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Sonoran Pronghorn

The Sonoran Pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana sonoriensis*) is a federally endangered subspecies of the pronghorn antelope that inhabits a variety of Sonoran Desert habitats. This species relies on detecting and fleeing from predators. As such, this species prefers flat to gently rolling terrain with open sight-lines. Creosotebush habitats, in particular, are frequented by the species, though habitats with greater shade availability are necessary during the summer. The species is nomadic and require large expanses of contiguous habitat to survive. No wild Sonoran Pronghorns have been observed north of Interstate 8 since 1990 (USFWS 2014). There is a “non-essential, experimental” population associated with the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge, northwest of the proposed Project (USFWS 2014).

The native habitats associated with the Project represent potentially suitable habitat for this species. However, the proximity of these habitats to active solar energy and agricultural operations make consistent or regular occupancy of these areas by the species very unlikely. Instead, Sonoran antelope would be expected to preferentially use the large amounts of native habitat located on all sides of the Project area that are less impacted by ongoing human activities.

Migratory Birds

Several species of migratory birds have a high potential to use the Project area (Table C-1 and Exhibit D). Avian use of the Project area could include wintering, foraging, transit, and/or nesting. Migratory birds and their nests are federally protected under the migratory bird treaty act. The areas within the active agricultural fields themselves do not represent suitable nesting habitat due to the regular disturbance associated with active farming. The irrigation infrastructure and areas around the edges of the fields, as well as the native habitats associated with the Gen-tie route, do offer potentially suitable nesting substrate for several species.

Burrowing Owl

The Burrowing Owl is primarily restricted to the western United States and Mexico. Habitat for the Burrowing Owl includes dry, open, short-grass areas often associated with burrowing mammals (Haug et al. 1993). Agricultural areas may benefit the species and appear to represent preferred habitat in some areas (DeSante et al. 2004). Burrowing Owls are opportunistic feeders, consuming a diet that includes arthropods (typically insects), small mammals, small birds, and occasionally amphibians and reptiles (Haug et al. 1993). Urbanization has greatly reduced the amount of suitable habitat for this species. Other contributions to the decline of this species include the poisoning of squirrels and prairie dogs, and collisions with automobiles.

The open native desert habitats along the Gen-tie route (especially creosotebush – white bursage) represent suitable habitat for this species. No Burrowing Owls or potentially suitable burrows were observed during surveys along the Gen-tie corridor.

Summary

Plants

Of the 6 special status plant species having some potential to occur within the Project Site, none have been recorded in or within 3 miles of the Project Site (AGFD 2016). Additionally, either the elevation of the Project Study Area is outside of the range for these plants and/or none were observed during field surveys. The Project will therefore have no direct or indirect impacts on threatened, endangered, and State-protected plants.

Wildlife

Agricultural and solar development, along with its associated roads and infrastructure, has converted and degraded areas of natural vegetation (wildlife habitat) in and adjacent to the Project Area. The Project would permanently impact a very small area and the majority of the Project-related impacts would be temporary and short-term in nature.

There are no suitable habitats or known occurrences within 3 miles for federally threatened, endangered, or candidate species in the Project area (AGFD 2016) so there would be no impacts on these species from implementation of the Project. Twenty-one other special status wildlife species have the potential to occur in the Project Area (6 bats, 2 small mammals, kit fox, 10 migratory birds identified in the PEP, Sonoran desert toad, and banded gila monster).

There is no roosting or maternal roost habitat for bats in or near the Project Area. Very little potential foraging habitat would be removed and construction would not occur during foraging periods, so only minor short term impacts to bats are expected.

While none were observed on the ROW, BUOW, small mammal, kit fox, and banded gila monster habitat (burrows and foraging habitat) could potentially be directly impacted by construction activities. Construction-related impacts would be temporary and short-term and may include temporary loss of habitat and displacement of individuals, possible injury or death during ground-disturbing activities, temporary impacts on foraging behaviors, and noise-related disturbance. Burrow surveys would be conducted prior to construction to identify potential burrows for these species. Burrows would be avoided or excavated per species-specific requirements if they cannot be avoided.

Very little foraging habitat for special status migratory birds would be removed. If construction occurs during the nesting season, a pre-construction protocol survey 30 days prior to construction would be conducted to ensure that any active nests are avoided. If active nests cannot be avoided, an appropriate avoidance buffer would be established (per USFWS guidelines) and construction would not occur within that buffer until the nest becomes inactive. If a BUOW, they could be relocated per AGFD guidance by an approved permit holder and rehabilitation center. Therefore, any direct impacts associated with the Project would be a short-term minor impact on special status migratory birds.

To further minimize risks to special status migratory birds, the lines will be constructed following industry suggested practices aimed at reducing avian collisions and electrocutions (APLIC 2006 and 2012). If avian line interactions become an issue, the issue would be quickly evaluated and a solution developed using appropriate state-of-the art measures.