



CONDOR ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING SERVICES, INC.

3944 STATE STREET SUITE 310, SANTA BARBARA, CA 93105 USA
PHONE: (805) 898-2000 • FAX: (805) 898-2211

Preliminary Biological Survey and Initial Study

Applicant: Sunset Valley Farms, LLC
5449 Endeavor Court Moorpark, CA 93021
Ventura County

APNs: 500-0-410-26, 500-0-410-30, 500-0-410-32

Case File Number: SD06-0047

Prepared by:
Elihu Gevirtz and Jennifer Jackson

Prepared for:
County of Ventura
Resource Management Agency
Planning Division
Andrea Ozdy, Planner

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Description of Property

Location

The project site consists of three vacant parcels (two 1.5 acre lots and one 82 acre lot) located in a semi-rural area of Simi Valley, near the intersection of Tierra Rejada Road and Sunset Valley Road, west of Thousand Oaks Freeway (Highway 23). It is situated at an approximate elevation of 657 feet, roughly at N 34.15048 and W 118.51299 (Figure 1). The parcel is owned by Sunset Valley Farms, LLC and identified as APNs 500-0-410-26,-30, and-32.

Objective

This report has been prepared for the Ventura County Resource Management Agency Planning Division. Condor was asked to visit the site and to prepare the biological resources section of the Initial Study pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in order to identify potential impacts associated with a proposed lot subdivision (2-lot Large Lot Subdivision) and associated development (SD06-0047). The case planner is Andrea Ozdy.

B. Background Research

The California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDB) (California Department of Fish and Game 2006) and the California Native Plant Society's (CNPS) Inventory of Rare Plants (2006) were reviewed for records of sensitive plant and wildlife species in the vicinity of the project site. The CNDDB results (provided in Appendix 1 & 2) indicate a total of two sensitive plant species and three sensitive animal species known to occur within the 7.5-minute USGS Simi Quadrangle.

II. BIOLOGICAL SURVEY

Survey Methods

A brief survey focusing on botanical and wildlife resources was conducted on foot by Condor biologists Elihu Gevirtz and Jennifer Jackson on November 28, 2006 from 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. Debbie Cassar, property owner, provided an orientation to the site by pointing out the property boundaries. The survey was limited to a representative sampling of the property. Biologists walked portions of the 82 acre lot (APN 500-0-410-26) and one of the 1.5 acre lots (500-0-410-32) in a random fashion. The second 1.5 acre lot (APN 500-0-410-30) was not surveyed. Site conditions and plant and wildlife species observed were noted (Tables 1 & 2). Eight power binoculars were used to observe and identify any animals in and around the property. Animals were noted by site, sound, tracks, and scat.

Weather Conditions

The survey was conducted in the afternoon under clear skies with a high temperature of 65° F.



Existing Conditions

The project site includes a developed Equestrian Center (including stables, barns, at least two homes, and associated development). It is located in a relatively level valley bottom, that has apparently been in agricultural production for a long period of time. Sunset Valley Road (a major road) forms the property's westerly boundary and Highway 23 is adjacent to a portion of the property's easterly boundary. The large 82 acre lot has been farmed in the past evidenced by the disturbed soil, predominance of weedy species, and as told to the investigators by Ms. Cassar. According to Ms. Cassar, the field is now fallow, awaiting completion of a transitional period until the site can be qualified as organic, at which point, the owners plan to farm organically.

A small defined drainage channel runs from south to north along the boundary between the developed portion of the property and the undeveloped portion. At the time of the site visit it was approximately 6 feet wide and about 2.5 feet deep. A small stream of water several inches high was flowing in its center. A pond (probably man-made) exists at the north end of the property. A long pile of dirt about five or six feet high was on the property. It was not examined, but there was a smell of trash observed by one of the investigators. Items observed included broken glass, bottles, plastics, etc.

A. Vegetation and Wildlife Observations

Most of the large 82-acre parcel is disturbed and is dominated by a variety of non-native, invasive species, however, a few native species were observed such as cliff aster (*Malacothrix saxatilis*), Douglas' nightshade (*Solanum douglassii*), coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*), and telegraph weed (*Heterotheca grandiflora*). Non-native species observed include Russian thistle (*Salsola tragus*), black mustard (*Brassica nigra*), common sowthistle (*Sonchus oleraceus*), and cheeseweed (*Malva parviflora*), among others listed in Table 1. These plants and the ground between them provide cover and food chain support to a variety of animals.

Narrowleaf willow (*Salix exigua*), arroyo willow (*Salix lasiolepis*), Peruvian pepper tree (*Schinus molle*), water-cress (*Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum*), and what appears to be a cultivated walnut (*Juglans sp.*) dominate the drainage channel and adjacent slopes. Weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*) occurs around the perimeter of the pond. Wildlife observations included two rufous-crowned sparrows (*Aimophila ruficeps*), red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*), and two white-tailed kites (*Elanus leucurus*), among others listed in Table 2.



Table 1
Partial List of Plants Occurring On Site

Scientific Name	Common Name	IPC Rating
<i>Baccharis pilularis</i>	coyote brush	
<i>Brassica nigra</i>	black mustard	Moderate
<i>Heterotheca grandiflora</i>	telegraph weed	
<i>Hirschfeldia incana</i>	shortpod mustard	Moderate
<i>Juglans sp. (cultivar)</i>	walnut	
<i>Malacothrix saxatilis</i>	cliff aster	
<i>Malva parviflora</i>	cheeseweed	
<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	white horehound	Limited
<i>Olea europea</i>	olive	Limited
<i>Plantago major</i>	broadleaf plantain	
<i>Ricinus communis</i>	castorbean	Limited
<i>Rorippa nasturtium-aquaticum</i>	water-cress	
<i>Rubus ursinus (cultivar)</i>	blackberry	
<i>Rumex sp.</i>	dock	Limited
<i>Salvia mellifera</i>	black sage	
<i>Salix babylonica</i>	weeping willow	
<i>Salix exigua</i>	narrowleaf willow	
<i>Salix lasiolepis</i>	arroyo willow	
<i>Salsola tragus</i>	Russian thistle	Limited
<i>Schinus molle</i>	Peruvian pepper tree	Limited
<i>Solanum douglasii</i>	Douglas' nightshade	
<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>	common sowthistle	
<i>Urtica sp.</i>	nettle	

Table 2
Partial List of Wildlife Observed On Site

Scientific Name	Common Name
Birds	
<i>Aimophila ruficeps</i>	rufous-crowned sparrow
<i>Anas americana</i>	American wigeon
<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	mallard
<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>	red-tailed hawk
<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>	American crow
<i>Dendroica coronata</i>	yellow-rumped warbler
<i>Dendroica petechia</i>	yellow warbler
<i>Egretta thula</i>	snowy egret
<i>Elanus leucurus</i>	white-tailed kite
<i>Euphagus cyanocephalus</i>	Brewer's blackbird
<i>Falco sparverius</i>	American kestrel
<i>Fulica americana</i>	American coot
<i>Oxyura jamaicensis</i>	ruddy duck
<i>Sayornis nigricans</i>	black phoebe
<i>Zenaidura macroura</i>	mourning dove

B. Results

The site is heavily disturbed. The area visited includes a fallow agricultural field which currently exhibits some remnant individuals typically associated with coastal sage scrub such as cliff aster (*Malacothrix saxatilis*), Douglas' nightshade (*Solanum douglassii*), coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*), and telegraph weed (*Heterotheca grandiflora*). Among the species listed in Tables 3 and 4, only California Orcutt grass (*Orcuttia californica*) which occurs in vernal pools, Lyon's pentachaeta (*Pentachaeta lyonii*) which occurs in valley grasslands and other habitats, and round-leaved filaree (*Erodium macrophyllum*) which also occurs in valley grasslands would have been expected if the site had not been farmed for many years. Note that the survey was very brief and should only be considered preliminary considering the size of the property and that it was during the winter when these species are not flowering. Other rare, threatened and endangered plant species that grow in flat valley bottoms are possible but unlikely to occur on the site due the degraded nature of the site.

Two white-tailed kites (*Elanus leucurus*) were observed foraging over a portion of the fallow agricultural field vegetated by brush that was about 3 to 4 feet tall with space to walk between most shrubs. A variety of wading birds and a snowy egret were observed at the pond. Other observed species are listed in Table 2. Unidentified fish (more than 25 individuals) approximately 2 to 4 inches long were swimming in the drainage.

Table 3
CNDDDB and CNPS Results for USGS Simi Quadrangle

Scientific Name	Common Name	Habitat Likely to Occur
<i>California Orcutt grass</i>	Orcuttia californica	vernal pools
<i>Pentachaeta lyonii</i>	Lyon's pentachaeta	coastal habitats
<i>Horkelia cuneata ssp. puberula</i>	mesa horkelia	Dry, sandy, coastal chaparral
<i>Erodium macrophyllum</i>	round-leaved filaree	Open sites, grassland, scrub
<i>Dudleya parva</i>	Conejo dudleya	coastal scrub, rocky, clay soils
<i>Calochortus plummerae</i>	Plummer's mariposa lily	Dry, rocky chaparral, yellow-pine forest
Total		6



Table 4
CNDDDB Results for USGS Surrounding Quadrangles

Scientific Name	Common Name	Habitat Likely to Occur
<i>Astragalus brauntonii</i>	Braunton's milk-vetch	disturbed chaparral
<i>Chorizanthe parryi</i> var. <i>fernandina</i>	San Fernando Valley spineflower	Sandy places, generally in coastal or desert scrub
<i>Deinandra minthornii</i>	Santa Susana tarplant	Chaparral
<i>Dodecahema leptoceras</i>	slender-horned spineflower	alluvial sand in coastal scrub
<i>Dudleya cymosa</i> ssp. <i>agourensis</i>	Agoura Hills dudleya	rocky outcrops and slopes
<i>Dudleya cymosa</i> ssp. <i>marcescens</i>	marcescent dudleya	Santa Monica Mountains
<i>Dudleya parva</i>	Conejo dudleya	coastal scrub, rocky, clay soils
<i>Dudleya verityi</i>	Verity's dudleya	volcanic outcrops
<i>Eriogonum crocatum</i>	Conejo buckwheat	dry, rocky slopes
<i>Orcuttia californica</i>	California Orcutt grass	vernal pools
<i>Pentachaeta lyonii</i>	Lyon's pentachaeta	chaparral, valley grasslands
Total		11

Table 5
CNDDDB for USGS Simi Quadrangle

Scientific Name	Common Name	Habitat Likely to Occur
<i>Poliophtila californica californica</i>	coastal California gnatcatcher	coastal sage scrub
<i>Streptocephalus wootton</i>	Riverside fairy shrimp	vernal pools
<i>Vireo bellii pusillus</i>	least Bell's vireo	willow-dominated riparian habitat
Total		3

Table 6
CNDDDB Results for USGS Surrounding Quadrangles

Scientific Name	Common Name	Habitat Likely to Occur
<i>Bufo californicus</i>	arroyo toad	riparian - sandy riverbanks, washes, and arroyos
<i>Castostomus santaanae</i>	Santa Ana sucker	riparian
<i>Coccyzus americanus occidentalis</i>	western yellow-billed cuckoo	riparian
<i>Gasterosteus aculeatus williamsoni</i>	unarmored threespine stickleback	riparian
<i>Gymnogyps californianus</i>	California condor	foraging over grasslands
<i>Oncorhynchus mykiss irideus</i>	southern steelhead- southern California esu	riparian
<i>Poliophtila californica californica</i>	coastal California gnatcatcher	coastal sage scrub
<i>Rana aurora draytonii</i>	California red-legged frog	riparian
<i>Rana muscosa</i>	mountain yellow-legged frog	mid to high elevation riparian
<i>Riparia riparia</i>	bank swallow	riparian
<i>Vireo bellii pusillus</i>	least Bell's vireo	willow-dominated riparian
Total		11

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III. IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Impacts to native plants and animals are expected to be minimal given the historical uses and presently degraded nature of the site.

Nesting and Roosting

No evidence of nesting or roosting by raptors or vultures was observed.

Rare, Threatened, and Endangered (RTE) Species - Plants

No federal, state, or CNPS listed species were observed onsite.

Rare, Threatened, and Endangered (RTE) Species - Animals

No rare, threatened, or endangered species were observed on site. White-tailed kite (*Elanus leucurus*) is not listed as rare, threatened, or endangered, nor as a Species of Special Concern, but it is a Fully Protected species by the State of California (California Fish and Game Code, Section 3511). Two were observed foraging over a portion of the fallow agricultural field property vegetated by brush. (This brush was about 3 to 4 feet tall with space to walk between most shrubs.)

Wetlands

A pond (probably man-made) and a small drainage with water flowing in it occur on the property. The ecological significance of the pond, and the project's potential impact to the pond are unknown.

Coastal Habitats

The project site is outside of the Coastal Zone and would not directly impact coastal habitats.

Habitats Providing Seasonal Concentrations or Migration of Fish and Wildlife

The pond may support seasonal concentrations of aquatic fowl.

Locally Important Species and Communities

White-tailed kite (*Elanus leucurus*)

White-tailed kites are found in open country, preferring grasslands and the upper sections of marshes for hunting. These areas may be maintained as year-round territories or they may be unused for several years before being used again. Communal nocturnal roosts often occur in oak woodland on the edge of grassland, but communal roosts can also occur in willows, and orchards.

The project would remove some foraging habitat for this species. It is unknown how much foraging habitat would be removed; and it is also unknown how the species would be affected by the project.

Wildlife Movement Corridors

The project appears to be within a wildlife movement corridor recognized by the Ventura State Route 118 Wildlife Corridor Multi-Agency Working Group. The role of this property in the wildlife corridor and the presence and location or absence of crossings under Highways 23 and 118 are unknown to the investigators at this time. The project's potential impact to the wildlife corridor is unknown.

Mitigation Measures

None identified at this time.



IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Further analysis of the following issues is recommended:
 - a. Status of the white-tailed kite population in the Tierra-Rejada area of the Simi Valley, including population estimates, nesting and roosting sites, and the amount of available foraging grounds in light of potential cumulative impacts.
 - b. Importance of the property to the Highway 118 wildlife movement corridor.
 - c. Significance of the pond on the property.
 - d. Spring surveys for sensitive plants and animals.
2. There is adequate room on the property to allow for setting aside some land for the purposes of conservation and habitat restoration. Potential habitat on the property includes native grassland, coastal scrub, and possibly vernal pools (depending upon the suitability of the soil). These could occur on a portion of the property while still allowing agriculture to continue unimpeded. Such an effort could benefit a suite of threatened, endangered, and locally important species and could contribute to the sustainability of ongoing efforts to preserve wildlife corridors in this area. The species that could benefit might include California Orcutt grass, Lyon's pentachaeta, round-leaved filaree, white-tailed kite, Riverside fairy shrimp, western spadefoot, and common animals such as red-tailed hawk and American kestrel.

We suggest that this effort be a voluntary effort of the land owners working in cooperation with the County and other agencies. It is possible that state, federal, or private funds could be used to pay for a conservation easement on a portion of the property.



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REFERENCES

California Department of Fish and Game, 2005. California Natural Diversity Database, Rare Find 3.

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