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Agreement Protects San Diego's Vanishing Burrowing Owls, Increases Solar Energy

SAN DIEGO— An agreement announced today between conservation and environmental-justice groups and private developers will protect imperiled burrowing owls, increase renewable solar energy and conserve wildlife habitat to offset impacts from the redevelopment of San Diego's Brown Field Municipal Airport. The airport — located near the Mexico border in Otay Mesa — will be redeveloped with new commercial and aviation facilities and include on-site solar energy to reduce energy consumption.

"This agreement provides an innovative strategy reestablishing burrowing owls throughout San Diego County and creates an effective tool to allow off-site mitigation of greenhouse gases with rooftop solar in communities most harmed by air pollution from fossil fuels," said Jonathan Evans, environmental health legal director at the Center for Biological Diversity.

The agreement enlists the San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research in a multi-year program to help rebuild the struggling burrowing owl population on Otay Mesa and to establish a pilot program for implementing successful repopulation of burrowing owls in other areas throughout San Diego County. The agreement also sets aside habitat off the airport for burrowing owls and protects vanishing vernal pool habitat.

"Avoiding climate impacts and gaining protections for species being driven toward extinction are essential," said Van Collinsworth, director of Preserve Wild Santee. "We are pleased that the partnership with the San Diego Zoo will implement owl protection strategies while clean distributed energy will be boosted to reduce climate impacts."

The agreement would also establish a revolving trust fund to be managed by the San Diego Foundation to install off-site solar energy on facilities operated by nonprofit organizations serving low-income or disadvantaged communities. The redeveloped airport also commits to 12 megawatts of photovoltaic energy as part of the project, which is enough solar energy to power more than 3,000 homes.

"Burrowing owls and vernal pools have almost been wiped off the map in most of Southern California," said Jesse Marquez, executive director of Coalition for a Safe Environment. "We must take stronger wildlife habitat conservation actions to protect these amazing owls as part of our

natural heritage from going extinct.”

Burrowing owls have nearly been eliminated from San Diego County and require greater efforts to help rebuild their population. Vernal pools are small, seasonal wetlands that support plants and animals, like the endangered San Diego fairy shrimp, uniquely adapted to an environment that may dry up for months or years at a time. San Diego has lost about 98 percent of its vernal pools.

“Opportunities need to be provided to citizens to help us reduce our impacts on the Earth’s climate,” said Richard Halsey, director of the California Chaparral Institute. “The solar trust fund offers one such opportunity by facilitating the production of solar energy in neighborhoods where assistance is needed most.”

The settlement agreement was agreed to by conservation and environmental-justice groups the Center for Biological Diversity, Preserve Wild Santee, California Chaparral Institute, Coalition for a Safe Environment, Community Dreams and California Kids IAQ. The groups were represented by the Center for Biological Diversity and Coast Law Group.

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