expanded agricultural operations. These provisions extend the development streamlining benefits already available to property owners in the South County Subarea Plan and fulfill the Board’s 2020 direction to support the local farming industry by enabling the expansion of agricultural operations. The FRMP identifies how conserved lands, both land that is set aside for mitigation and acquired by the County for conservation, will be managed and monitored across the North County Plan Preserve System.

The County and Wildlife Agencies will execute an Implementing Agreement (IA) defining each agency's roles and responsibilities for administering the North County Plan following adoption. This document will be prepared following the public review period of the Draft North County Plan. Together, these documents establish the regulatory, management, and administrative framework needed to implement the North County Plan. As key implementing documents of the North County Plan needed for the Wildlife Agencies to make permit findings, the BMO, FRMP, and IA will be included as part of the package brought to the Board for consideration and adoption in 2027. Upon Board adoption, these key implementing documents of the North County Plan will be considered by the Wildlife Agencies to make permit findings.

Following Board consideration for adoption in 2027, staff will also prepare a Procedures Manual to provide clear and transparent guidance on the County's implementation and administration of the North County Plan to address feedback from stakeholders and the Wildlife Agencies. The Procedures Manual will document the County's internal processes and implementation procedures, including administrative processes for coordinating across departments, project review process, the North County Plan’s relationship to existing County ordinances, data collection and maintenance process, annual reporting roles and responsibilities, and coordination process with the Wildlife Agencies during North County Plan implementation. Feedback received during the public review process of the Draft North County Plan components, as well as implementation issues and lessons learned following North County Plan adoption, will be considered, as appropriate, in the preparation and periodic updates to the Procedures Manual. This adaptive approach will allow the County to clarify procedures, respond to emerging implementation issues, and incorporate best practices over time while remaining consistent with the adopted North County Plan and associated regulatory requirements. Board offices and the public will have the opportunity to provide input and feedback on the Procedures Manual as it is developed. As this document will not establish new policy or regulatory requirements and to allow for flexibility

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during the 30-year permit term, it will be approved at the department Director-level and will be posted on the project website for interested parties and transparency of the County's implementation processes.

STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT

Staff used a proactive stakeholder engagement approach for the development of the North County Plan, which includes convenings of the North County Plan Stakeholder Working Group, a diverse group of stakeholders that represent the environmental, agricultural, recreational, and development communities. These meetings are open to the public and provide communities with the opportunity to submit written and verbal comments.

Public workshops and Stakeholder Working Group meetings are promoted through emails to interested subscribers and stakeholders, the project website and engage page, social media posts, and industry group meeting presentations. Simultaneous interpretation is made available for attendees whose primary language is Spanish, with additional threshold languages offered by request, and videos of the meetings were uploaded to the website in both languages. Workshop materials are offered in both English and Spanish on the project website and made available to attendees and on the website. Feedback is collected through interactive questions throughout the staff presentation, using the Q&A feature, and verbal discussions.

Staff continues to engage closely with stakeholders through standing industry group meetings and dedicated discussions to highlight the intended benefits of the Draft North County Plan and address outstanding requests. Focused engagement sessions were also held to receive feedback from subject matter experts on the public access framework and tribal coordination following North County Plan adoption.

Summary of Outreach & Engagement Events Hosted by County Staff

Topic	Date	Meeting Type	No. of Attendees
North County Plan Implementation	December 16, 2025	Stakeholder Working Group	33
North County Plan Implementation	December 18, 2025	Virtual Public Workshop	12
Public Access Framework	June 9, 2026	Independent Science Advisors & Wildlife Agencies	22
Tribal Coordination	July 9, 2026	Tribal Members & Wildlife Agencies	28

A summary of the input received at each outreach event is summarized below, and the input has been incorporated into the Draft North County Plan, when feasible.

North County Plan Implementation

In December 2025, staff held a Stakeholder Working Group meeting and virtual public workshop to discuss the County's approach to North County Plan implementation. The staff presentation outlined how the plan will function, including the roles and responsibilities of the County, Wildlife Agencies, and private land managers; the policies that guide plan implementation; how development project applications will be processed; how the County and Wildlife Agencies will

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respond to any changes over the 30-year permit; and the process for updating the North County Plan.

Key requests that arose from the input received include:

- Ensure there is a process for evaluating new species listings and changes in the County's discretionary authority in response to new federal and State regulations;
- Provide clear, transparent guidance for compliance during permit processing;
- Describe the process for evaluating mitigation requirements during redevelopment of project areas previously mitigated by the County under the BMO exemptions.

The input received on how the County implements the North County Plan has been incorporated into the Draft North County Plan, BMO, and FRMP. Staff also developed a Procedures Manual to provide clarity on the County's implementation processes as previously described.

Public Access Framework

In response to feedback from the Wildlife Agencies and stakeholders, staff held a meeting with independent science advisors to receive input on the proposed public access framework for evaluating impacts from trail projects within the North County Plan Preserve System before and after trail construction. Independent science advisors are subject matter experts in the field of conservation biology who are consulted to help guide plan development and ensure that the best available science is incorporated. Prior to the discussion on the public access framework, staff also convened independent science advisors to receive input on the preserve design, connectivity conservation strategy, and species-specific conservation strategies.

Key takeaways from the input received include:

- Evaluate potential project impacts beyond the individual property and consider the landscape context;
- Provide flexibility in public access plans to respond to changes in human use over time;
- Use a wide variety of methods for tracking trail use and work directly with species experts when making decisions to minimize effects on Covered Species.

The input received on the public access framework has been incorporated into the Draft North County Plan and FRMP to ensure there are clear expectations for evaluating trail impacts during project design and preserve-specific Resource Management Plans (RMPs) will have specific tasks to monitor and manage the effects of public access.

Tribal Coordination

In addition to the required AB52 consultations with tribes, staff held an additional tribal coordination meeting to discuss the process for evaluating tribal cultural resources for both private and County projects. This includes the required CEQA assessments and consultations when potential impacts to tribal cultural resources arise from development projects, as well as cultural

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resource evaluations during the preparation of RMPs. Staff also requested input on how the tribes would like to stay engaged during implementation after North County Plan adoption.

Themes of stakeholder input received include:

- Biological and cultural resources, and their values, are intrinsically linked and should be represented as such in the Draft EIR;
- There is a co-relationality between cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices of a community and how effectively they care for and conserve land;
- Cultural resources are important context when setting objectives for mitigation and management of natural lands.

The input received on how cultural resources will be integrated into preserve-specific RMPs and tribal coordination following North County Plan adoption has been incorporated into the Draft FRMP and will be included in the Procedures Manual, respectively. Staff is awaiting feedback from individual tribes on whether they would like to participate in the proposed Preserve Management Working Group or some other forum for tribal engagement following North County Plan adoption. County staff will continue to consult with the tribes as part of AB52 requirements prior to finalization of the Draft EIR.

Outstanding Stakeholder Requests

There have been several stakeholder requests received during the engagement sessions held by the County since 2021 that have not been included in the North County Plan because they cannot be addressed within the scope of an HCP/NCCP or would require substantial revisions to the negotiated North County Plan with the Wildlife Agencies. These include, but are not limited to, the following items which could be addressed separately from the North County Plan, its implementing documents, and Procedures Manual if directed:

- Streamline wetland impact permitting compliance with the Clean Water Act, which would require negotiation with several additional federal, State, and local agencies;
- Use Tribal cultural resources as a guiding principle when designing the future preserve system, which would not align with the permitting obligations, intent, or guidance from the Wildlife Agencies for preparation of an HCP or NCCP; and
- Include wild horses as a Covered Species and facilitate their reintroduction onto public lands, which are not currently subject to state or federal protections as a biological resource.

NEXT STEPS

Staff have prepared a robust outreach strategy for the public review of the Draft North County Plan and Draft EIR in early 2027, including a virtual public workshop to provide an overview of the project and how to submit comments. Following public review, staff will continue to engage directly with stakeholders while preparing responses to comments and a revised Final Plan. Staff anticipate presenting the project to the Board in 2027 and will recommend that the Board adopt the Final Plan and certify the EIR. Upon Board consideration and adoption, staff will submit permit applications to the Wildlife Agencies that allow the County to issue permits for compliance with the federal and California Endangered Species Acts for a 30-year permit term to allow take of Covered Species and their habitat. While the Wildlife Agencies document their findings to issue these permits, which typically takes six months to one year, the County will prepare and receive public input on the Procedures Manual. Prior to permit issuance, the County will work with

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individual projects to apply North County Plan policies during this interim phase to streamline permit issuance with the Wildlife Agencies.

If you have questions, please contact Tyler Farmer, PDS Assistant Director, at Tyler.Farmer@sdcounty.ca.gov or (619) 517-5102 or Crystal Benham, DPR Chief – Resource Management Division, at Crystal.Benham@sdcounty.ca.gov or (619) 539-4155.

Respectfully,

Vince
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VINCE NICOLETTI, Director
Planning & Development Services

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Jason
Hemmens
JASON HEMMENS, Director
Department of Parks and Recreation

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cc: Ebony Shelton, Chief Administrative Officer
Joan Bracci, Assistant Chief Administrative Officer
Andrew Potter, Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
Dahvia Lynch, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer, Land Use and Environment Group
Brian Albright, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer, Finance and General Government Group