

DOCKETED	
Docket Number:	26-OPT-02
Project Title:	Seahawk Battery Energy Storage System
TN #:	272173
Document Title:	Phillip Carranco Comments - Inadequate Secondary Access
Description:	N/A
Filer:	System
Organization:	Phillip Carranco
Submitter Role:	Public
Submission Date:	8/26/2026 8:27:42 AM
Docketed Date:	8/26/2026

Comment Received From: Phillip Carranco

Submitted On: 8/26/2026

Docket Number: 26-OPT-02

Inadequate Secondary Access

Dear Commissioners and Staff:

I write regarding the Application for Opt-In Certification filed by Sequoia Energy Storage 1, LLC (a subsidiary of New Leaf Energy, Inc.) for the proposed 200 MW / 800 MWh Seahawk Battery Energy Storage System at approximately 90 Minto Road, unincorporated Santa Cruz County (Docket 26-OPT-02).

The three application documents filed May 27, 2026: TN 270250 (Part 1), TN 270248 (Part 2), and TN 270249 (Part 3) collectively state that secondary (emergency) access for the project is proposed via agreements with adjacent property owners that have not been finalized. The documents describe options crossing County owned and/or private parcels and note only that the applicant plans to enter into an agreement with the property owner(s). No executed, recorded easement or other formal, binding evidence of land-use rights for the secondary access road is provided.

1. Incomplete Fire / Hazard Mitigation Analysis Due to Unsecured Secondary Access

Without a formal, signed, and recorded agreement (or equivalent binding evidence of perpetual or long-term land use rights) establishing the secondary access road, the Hazard Mitigation Analysis and related Fire Mitigation / Emergency Response planning cannot be completed in a manner that satisfies regulatory requirements. Secondary emergency access is a fundamental element of fire apparatus access, apparatus turnaround capability, concurrent civilian egress, and overall site safety for a large-scale stationary energy storage system.

The absence of secured secondary access renders the fire protection and hazard mitigation components of the application incomplete and non-compliant with the following

standards:

* 2025 California Fire Code (Title 24, Part 9, effective January 1, 2026):

- o Chapter 5 (Fire Service Features) and Appendix D (Fire Apparatus Access Roads). CFC Section 503.1.2 authorizes the official fire code to require more than one fire apparatus access road when access by a single road may be impaired by vehicle congestion, condition of terrain, climatic conditions, or other factors that could limit access. For a 200 MW lithium iron phosphate BESS facility in a rural/agricultural interface area within the State Responsibility Area (SRA), these factors are present and secondary access is essential.

* CFC Appendix D, Section D102.1:

- o requires that facilities be accessible by an approved fire apparatus access road with asphalt, concrete, or other approved driving surface capable of supporting the imposed load of fire apparatus weighing up to 75,000 pounds.

* CFC Appendix D, Table D103.4 and Section D103.4:

- o Dead-end fire apparatus access roads more than 150 feet shall be provided with approved turnaround provisions (120ft hammerhead, 60ft "Y" or 96ft diameter cul-de-sac). Without a secure secondary access route, any primary access that functions as a dead-end longer than 150ft triggers mandatory turnaround requirements that cannot be satisfied by speculative future agreements.

* NFPA 855 (Standard for the Installation of Stationary Energy Storage Systems) and related provisions of NFPA 550 require reliable emergency access, adequate fire apparatus approach, and coordinated emergency response planning for ESS facilities.

* Santa Cruz County Fire Code (Chapter 7.92) and California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Â§Â§ 1273.00 et seq. (State Minimum Fire Safe Regulations):

- o The project site is located within the State Responsibility Area (SRA) served by the Pajaro Valley Fire Protection District, which is in the process of consolidation with Santa Cruz County Fire. These standards expressly require that more than one fire apparatus access road be provided when access by a single road may be impaired by vehicle congestion, terrain, climatic conditions, or other factors. Access for new structures and industrial facilities of this scale must be in the duly recorded form of deeded access or an access recognized by court order, and all access road improvements must be made prior to permit approval or as a condition of permit approval.

* City of Watsonville Fire Code (adopting the 2025 California Fire Code with local amendments):

- o In the event of a thermal runaway incident, mutual aid response from the City of Watsonville Fire Department is expected to include aerial/ladder apparatus. Watsonville's adopted fire code and operational practices require fire apparatus access roads capable of supporting ladder truck operations, including adequate

width, all weather surface, turning radii, and staging areas consistent with CFC Chapter 5 and Appendix D.

These deficiencies directly impact public safety. Firefighters and emergency responders cannot rely on speculative or unexecuted access rights when developing response plans, determining apparatus placement, or ensuring safe concurrent evacuation. Local fire authority input (including from the Pajaro Valley Fire Protection District / Santa Cruz County Fire and the City of Watsonville Fire Department for mutual-aid ladder-truck response) cannot be fully or meaningfully integrated while the physical means of secondary access remain unsecured.

2. Gravel Surface Non-Compliance with All-Weather Driving Surface Requirements

In addition, any reliance on a gravel road surface for permanent secondary (or primary) fire apparatus access does not meet the requirements of the 2025 California Fire Code, Appendix D, Santa Cruz County Fire Code, or the applicable Fire Prevention Officer standards.

California Fire Code Requirements:

* CFC Section 503.2.3 and Appendix D, Section D102.1:

o require an approved all weather driving surface capable of supporting the imposed loads of fire apparatus (up to 75,000 pounds). The approved surfaces are asphalt, concrete, or equivalently engineered and approved hard surfaces.

* Gravel is generally limited to narrow exceptions (e.g., certain temporary construction access or low-intensity residential uses with engineering certification) and is not an approved permanent surface for a commercial/industrial BESS facility of this scale. Industry practice and Bay Area civil/fire engineering guidance confirm that permeable pavement or gravel is not approved for through-traffic permanent fire lanes; asphalt and concrete are the standard.

Santa Cruz County Fire Code and FPO Surface, Grade and Drainage Requirements (directly applicable in the SRA):

* Access road surface standards (FPO-012 / FPO-014 and Santa Cruz County Fire Code Â§ 7.92.503.2.3):

o An all-weather surface shall be a minimum of 6 inches of 95% compacted Class II base rock for grades up to and including 5%, oil and screened for grades up to and including 15%, and asphaltic concrete for grades exceeding 15%.

* Maximum Grade (CCR Title 14 Â§ 1273.03 and Santa Cruz County Fire Code):

o The grade for all roads and driveways shall not exceed 16% in the State

Responsibility Area (SRA). Grades greater than 15% shall not be permitted for distances of more than 200 feet at a time.

* Drainage details shall conform to current engineering practices, including erosion control measures. These local and state standards implement and exceed the baseline CFC requirements and leave no room for reliance on unimproved gravel for permanent emergency access serving a large ESS facility.

3. Additional Dimensional, Geometric, and Operational Deficiencies Under Local and State Standards

Even if a secondary access agreement were eventually executed, the application materials do not demonstrate that the proposed secondary (or primary) access would satisfy the full suite of dimensional, geometric, and operational requirements:

Minimum Width and Vertical Clearance (Santa Cruz County Fire Code Â§ 7.92.503.2.1 and CFC):

* Santa Cruz County Fire Code requires an unobstructed width of not less than 20ft, exclusive of shoulders, and an unobstructed vertical clearance of not less than 15ft (stricter than the baseline CFC 13ft 6in in many applications).

* Where a fire hydrant is located on a fire apparatus access road, CFC Appendix D requires a minimum road width of 26 feet, exclusive of shoulders. Ladder truck staging under the City of Watsonville Fire Code and mutual-aid protocols may require additional clear width and approach geometry.

Turning Radius and Dead-End / Turnaround Limitations (CCR Title 14 and Santa Cruz County Fire Code):

* Minimum Turning Radius (CCR Title 14 Â§ 1273.05):

o The minimum turning radius for a turnaround shall be forty (40) feet centerline radius (not including parking).

* Minimum Turnaround / Roadway Radius in SRA (CCR Title 14 Â§ 1273.04):

o No roadway shall have a horizontal inside radius of curvature of less than 50ft in the SRA; additional surface width is required on tighter curves. Turnarounds are required on driveways and dead-end roads; the minimum turning radius for a turnaround is 40 feet centerline.

* Roads that are 150ft or more in length shall require an emergency vehicle turnaround area

(consistent with CFC Appendix D Table D103.4 and Santa Cruz County Fire Prevention Standards).

* New dead-end roads are prohibited, without secondary access, serving more than one parcel in new minor land divisions or subdivisions which exceed specified distances; in no case shall a new dead-end road exceed $\hat{A} \frac{1}{2}$ mile in length.

Bridges (Santa Cruz County Fire Code $\hat{A} \S 7.92.503.2.6$; FPO-13 & FPO-16):

* Any bridge or elevated surface that is part of a fire apparatus access road shall be constructed and maintained in accordance with AASHTO HS-20 loading standards (25+ tons).

ï, Bridges shall be a minimum of 20ft clear width (unless a reduction is specifically approved for limited occupancies). Vehicle load limits shall be posted at both entrances. Certification by a licensed engineer is required, with recertification every ten years or as directed by the fire code official.

* These requirements are set forth in Santa Cruz County Fire Code $\hat{A} \S 7.92.503.2.6$ and implementing Fire Prevention Officer standards FPO-13 and FPO-16.

Timing and Enforceability:

* Santa Cruz County Fire Code and related standards require that access roads be in place

before framing construction can begin (or construction shall be stopped) and that all access road and bridge improvements required under the standards be made prior to permit approval or as a condition of permit approval.

* Access must be in the duly recorded form of a deeded access or court-recognized access.

A mere plan to enter into an agreement does not satisfy this requirement and leaves first responders without enforceable rights of entry.

For industrial scale facilities, fire access engineering practice emphasizes that the 20ft (or 26ft)

clear width, all weather hard surface, compliant turning radii / turnarounds, and bridge load

ratings are nonnegotiable. Site plans that rely on future or unsecured secondary access routinely

receive red-line comments and require fundamental redesign before approval. The additional

requirement for ladder truck accessibility under Watsonville mutual-aid protocols further elevates these geometric and structural standards.

4. Public Safety Implications for 200 MW / 800 MWh BESS Facility

Secondary emergency access is not a minor or deferrable detail for a 200 MW lithium iron

phosphate BESS facility in a rural/agricultural interface area within the SRA. It is a core safety

and property protection requirement under the California Fire Code, NFPA 855, Santa Cruz

County Fire Code, Title 14 SRA Fire Safe Regulations, and the City of Watsonville Fire Code
(for mutual-aid ladder-truck response).

A single access road creates unacceptable single point of failure risk: blockage by civilian vehicles during an incident, terrain or weather impairment, or apparatus staging conflicts can prevent concurrent firefighter ingress and civilian egress. For an ESS facility of this magnitude, thermal runaway events, potential off gassing, and the need for large volumes of water or specialized agents make reliable dual access essential for effective response and for protecting surrounding agricultural and residential properties. Ladder-truck operations from Watsonville further require unobstructed, load-rated, all-weather access of sufficient width and geometry. Proceeding without a formal, enforceable, recorded secondary-access agreement leaves the public, first responders, and the surrounding community exposed to unnecessary and avoidable risk.

5. Request for Action

Because the application materials themselves acknowledge that secondary access agreements remain unfinalized and because formal evidence of land use rights (easement or equivalent) is lacking, the Hazard Mitigation Analysis / Fire Mitigation components cannot be deemed complete or compliant. The resulting gaps undermine public safety and prevent a thorough evaluation under the Opt-In Certification process.

I respectfully request that the Commission:

1. Maintain or reaffirm the incomplete status of the application (consistent with the July 8, 2026, Determination of Incomplete Application, TN 271321);
2. Require the applicant to submit a fully executed, recorded secondary access easement (or equivalent binding land use agreement) together with engineered plans demonstrating full compliance with:
 - a. 2025 California Fire Code Chapter 5 and Appendix D (including D102.1 surface and load requirements, D103.4 dead-end / turnaround standards, and minimum widths);

b. Santa Cruz County Fire Code (Chapter 7.92), CCR Title 14 Â§Â§ 1273.03 (maximum grade 16% in SRA), 1273.04 (minimum 50-foot inside radius in SRA), 1273.05 (40-foot centerline turnaround radius), FPO-012 (access road surface standards), and bridge requirements under Â§ 7.92.503.2.6 / FPO-13 & FPO-16 meeting AASHTO HS-20 (25+ ton) loading;

c. City of Watsonville Fire Code requirements applicable to mutual aid ladder truck response and aerial apparatus access; and

d. NFPA 855 emergency access and response planning provisions;

3. Deny or withhold further advancement of the Opt-In Certification until these fundamental public safety deficiencies are cured and the local fire authority (Pajaro Valley Fire Protection District / Santa Cruz County Fire) and, as appropriate, the City of Watsonville Fire Department have confirmed that the secondary access is secured, constructed to standard, and integrated into approved emergency response plans. Secondary emergency access is a core safety and property protection requirement. The Commissionâ€™s Opt-In Certification process should not advance a project of this scale and hazard profile while the most basic means of emergency response remain speculative and unenforceable.

Thank you for your attention to this critical public safety matter.

Respectfully submitted,
 Phillip Carranco
 Regulatory Compliance Expert
 CarrXEnergy@gmail.com

Key References Cited:

- * 2025 California Fire Code, Title 24, Part 9, Chapter 5 and Appendix D (Fire Apparatus Access Roads)
- * Santa Cruz County Fire Code, Chapter 7.92 (including Â§Â§ 7.92.503.2.1, 7.92.503.2.3, 7.92.503.2.4, 7.92.503.2.6)
- * California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Â§Â§ 1273.03 (Grades â€“ maximum 16% in SRA), 1273.04 (Radius), 1273.05 (Turnarounds â€“ 40-foot centerline radius)
- * Santa Cruz County Fire Prevention Officer Standards: FPO-012 (Maximum Grade / Vertical Clearance / Surface), FPO-013 (Turnouts), FPO-014 (Roadbed Construction), FPO-015 (Turnarounds), FPO-16 (Bridges)
- * AASHTO HS-20 loading standards (25+ tons) for bridges â€“ Santa Cruz County Fire Code Â§ 7.92.503.2.6
- * City of Watsonville Fire Code (2025 California Fire Code as adopted with local amendments) â€“

applicable to mutual-aid ladder-truck response

- * NFPA 855, Standard for the Installation of Stationary Energy Storage Systems

- * CFC Appendix D Table D103.4 “Requirements for Dead-End Fire Apparatus Access Roads