

June 25, 2015

Andrew Barnsdale
California Public Utilities Commission
550 Kearny Street, Suite 800, San Francisco, CA 94108

Dear Mr. Barnsdale,

I am writing in reference to the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for the Monterey Peninsula Water Supply Project (MPWSP). Point Blue Conservation Science (founded as Point Reyes Bird Observatory in 1965) is a non-profit 501c3 organization dedicated to conserving birds, other wildlife, and their ecosystems through science, partnerships and outreach. Point Blue has been studying the population of western snowy plovers (*Charadrius nivosus*) at the proposed project site and in the greater Monterey Bay area for more than 30 years.

I have spent more than 15 years studying the species at this site and offer information about the snowy plover at the proposed project site that may help improve the impacts assessment in the DEIR.

- 1) **Current occurrence data of snowy plovers in southern Monterey Bay is not complete, and does not include our 10+ years of spatial data.** Figures 4.6-2a and 2b of the DEIR show occurrences of snowy plovers in southern Monterey Bay. These data are drawn from California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) sources only, resulting in the mapped distribution shown being misleadingly sparse, though the text does mention that plovers nest and winter throughout the bay. In addition, in the impacts analysis, only a single year of nest distribution data is cited (Page et al. 2012). Point Blue has made our 10+ year data set of nest locations available upon request to consultants and public trust and regulatory agencies involved in the test well phase of this project but it was not presented here, even though it is the most comprehensive data source available. It seems logical to include all available data sources when conducting an impact assessment of this scope.

- 2) **Incorrect representation of our data, over inflating the number of snowy plovers in Monterey Bay.** In section 4.6 (Terrestrial Biological Resources), I am attributed in a personal communication to Environmental Science Associates as saying that in 2012 there were 330 pairs of snowy plovers nesting in Monterey Bay. This is incorrect (330 pairs is equivalent to 660 individuals). In 2012 there were 386 *individual* plovers in the Monterey Bay breeding population (Page et al. 2012). By 2014, our most recent year of data collection, this number had increased slightly, to about 419 individual nesting plovers (Page et al. 2014).

- 3) **Construction of the southern slant well cluster is habitat loss that cannot be mitigated as described.** Snowy plovers have historically nested within the proposed project footprint containing the southern slant well clusters (Fig 3.3). Though this nesting occurred prior to the collection of nest location waypoints with GPS units, I was involved in the fieldwork collecting this data and am aware of specific habitat areas that contained multiple nests over multiple years. In addition, this area has not been surveyed in recent years, so recent use of this area by plovers is unknown. Regardless, construction of the southern slant well clusters will cause temporary loss of this habitat as noted in the DEIR. In addition, planned maintenance activities (Section 3.6) may preclude further use of this site in the future, due to the large extent (10 acres) and duration (9-18 weeks) of disturbance, even at the infrequent maintenance interval described (every 5 years). Planned mitigation measures for all sensitive areas and species include returning habitat to pre-disturbance conditions, but the above described maintenance schedule may preclude the goal of "restored" nesting habitat in the disturbance footprint around the southern slant well cluster. It may not be possible to mitigate this small but potentially permanent loss of habitat to a less than significant level with the current measures proposed. Habitat loss for the snowy plover should be mitigated in a similar manner as proposed for permanent loss of special status plant species (see 4.6-1e, section d).

- 4) **The cumulative impacts assessment (Section 5.2.6) is inadequate.** There are three major projects in addition to the proposed slant well project that will have impacts on snowy plovers in Monterey Bay in the near future. Two are listed in Table 5-1: a) Fort Ord Dunes State Park Campground and b) the Monterey Bay Shores Eco Resort. Not mentioned is the Collections project, a large coastal hotel, also proposed for Sand City. Three of these projects will potentially result in permanent, unavoidable losses of plover nesting habitat

(this project, and the Monterey Bay Shores and the Collections hotels). The two Sand City hotels will also have significant unavoidable impacts on plover nesting and wintering at adjacent habitats due to the marked increase in human use of beaches in the region that will probably preclude nesting in the future over a large area in southern Monterey Bay (see Webber et al. 2013, Ruhlen et al. 2003). Finally, the development of Fort Ord Dunes Campground also will result in increased human use of plover nesting beaches at Fort Ord and adjacent beaches, possibly reducing or degrading the habitat from current levels. Though the potential loss of habitat resulting from the MPWSP will be smaller than these other projects, these four projects collectively represent a significant threat to the viability of the snowy plover in southern Monterey Bay. If all projects were to be developed, habitat for the snowy plover would be greatly reduced and therefore, remaining habitat would need to be managed intensively for conservation purposes.

- 5) **Cumulative impacts should be offset.** In order to offset possible cumulative impacts associated with this project, a mitigation fund should be established to support snowy plover conservation activities at this and immediately adjacent sites. Key activities that could be supported include habitat and predator management, population monitoring, and education and outreach.

- 6) **Consider coordinating monitoring of project impacts with Point Blue Conservation Science's ongoing research on plovers.** Point Blue Conservation Science has been studying the threats to the snowy plover at this site and the greater Monterey Bay area for more than 30 years and all future activities involving monitoring impacts to the species related to construction and maintenance of the project should be coordinated with Point Blue's ongoing research.

Sincerely,

Kriss Neuman, Waterbird Ecologist

cc: Ellie Cohen, Gary Page, Lynne Stenzel, Point Blue Conservation Science

cc: Jacob Martin, US Fish and Wildlife Service

References

- Page, G.W., Kriss K. Neuman, Jane C. Warriner, Carleton Eyster, Jenny Erbes, Dave Dixon, Amy Palkovic and Lynne E. Stenzel. 2014. Nesting of the snowy plover in the Monterey Bay Area California in 2014. Point Blue Conservation Science Publication #2017.
- Page, G.W., Kriss K. Neuman, Jane C. Warriner, Carleton Eyster, Jenny Erbes, Dave Dixon, Amy Palkovic and Lynne E. Stenzel. 2012. Nesting of the snowy plover in the Monterey Bay Area California in 2012. Point Blue Conservation Science Publication #1898.
- Ruhlen, T.D., S. Abbot, L.E. Stenzel and G.W. Page. 2003. Evidence that human disturbance reduces snowy plover chick survival. *Journal of Field Ornithology* 74:300-304.
- Webber, A.F., J.A. Heath, and R.A. Fischer. 2013. Human disturbance and stage-specific habitat requirements influence snowy plover site occupancy during the breeding season. *Ecology and Evolution*. DOI: 10.1002/ece3.511