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## State Water Resources Control Board

May 21, 2021

Ms. Kimberly D. Bose  
Federal Energy Regulatory Commission  
888 First Street, N.E.  
Washington, DC 20426  
**Via E-File**

### **Concurrence with Pacific Gas and Electric Company's Request to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission for an Instream Flow Variance for the DeSabra-Centerville Hydroelectric Project**

Dear Secretary Bose,

The Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) has alerted the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) that it plans to submit a request to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) for a variance from the conditions in PG&E's DeSabra-Centerville Hydroelectric Project (Project), FERC Project No. 803 license in May 2021, and has requested concurrence with this variance from the State Water Board. The purpose of this variance is to help provide additional water to Butte Creek during the hot summer months, thereby minimizing effects of high temperature on the Central Valley spring-run Chinook salmon (CVSRCS) holding in Butte Creek. The State Water Board received an email with a copy of PG&E's draft variance request to FERC on May 19, 2021, which includes information regarding the proposed variance from the conditions in the Project license. This proposed variance would take effect upon FERC approval and expire on February 28, 2022 (variance period).

On May 11, 2021, PG&E held the 2021 DeSabra-Centerville Operations and Maintenance Plan Meeting with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), United States Forest Service (USFS), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and State Water Board staff (collectively, the Resource Group) to discuss continued drought conditions and flow management for the Project to ensure availability of cold water storage in Philbrook Reservoir (located on the West Branch Feather River), which is diverted into Butte Creek to help support the population of CVSRCS during the summer holding period. PG&E's proposed variance request supports the Resource Group's common goal of ensuring the availability of cold-water storage in Philbrook Reservoir to support the population of CVSRCS in Butte Creek. Article 39(e) of the existing FERC license allows for flow modifications upon mutual agreement between PG&E and CDFW. On May 17, 2021, in an Operations and

E. JOAQUIN ESQUIVEL, CHAIR | EILEEN SOBECK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Maintenance meeting, PG&E and CDFW verbally agreed to an instream flow variance to conserve water to help support the 2021 CVSRCS cohort.

**Proposed Variance:**

**Philbrook Creek**

PG&E proposes to reduce minimum instream flows (MIF) from Philbrook Reservoir from 2.0 cubic feet per second (cfs) (with a 0.5 cfs flow buffer) to 0.8 cfs (with a 0.2 cfs flow buffer) to provide additional cold-water storage for CVSRCS during the current drought conditions. Compliance is measured at Philbrook Creek (PG&E Gage BW-3). In addition, PG&E is requesting that a 48-hour flow average be used to determine compliance with the reduced minimum instream flow, instead of the currently-required instantaneous flow rate. This will allow for flow deviations that occur upon buffer removal.

**Butte Head Dam and Hendricks Head Dam**

PG&E's proposed variance also includes temporary replacement of the existing instantaneous MIF requirement of 7 cfs at both the Butte and Hendricks Head Dams with a MIF requirement averaged over 48 hours. PG&E's normal practice is to provide a buffer-flow of 4 – 5 cfs in addition to the required MIF to assure that the MIF is always met notwithstanding flow variability and fluctuations that occur with normal operations. This variance will allow PG&E greater flexibility to operate during short-lived drops in instream flow readings.

At the Hendricks Head Dam the buffer is provided by additional releases from Philbrook Reservoir. The variance at the Hendricks Head Dam will help to maximize the delivery of flow released from Philbrook to Butte Creek instead of being used to buffer flows to ensure compliance with the instantaneous MIF requirement. The net result in lower Butte Creek will be an increase to instream flow and a decrease in water temperatures where CVSRCS are holding.

The Butte Head Dam variance will increase flow in the Hendricks and Butte canals. PG&E's monitoring data indicates that water diverted into the Project canals travels faster and experiences less exposure to solar radiation, evaporation and heating when compared to flows in the natural channel. Increasing flow into the Butte Canal is expected to result in colder water in lower Butte Creek at the DeSabra Powerhouse when compared to water temperature left in the natural channel of Butte Creek. In addition, increased flow into both the Hendricks and Butte canals is expected to contribute to increased travel speed and decreased heating as water travels through the DeSabra Forebay. Compliance with the MIF requirement during the variance period will be measured at Hendricks Head Dam (PG&E Gage BW40) and the Butte Head Dam (PG&E Gage BW97).

PG&E will implement the following actions during the variance period:

1. Monitor BW 40 and BW97 and provide the monthly flow record to the Resource Group (at the beginning of the month, for the preceding month's flow) for each month during the variance period.
2. Promptly notify the Resource Group of any event that significantly inhibits or impairs the release structures from maintaining a 48-hour average release of 7 cfs.

State Water Board staff supports PG&E's proposed instream flow variance request through February 28, 2022 or until determined no longer necessary by the Resource Group. The implementation of this proposed variance is intended to support the protection of the beneficial uses of Butte Creek.

#### Related Regulatory Background:

The California Regional Water Quality Control Boards adopt, and the State Water Board approves, water quality control plans (basin plans) for each watershed basin in the State. The basin plans designate the beneficial uses of waters within each watershed basin, and water quality objectives designed to protect those uses pursuant to Section 303 of the Clean Water Act. (33 U.S.C. § 1313.) The beneficial uses and water quality objectives that are contained in the basin plans together with state and federal anti-degradation requirements constitute California's water quality standards.

The *Water Quality Control Plan for the Sacramento River and San Joaquin River Basins* (SR/SJR Basin Plan) does not specifically identify the beneficial uses for the West Branch Feather River. The SR/SJR Basin Plan specifies that the beneficial uses of any specifically identified water body generally apply to its tributary streams. Therefore, the West Branch Feather River beneficial uses are listed under the Lake Oroville designation. Designated beneficial uses for the West Branch Feather River (Lake Oroville designation) include: municipal and domestic supply; irrigation; power; contact recreation; other non-contact recreation; cold freshwater habitat; warm freshwater habitat; warm freshwater spawning; cold freshwater spawning; and wildlife habitat. The existing beneficial uses listed in the Basin Plan for Butte Creek (sources to Chico), as designated in the SR/SJR Basin Plan, are: municipal and domestic supply; irrigation; stock watering; power; contact recreation; cold freshwater habitat; warm freshwater habitat; cold freshwater migration; warm freshwater spawning; cold freshwater spawning; and wildlife habitat.

State Water Board staff appreciates the continued cooperation of FERC and looks forward to working with FERC on this Project and California drought related items. During the current COVID emergency, most State Water Board staff are working from home. Accordingly, if you have questions regarding this correspondence, the best means of contact is by email at [eric.bradbury@waterboards.ca.gov](mailto:eric.bradbury@waterboards.ca.gov).

Sincerely,

Eric  
Bradbury



Digitally signed by Eric Bradbury  
Date: 2021.05.21 11:55:55 -0700

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Environmental Scientist  
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State Water Resources Control Board

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