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January 13, 2020

Mr. Tim Kihm  
Red Tail Acquisitions  
2082 Michelson Drive, 4th Fl.  
Irvine, CA 92612

Reference: Habitat Assessment and Western Burrowing Owl Focused Survey Results at the Bella Mar Survey Area (RECON Number 8575)

Dear Mr. Kihm:

This letter summarizes the results of the 2019-2020 non-breeding season surveys for the western burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia hypugaea*) conducted within the Bella Mar Project site (project site). The project site is located in the city of San Diego, east of Interstate 5 (I-5) and north of State Route 905 (Figure 1). The project site occurs in Section 22, Township 18 South, Range 2 West, of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) 1996 7.5-minute topographic map, Imperial Beach quadrangle (Figure 2; USGS 1996). The assessor's parcel numbers are shown on Figure 3.

RECON Environmental, Inc. (RECON) biologists conducted western burrowing owl focused surveys in suitable habitat in accordance with the guidelines developed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW; 2012). Non-breeding season surveys were conducted to determine the presence or absence of the species within the project site and a 150-meter buffer, and no burrowing owls were detected. A discussion of the results of the conducted surveys is provided below.

### **Western Burrowing Owl**

The western burrowing owl is a CDFW species of special concern. This species is primarily restricted to the western United States and Mexico. A year-round resident in San Diego County, breeding western burrowing owls remain in only five primary areas in San Diego County, including Otay Mesa, Imperial Beach, Naval Air Station North Island, Warner Valley, and Borrego Valley (Unitt 2004). Habitat for the western burrowing owl includes dry, open, short-grass areas with level to gentle topography and well-drained soils (CDFW 2012). These areas are also often associated with burrowing mammals (Haug et al. 1993). Western burrowing owls are known to use multiple burrows, called "satellite" burrows, in addition to their nesting burrows. These non-nesting burrows are used to seek protection from predators and for roosting during the non-breeding season (CDFW 2012).

The western burrowing owl is diurnal and typically perches during daylight at the entrance to its burrow or on adjacent structures, such as low posts. Nesting occurs from March through August. Western burrowing owls form a pair bond for more than one year and exhibit high site fidelity, reusing the same burrow year after year (Haug et al. 1993). The female remains inside the burrow during most of the egg laying and incubation period and is fed by the male throughout brooding. Western burrowing owls are opportunistic feeders, consuming a diet that includes arthropods, small mammals, and 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 fossorial mammals, road and ditch maintenance, and collisions with automobiles (CDFW 2012).

## Survey Methods

RECON biologists Beth Procsal, Alex Fromer, JR Sundberg, and Brian Parker conducted western burrowing owl focused surveys in accordance with the guidelines developed by the CDFW (CDFW 2012). Wildlife databases, including California Natural Diversity Database and San Diego Biological Information and Observation System, were consulted and available information of known western burrowing owl observations was gathered and compared to the parcel location. No previous records were found for the project site within the wildlife databases.

The current surveys included a habitat assessment and four non-breeding season western burrowing owl surveys. For the purposes of this report, the “survey area” includes the project’s proposed ground disturbance footprint (project site) and a 150-meter buffer (Figure 4). Meandering transects were walked through all suitable habitat identified within the project site. The 150-meter buffer was surveyed using binoculars, as access onto private property was not granted. All wildlife species observed during the surveys were noted. Survey dates, times, and weather conditions are provided in Table 1.

Vegetation community classifications in this report follow Oberbauer et.al. (2008), which is based on Holland (1986). It should be noted that vegetation community classifications should follow Sawyer et al. (2009) per the CDFW guidelines; however, Sawyer et al. (2009) does not contain a vegetation classification equivalent for disturbed land, which occurs on-site.

Date	Survey Type	Surveyors	Beginning Conditions	Ending Conditions
9/18/2019	Western Burrowing Owl Habitat Assessment	A. Fromer, B. Parker	9:00 a.m.; 70°F; 0–1 mph; <10% cc	10:30 a.m.; 76°F; 0–1 mph; 0% cc
10/16/2019	Western Burrowing Owl Survey #1	A. Fromer, J.R. Sundberg	7:00 a.m.; 54°F; 1–3 mph ; 85% cc	8:20 a.m.; 59°F; 1–6 mph; <1% cc
11/13/2019	Western Burrowing Owl Survey #2	B. Procsal, B. Parker	7:00 a.m.; 54°F; 1–3 mph ; 85% cc	8:20 a.m.; 59°F; 1–6 mph; <1% cc
12/11/2019	Western Burrowing Owl Survey #3	B. Procsal, A. Fromer	8:00 a.m.; 51°F; 0–1 mph; 15% cc	9:25 a.m.; 58°F; 0–1 mph; 15% cc
1/8/2020	Western Burrowing Owl Survey #4	B. Procsal, B. Parker	7:55 a.m.; 47°F; 0–1 mph; 2% cc	9:10 a.m.; 57°F; 0–1 mph; 95% cc
°F = degrees Fahrenheit; mph = miles per hour; % = percent; cc = cloud cover.				

## Existing Conditions

The project site is bounded by I-5 to the west, the Otay River to the north, Hollister Street to the east, and undeveloped land to the south (see Figure 3). The parcel is relatively flat and three soil types occur on the parcel, including Visalia gravelly sandy loam, Tujunga sand, and Riverwash (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1973). Approximately 5.5 acres of City of San Diego Multi-Habitat Planning Area overlap with the project (see Figure 4). The site had been previously mowed or cut and much of the dead vegetation was laid down and had created a thick thatch layer.

## Habitat Assessment Results

A burrowing owl habitat assessment was conducted on September 18, 2019 within the survey area to evaluate the suitability of the habitat for this species. The survey area supports two land cover types, disturbed land and urban/developed land (Figure 5). The disturbed land provides suitable habitat for the burrowing owl and vegetation at the time of the surveys was low-growing and dominated by redstem filaree (*Erodium cicutarium*), Australian saltbush (*Atriplex semibaccata*), Russian thistle (*Salsola tragus*), and crown daisy (*Glebionis coronaria* [= *Chrysanthemum coronarium*]). Non-native grasses (*Bromus* sp.) and many areas of bare ground are also present within the disturbed land. Some scattered native individual

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species, such as broom baccharis (*Baccharis sarothroides*), were present but are too few and widespread to form a distinct native habitat. The urban/developed land consists of asphalted roads; and therefore, does not provide suitable habitat for the burrowing owl. The 150-meter buffer surrounding the project site contains suitable habitat for western burrowing owl. The lands to the south and to the immediate west are comprised of disturbed land with similar plant species and structure to that of the project site.

Four burrows were detected on-site during the habitat assessment that appeared to be the appropriate size and shape for burrowing owl use (see Figure 5). However, no whitewash, feathers, pellets, or bones were observed within or adjacent to these burrows.

### **Focused Western Burrowing Owl Surveys Results**

Focused western burrowing owl surveys were conducted on four separate dates: October 16, November 13, December 11, and January 8, 2020. All four surveys were conducted between morning civil twilight and 10:00 a.m. Meandering transects were walked through all suitable habitat identified within the project site. Suitable habitat within the 150-meter buffer was surveyed using binoculars. No burrowing owl or sign of active burrows used by burrowing owls were detected at the time the surveys were completed. In addition to the four burrows mapped during the habitat assessment, many small mammal burrows were also observed on-site, but these were not suitable for burrowing owl use due to the small size (approximately 2–3 inches wide). Additionally, no burrowing owl sign (e.g., cast pellets, prey remains, molted feathers, excrement, etc.) was observed at these small burrow entrances.

### **Conclusion and Mitigation Requirements**

Although there is moderate potential for this species to occur based on the suitable habitat and burrows present on-site, no burrowing owl or active burrows were observed during the surveys. In addition, no historical observations have been recorded on-site or in the vicinity of the site. However, to ensure that no potential impacts occur to this species, we recommend pre-construction Take-Avoidance Surveys to be conducted at least 14 days prior to ground disturbance to detect the presence of any western burrowing owls prior to ground disturbance. One survey shall be conducted no less than 14 days prior to the initiation of ground disturbance activities and the last survey was conducted within 24 hours of the vegetation clearing. These surveys will include all areas where suitable habitat is present within the survey area (CDFW 2012).

If you have any questions concerning the contents of this letter, please contact me at (619) 308-9333 extension 111 or Gerry Scheid at (619) 308-9333 extension 171.

Sincerely,



Beth Procsal  
Associate Biologist

EAP:jg

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