

SENT TO COUNCIL:

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City Manager's Office



Memorandum

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR
AND CITY COUNCIL

FROM: Kerrie Romanow

SUBJECT: SEE BELOW

DATE: February 9, 2012

Approved

Date

2/9/12

INFORMATION

**SUBJECT: SAN JOSE/SANTA CLARA WATER POLLUTION CONTROL PLANT
DISCONTINUING SHEEP AND GOAT GRAZING**

BACKGROUND

The Western Burrowing Owl has been part of the landscape in the Santa Clara Valley for all of recorded history. Unfortunately, urban expansion over the past 50 years in the valley and San José has resulted in significant habitat loss for the burrowing owls and a collapse in the owl population. The region now only has a few dozen pairs of burrowing owls, which have been listed by the state as a species of special concern. In the past, some of these rare burrowing owl pairs have been found on the bufferlands of the San Jose/Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant (Plant). However, these sightings have become rarer since the Plant began managing the land with sheep and goat grazing three years ago, even though interested stakeholders thought that grazing would be a desirable management strategy to benefit the owls.

ANALYSIS

In August 2011, the Environmental Services Department (ESD) hired Lynne Trulio, a biologist from San Jose State University (SJSU), to evaluate existing management practices on the bufferlands to better understand how to provide quality habitat for the burrowing owls. The biologist determined that sheep and goat grazing has contributed to making the habitat unsuitable for fostering a thriving owl population. In response to these findings, the Plant has now relocated the sheep and goats away from the habitat area designated by the recently approved Plant Master Plan (Area A shown on Attachment A).

While grazing was implemented to reduce the use of gas-powered mowers and need for chemicals, the large herds required to keep vegetation in control for fire protection have compacted the soil and

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resulted in uneven grazing where some areas are now devoid of vegetation and others still require mowing to control vegetation the animals will not eat. Past agricultural use and current conditions have also led to a dramatic loss of ground squirrel activity, which is essential for burrowing owl habitat, because the owls occupy abandoned squirrel burrows. Burrowing owl surveys completed by Jones and Stokes for the Plant Master Plan EIR development and SJSU's biologist have located owls only along a fence at the westernmost portion of the Plant's bufferlands and inside the wet weather basin. No other owls have been seen on the Plant site since the inception of the grazing activity three years ago.

ESD is working closely with the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, the Alviso Collaborative, and other stakeholders to develop an Interim Bufferland Management Plan to address concerns about the burrowing owl while providing equivalent fire protection for the Plant. Staff is also working with the Audubon Society to secure volunteer commitments to help support actions in the Interim Bufferland Management Plan. This plan will include:

- Replacing the grazing contract with a mowing contract by May 2012;
- Complementing the burrowing owl strategy in the Santa Clara Valley Habitat Plan (HCP/NCCP);
- Leveraging volunteers to establish and maintain improved owl habitat;
- Placing berms to help expedite the creation of natural and artificial burrows;
- Creating various heights of native grasslands (e.g., by mowing rotation);
- Possible discing and soil enhancement to promote grasslands while controlling noxious weeds; and
- Creating prey habitat (e.g., brush piles).

Staff believes that when implemented, the Interim Bufferland Management Plan will provide dramatic benefits when compared to the current management techniques by reducing the overall environmental impact, improving the health of the bufferland soil, and providing vital habitat for the burrowing owl, a species on the brink of being lost to the Santa Clara Valley. Staff recognizes that grazing is a sustainable land use option with much appeal; however, at the Plant site, this management technique has been found to be incompatible with the goals of providing burrowing owl habitat.

/s/

KERRIE ROMANOW

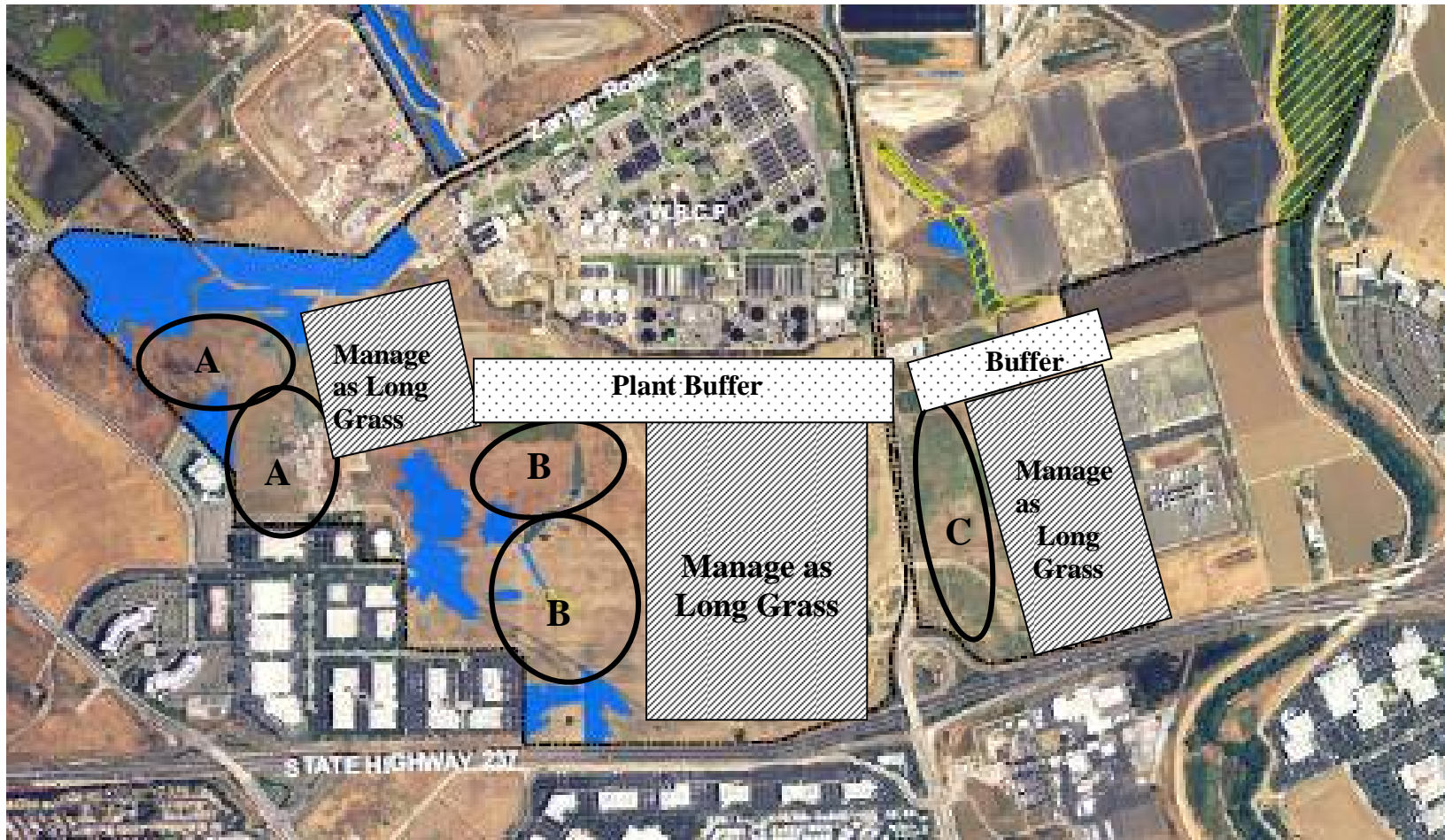
Acting Director, Environmental Services

For questions, please contact Kirsten Struve, Acting Manager, Sustainability & Compliance at 975-2594

Attachment A: Habitat Management Areas

Attachment B: Plant Master Plan Land-Use Plan

Attachment A: Habitat Management Areas



Burrowing Owl Nesting and Foraging Habitat Management Areas. Plant Buffer Areas (dotted zones) are not managed for owls. Blue areas are jurisdictional wetlands. [Map from H.T. Harvey (2007) Figure 9 showing Wetland Delineation]

The buffer areas may be extended at the discretion of Plant management.

Attachment B: Plant Master Plan Land-Use Plan – Preferred Alternative Used for CEQA Analysis
April 2011

