

**UPERIOR COURT** COUNTY OF LAKE 255 N. FORBES STREET EPORT, CALIFORNIA 95453

> Andrew Contreiras/Attorney General of Calif PO Box 85266 San Diego, CA 92101

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3		Krista D LeVier Yolanda Blum	
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8	SUPERIOR COURT OF TH	SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA	
9	COUNTY OF LAKE		
10	CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY, )	Case No. CV/421152	
11	Petitioner,		
12	)	RULING AND ORDER ON PETITIONS	
13	PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA, ) EX. REL, ATTORNEY GENERAL ROB ) BONTA,	FOR WRIT OF MANDATE	
14	) Petitioner-Intervenor, )		
15	v.		
16	) )		
17	COUNTY OF LAKE, BOARD OF () SUPERVISORS OF THE COUNTY OF () LAKE; and DOES 1 through 20, ()		
18	)	· ·	
19	Respondents. )		
20	( LOTUSLAND INVESTMENT HOLDINGS, ) INC.; and DOES 21 through 40, )		
21	Real Parties in Interest.		
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24	RULING AND ORDER ON PETITI		
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1	Ruling	
2	I. Introduction.	
3	The Court's obligation in this case is to answer the following questions:	
4	1. Was there substantial evidence to support the County's decision?	
5	2. Did the County fail to proceed in the manner required by law?	
6	(Pub. Res. Code §§ 21168, 21168.5.)	
7	In answering the first question, the Court "must indulge all reasonable inferences	
8	from the evidence that would support the agency's determinations and resolve all	
9	conflicts in the evidence in favor of the agency's decision." (Save Our Peninsula	
10	Committee v. Monterey County Board of Supervisors (2001) 87 Cal.App.4 <sup>th</sup> 99, 117.) "A	
11	court may not set aside an agency's approval of an EIR [Environmental Impact Report]	
12	on the ground that an opposite conclusion would have been equally or more reasonable."	
13	(Laurel Heights Improvement Assn. v. Regents of University of California (1988) 47	
14	Cal.3d 376, 393.)	
	In answering the second question, the Court must determine if the County	
15	substantially complied with the procedural requirements of the California Environmental	
16	Quality Act (CEQA). (Practice Under the California Environmental Quality Act (2d ed. Cal	
17	CEB) § 23.35.) While a court may find noncompliance with CEQA requirements to be a	
18	prejudicial abuse of discretion, there is no presumption that such an error is prejudicial.	
19	(Pub. Res. Code § 21005(b).) In determining whether a failure to comply with CEQA is	
20	prejudicial, a court does not determine whether a different outcome would have resulted.	
21	(Pub. Res. Code § 21005(a).)	
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### II. Wildfire Risk.

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A. Compression of Mitigation Measures Into the Project.

When an EIR incorporates mitigation measures into the project description, then
concludes that the project has no significant impact, the failure to separately identify
significant impacts and analyze the mitigation measures violates CEQA. (*Lotus v. Department of Transportation* (2014) 223 Cal.App.4<sup>th</sup> 645.) This is because by doing so,
an EIR "precludes both identification of potential environmental consequences arising
from the project and also thoughtful analysis of the sufficiency of measures to mitigate
those consequences." (*Id.* at p. 658.)

10 Lotus v. Department of Transportation, supra, involved a highway construction project through an old growth redwood forest. A portion of the construction was planned 11 to occur within the structural root zone of a number of trees. The EIR described 12 measures that "have been incorporated into the project to avoid and minimize impacts as 13 well as to mitigate expected impacts." (Id. at p. 650.) Those measures included 14 restorative planting and replanting, invasive plant removal, and use of an arborist and 15 specialized equipment. In the EIR, the agency concluded that "[n]o significant 16 environmental effects are expected as a result of this project with the implementation of 17 the stated special construction techniques." (Id. at p. 651.) 18 In concluding that the EIR violated CEQA by compressing the analysis of impacts 19 and mitigation measures into a single issue, the Court of Appeal explained: 20 The EIR fails to indicate which or even how many protected redwoods will be impacted beyond the tolerances specified in the handbook and, by failing to 21 indicate any significant impacts, fails to make the necessary evaluation and findings concerning the mitigation measures that are proposed. Absent a 22 determination regarding the significance of the impacts to the root systems of the 23 old growth redwood trees, it is impossible to determine whether mitigation 24

measures are required or to evaluate whether other more effective measures than those proposed should be considered. Should Caltrans determine that a specific tree or group of trees will be significantly impacted by proposed roadwork, that finding would trigger the need to consider a range of specifically targeted mitigation measures, including analysis of whether the project itself could be modified to lessen the impact.

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In that case, the measures contained within the project were designed to mitigate
the impacts to the health of the trees caused by the construction. The measures at issue
were "plainly mitigation measures and not part of the project itself." (*Id.* at p. 656, fn. 8.)
The failure to classify those measures as mitigation measures prevented those reviewing
the EIR from determining the significance of the impact the construction would have on
the health of the trees. (*Id.* at pp. 656-658.)

- 12 In the instant case, Petitioners<sup>1</sup> argue certain design elements included in the 13 Wildfire Prevention Plan (WPP), including those relating to relating to vegetation 14 management and firebreaks, were misclassified as part of the Project rather than 15 mitigation measures. Although certain actions such as vegetation management and 16 maintenance of the firebreaks will continue well after the Project is built, those 17 components of the WPP are properly classified as part of the Project itself. This is 18 because those measures, unlike the measures in Lotus v. Department of Transportation, 19 supra, are not designed to rectify the impacts to the environment caused by the Project. 20 None of the challenged design elements are meant to repair, rehabilitate or restore the 21 impacted environment. Instead, they are part of the design of the Project meant to avoid 22
- 23 Petitioners includes Intervenor/Petitioner unless otherwise stated.
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impacts to the environment in the first place. Accordingly, the Court concludes all of the
 components of the WPP, including vegetation management and maintenance of the
 firebreaks, are not mitigation measures improperly misclassified as Project components.
 Instead, they are part of the Project itself.

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### B. Adequacy of Analysis of Wildfire Risk.

6 Petitioners find fault with the EIR's analysis of the wildfire risk and the 7 methodology used to analyze that risk. Although the analysis could have been more 8 thorough and better methodologies could have been used, "challenges to the scope of an 9 EIR's analysis, the methodology used, or the reliability or accuracy of the data underlying 10 an analysis, must be rejected unless the agency's reasons for proceeding as it did are 11 clearly inadequate or unsupported." (Chico Advocates for a Responsible Economy v. City 12 of Chico (2019) 40 Cal.App.5th 839, 851.) The EIR's analysis of the Project's impacts on 13 wildfire risk was extensive and specific to both the Project and its location. Without 14 rehashing the evidence contained in the record, the Court concludes substantial evidence 15 supports the County's findings regarding the Project's impact on wildfire risks, with one 16 exception which will be discussed in the following section.

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# C. Impacts on Emergency Evacuation Routes.

In its briefing, Real Party differentiated project evacuation routes from
community or area-wide evacuation routes. The Court agrees that analysis of the
Project's evacuation routes are a "reverse CEQA" issue and need not be addressed in
the EIR. The Project's impacts to community evacuation routes, however, must be
analyzed in the EIR.

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1 In California Building Industry Assoc. v. Bay Area Air Quality Management Dist. (2015) 62 Cal.4<sup>th</sup> 369, at issue was an agency's thresholds of significance for certain air 2 3 pollutants which required project proponents to evaluate how existing air pollution would 4 affect individuals within the proposed project. The Supreme Court concluded, "CEQA 5 generally does not require an analysis of how existing environmental conditions will 6 impact a projects future users or residents." (Id. at p. 386.) CEQA does, however, require an analysis of a "project's potentially significant exacerbating effects on existing 7 8 environmental hazards - effects that arise because the project brings 'development and people into the area affected.'" (Id. at p. 388; italics in original.) The Supreme Court 9 10 explained an "EIR should evaluate any potentially significant impacts of locating 11 development in other areas susceptible to hazardous conditions (e.g., floodplains, 12 coastlines, wildfire risk areas)." (*Ibid.*)

13 Newton Preservation Society v. County of El Dorado (2021) 65 Cal.App.5th 771, 14 involved a bridge construction project where project opponents, many of whom were 15 residents, alleged the project would have a significant impact on evacuation. The Court of 16 Appeal held the evidence presented in that case did not "support a fair argument that the 17 project may have a significant impact on the environment or may exacerbate existing 18 environmental hazards." (Id. at p. 792.) The court determined the comments offered in 19 opposition to the project "lacked factual foundation and failed to contradict the 20 conclusions by agencies with expertise in wildfire evacuations with specific facts calling 21 into question the underlying assumptions of their opinions as it pertained to the project's 22 potential environmental impacts." (Id. at p. 791, italics in original.)

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1 Real Party is correct that analysis of community evacuation is not required unless 2 the project might exacerbate existing environmental hazards. (Real Party in Interest 3 Lotusland Investment Holding, Inc.'s Supplemental Brief Re: Evacuation filed November 19, 2021, (Real Party's Supplemental Brief), p. 7:7-9.). Here, unlike the case in Newton, 4 5 supra, there is evidence that the Project might exacerbate existing environmental 6 hazards. As pointed out by Petitioners Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and 7 California Native Plant Society (CNPS), a significant number of wildfire related deaths in California occur during attempts to evacuate. (Petitioners' Opening Brief filed June 15, 8 2021, pp, 19:26-20:4.) The hazards of a wildfire are certainly exacerbated if community 9 10 residents are unable to evacuate safely due to congested evacuation routes. It is 11 estimated that the Project will bring 4,070 residents to the area. (AR 6612.) This is a 12 significant population increase when considering the Project is located in Lake County 13 Census Tracts 12 and 13 which had an estimated combined population of 10,163 in 2017. (AR 6608.) If a wildfire occurs, the Project's residents will need to evacuate. These 14 15 people will likely compete with residents in the surrounding area for safe evacuation routes. The additional people competing for the same limited routes can cause 16 17 congestion and delay in evacuation, resulting in increased wildfire related deaths. This is undoubtedly a situation where the Project, by bringing a significant number of people into 18 the area, may significantly exacerbate existing environmental hazards; specifically, 19 20 wildfires and their associated risks. Therefore, this is an issue that is required to be 21 addressed under CEQA.

The County concluded the impacts to existing emergency evacuation plans would
be less than significant. (AR 6746.) The evidence supporting this conclusion are

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comprised primarily of opinions from traffic engineers and fire and law enforcement
 personnel. (Real Party's Supplemental Brief, p. 8:2-8; AR 42594-42595; 53739-53740.)
 Those opinions were not based on any identifiable facts.

- There are two problems with this evidence. First, this evidence primarily addresses
  the issue of whether the Project's residents could safely leave the Project in the event of
  a wildfire. This evidence does not focus on the issue that is required to be addressed by
  CEQA; whether evacuation of the residents in the nearby area would be affected by the
  evacuation of the Project's residents during a wildfire.
- 9 Second, this evidence cannot be considered substantial evidence. Substantial
  10 evidence includes "expert opinion supported by facts." (14 CCR §15384(b).)

11 Unsubstantiated opinion does not constitute substantial evidence. (14 CCR §15384(a).)

12 || The conclusion reached by the County as it relates to emergency evacuation plans is

13 based on unsubstantiated expert opinions. This evidence is legally insufficient to qualify

14 as substantial evidence under CEQA.

Because the County's findings regarding community emergency evacuation routes
are not supported by substantial evidence, the EIR does not comply with CEQA.

17 III. Carbon Credit Program<sup>2</sup>.

Petitioners argue the carbon credit program is ineffective as a mitigation measure
because it does not include sufficient safeguards to ensure offsets are real, permanent,
verifiable and enforceable. (*Golden Door Properties, LLC v. County of San Diego* (2020)
50 Cal.App.5<sup>th</sup> 467, 506-507.)

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23 <sup>2</sup> The carbon credit program was discussed by the parties under the broader topic of climate impacts and GHG mitigation measures. Also discussed was the transportation demand management plan (TDM). The Court concludes

4	Also we added a mitigation requiring the purchase of greenhouse gas carbon credits to offset the project's remaining greenhouse gas emissions that are above		
5 6	and beyond the stated threshholds in the EIR. However, the EIR's conclusion of a significant, unavoidable greenhouse gas impact would not change, given the limited supply of carbon offsets and the uncertainty regarding the availability of offset credits throughout the life of the project.		
7	(AR42599.)		
8	Given the timing of the addition of this measure to the EIR and the comments		
9	made by the County, unlike the mitigation measure in Golden Door Properties, LLC, v.		
10	County of San Diego, supra, the carbon credit program here was not a mitigation		
11	measure that the County relied upon in making any findings contained in the EIR. In fact,		
12	the County described the modifications to the mitigation measures contained in the		
13	Errata, which included the addition of the carbon credit program, to be minor and		
14	insignificant. (AR 7193.) To the extent this measure did not comply with CEQA, the Court		
15	determines it does not constitute prejudicial error because inclusion of the measure did		
16	not "deprive[] the public and decision makers of substantial relevant information about		
17	the Project's likely adverse impacts." (Neighbors for Smart Rail v. Exposition Metro Line		
18	<i>Constr. Auth.</i> (2013) 57 Cal.4 <sup>th</sup> 439, 463.)		
	IV. Water Supply.		
19	Petitioners CBD and CNPS take issue with on an off-site groundwater well located		
20	within the Collayami Valley Groundwater Basin. Groundwater from on-site wells and		
21    22	surface water sources are expected to supply all of the projects water demands.		
23	the TDM substantially complies with CEQA. (cf. <i>City of Hayward v. Trustees of California State University</i> (2015) 242 Cal.App.4 <sup>th</sup> 833, 854-855.)		
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(AR6554-6556.) The off-site well would provide non-potable water if required. (AR 6689.) 1 2 The County determined because of the characteristics of the basin, the potential impacts 3 of drawing water from the well could not be determined. (AR 6558.) The County 4 therefore imposed mitigation measure 3.9-3 which requires the applicant to provide to the 5 County an analysis that defines a safe yield as specified in the measure. It also requires 6 the applicant to submit annual monitoring reports and provide quarterly data for the first 7 five years of use. (AR 6575.) It further mandates the development of a groundwater 8 management plan should the reports show an impact to groundwater levels. (Id.) The 9 County found any potential impact would be mitigated to less than substantial when 10 considering this measure. The County's findings regarding the well are supported by 11 substantial evidence. This mitigation measure complies with CEQA.

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#### V. Special Status Plants.

13 Two appendices attached to the EIR<sup>3</sup> provide an in depth analysis and disclosure 14 of special status plants. The County's findings relating to the special status plants are 15 supported by substantial evidence. Which specific plants will be impacted cannot be 16 determined because the exact location of the buildings on the site has not been 17 determined. Mitigation measure MM 3.4-3 is designed to accommodate the uncertainty of 18 the impacts on the plants. It requires pre-construction botanical surveys be conducted by 19 a qualified biologist. If avoidance of a special-status plant is not feasible, compensatory 20 planting or transplanting shall occur. Those plants would be subject to monitoring to 21 ensure success of the plants<sup>4</sup>. (AR 6387-6388.) This mitigation measure complies with 22 <sup>3</sup> The appendices are labeled as BRA1 (AR2489-2926) and BRA2 (AR2927-3403).

23 4 These requirements also apply to initial vegetation clearing along proposed roadways. (AR 6387.)

CEQA. (cf. *Rialto Citizens for Responsible Growth v. City of Rialto* (2012) 208 Cal.App.4<sup>th</sup>
899, 943.)

### VI. Project Alternatives.

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"The wisdom of approving [a] project, a delicate task which requires a balancing of 4 interests, is necessarily left to the sound discretion of the local officials and their 5 6 constituents who are responsible for such decisions. The law . . . simply requires that those decisions be informed, and therefore balanced." (Citizens of Goleta Valley v. Board 7 8 of Supervisors (1990) 52 Cal.3d 553, 576.) "'[F]easibility' under CEQA encompasses 9 'desirability' to the extent that desirability is based on a reasonable balancing of the relevant economic, environmental, social, and technological factors." (City of Del Mar v. 10 11 City of San Diego (1982) 133 Cal.App.3d 401, 417.)

12 Petitioners contend the County's finding of infeasibility of Alternative C was not 13 supported by substantial evidence. With respect to Alternative C, the County concluded, 14 "[G]iven that the Reduced Intensity Alternative would result in significantly fewer 15 economic benefits, the County finds that the Reduced Intensity Alternative does not 16 warrant approval in lieu of the Proposed Project." Economic benefits are key goals of the 17 project. The stated project objectives included economic growth, expanding high-end 18 hospitality and construction employment opportunities, and increasing revenues for the 19 County. (AR 6769.) Alternative C would restrict the overall luxury market resort and 20 residential community appeal; reduce revenues and workforce; and reduce marketability 21 to investors, buyers and consumers in the high-end luxury resort market. (AR 53789-22 23

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53791.) The evidence supports the conclusion that Alternative C would result in fewer
 economic benefits to the County.<sup>5</sup>

Intervenor suggests the County should have considered alternative locations
closer to a transit stop because GHG emissions would have been reduced in such a
location.<sup>6</sup> The Project consists of high-end residential, resort, and recreational facilities. It
is speculative to conclude consumers of the project will travel from out of the area by
public transit.

8 "It is [the petitioner]'s burden to demonstrate inadequacy of the EIR. [A petitioner] 9 must therefore show the agency failed to satisfy its burden of identifying and analyzing one or more potentially feasible alternatives. [A petitioner] may not simply claim the 10 11 agency failed to present an adequate range of alternatives and then sit back and force 12 the agency to prove it wrong." Mount Shasta Bioregional Ecology Center v. County of 13 Siskiyou (2012) 210 Cal.App.4th 184, 199.) Here, Intervenor "make[s] no attempt to show how such an alternative would have met most of the goals of the Project, would 14 15 have been potentially feasible under the circumstances, or would have reduced overall environmental impacts of the Project." (Ibid.) 16

The County properly considered and rejected potential alternatives.

# VII. Recirculation of the EIR.

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Recirculation of an EIR is not required when the changes merely clarify, amplify

23 <sup>6</sup> People's Opening Brief, pp. 32:22-33:1.

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 <sup>21 &</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Intervenor's position is that Alternative C was found infeasible based on the applicant's expectation of reduced revenues. (Intervenor People of the State of California's Opening Brief filed June 15, 2021 (People's Opening Brief), p. 35:4-6.) This interpretation is not supported by the language of the EIR as a whole. It is the economic benefits to the County, not the applicant. that was the driving force behind the County rejecting Alternative C.

or make insignificant modifications to an EIR. (Laurel Heights Improvement Association v. 1 Regents of University of California (Laurel Heights II) (1993) 6 Cal.4<sup>th</sup> 1112, 1130.) The 2 3 County found the Errata contained minor edits and clarifications which did not constitute 4 significant new information that deprived the public of a meaningful opportunity to 5 comment upon a substantial impact resulting from the Project or a mitigation measure. 6 (AR 7193.) This determination is required to be upheld if supported by substantial 7 evidence. (Laurel Heights II, supra, at p. 1135.) Reasonable doubts are to be resolved in 8 favor of the agency's decision. (Ibid.)

9 The EIR's analysis of the Project's impacts on wildfire risk was extensive. The
10 County's finding that the EIR did not include any information that showed a substantial
11 increase in the severity of the wildfire related impacts is supported by substantial
12 evidence.

The Errata did add an additional mitigation measure regarding the purchase of
GHG carbon credits. Recirculation is required only if a new mitigation measure is not
adopted. (*South County Citizens for Smart Growth v. County of Nevada* (2013) 221
Cal.App.4<sup>th</sup> 316, 330.) The mitigation measure in the Errata was adopted.

Based on the County's findings that the Errata contained only clarifications,
amplifications and insignificant modifications to the EIR, recirculation of the EIR was not
required.

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### VIII. Other Issues Raised by Petitioners Not Specifically Discussed.

Due to time constraints, the Court has not discussed each and every issue raised by Petitioners. The Court focused on those issues which it considered to be of primary importance in helping the parties to understand the reasons for the Court's ruling. As to

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all other issues raised by Petitioners not specifically discussed herein, the Court has
 determined all findings made by the County were supported by substantial evidence and
 the County otherwise substantially complied with the requirements of CEQA.

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# IX. Timeliness of Intervenor's Claims.

A subsequent pleading may relate back to the original pleading for statute of
limitation purposes if it (1) rests on the same general facts as the original; (2) involves the
same injury; and (3) refers to the same instrumentality. (*Norgart v. Upjohn Co.* (1999) 21
Cal.4<sup>th</sup> 383, 408.)

9 The timeliness of Intervenor's petition is moot as to all claims denied by the Court.
10 As discussed above, the Court has concluded the EIR was deficient because the
11 County's findings regarding community emergency evacuation routes are not supported
12 by substantial evidence. This issue was addressed by causes of action in the Petitions
13 filed by CBD and CNPS. Therefore, the claim related to this issue was timely filed
14 pursuant to the relation-back doctrine.

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## X. Conclusion.

Because the County's findings regarding community emergency evacuation routes are not supported by substantial evidence, the EIR does not comply with CEQA. Had the findings regarding emergency evacuation routes been supported by substantial evidence, the Court would have concluded the EIR complied with CEQA and therefore denied each of the Petitions.

21 <u>Order</u>
 22 The Court orders as follows:
 23 1. Respondent's and Real Party in Interest's Joint Motion to Augment the
 24 RULING AND ORDER ON PETITIONS FOR WRIT OF MANDATE
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1	Administrative Record filed August 17, 2021, is granted. Exhibits A and B attached to the		
2	Declaration of Charmaine G. Yu in Support of Respondent's and Real Party in Interest's		
3	Joint Motion to Augment the Administrative Record are hereby added to the		
4	administrative record in this action. <sup>7</sup>		
5	2. The People's Request for Judicial Notice in Support of Opening Brief filed June		
6	15, 2021, is granted. The Court takes judicial notice of Exhibits 1 and 2 attached to the		
7	Declaration of Andrew R. Contreiras.		
, 8	3. The Objection to the Declaration of Van Bustic Regarding E-Mail		
	Communication in the Record filed October 15, 2021, is sustained.		
9	4. A judgment will issue granting a peremptory writ of mandate ordering		
10	Respondent County of Lake to set aside its (a) certification of the final EIR, (b) findings		
11	relating to impacts to an adopted emergency evacuation plan, and (c) approval of the		
12	Project.		
13	5. Intervenor/Petitioner People of the State of California is directed to prepare a		
14	form of judgment and peremptory writ of mandate.		
15	6. The issues of costs and attorney fees are reserved.		
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17	Date: January <u>4</u> , 2022		
18	D. David Markham		
19	Judge of the Superior Court		
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23	<sup>7</sup> Prior to the trial in this matter, a number of motions were filed by the parties. The Court ruled on these motions arises		
24	<sup>7</sup> Prior to the trial in this matter, a number of motions were filed by the parties. The Court ruled on those motions prior to commencement of the trial. At the request of counsel, orders relating to those motions are contained herein.		
	RULING AND ORDER ON PETITIONS FOR WRIT OF MANDATE		
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Center for Biological Diversity vs. County of Lake et al CV421152

### PROOF OF SERVICE

I am a Deputy Clerk of the Superior Court of California, County of Lake. I am over the age of 18 and not a party to the action to which this document is attached.

January 4, 2022- On this date, I mailed a true copy of the attached document to the person(s) whose name(s) are set forth below by placing said copy in a sealed envelope addressed to each of said person(s), at the address set forth below, which envelope was then sealed and postage fully prepaid, and deposited in the mail at Lakeport, California to be delivered by United States mail.

Peter Broderick-Center for Biological Diviersity 1212 Broadway, Ste 800 Oakland, CA 94612

Nicole Johnson & Anita Grant – by courhouse mailbox

Arthur F Coon – Miller Starr Regalia 1331 N California Blvd, 5<sup>th</sup> Fl Walnut Creek, CA 94596

Andrew Contreiras/Attorney General of Calif PO Box 85266 San Diego, CA 92101

Jonathan R. Bass/COBLENTZ PATCH DUFFY & BASS One Montgomery St, STE 3000 San Francisco, CA 94104-5500

Rebecca Davis- Lozeau/Drury LLP 1939 Harrison St, Ste 150 Oakland, CA 94612

Krista D.	LeVier, Court Clerk
By:	YB
Yolanda Blum	

Dated: January 4, 2022

Deputy Court Clerk