

Creek Alliance Wants Dublin Owl Habitat Preserved

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The likely eradication of a burrowing owl community at Camp Parks by The Crossings development in Dublin should be avoided, according to Alameda Creek Alliance director Jeff Miller.

Miller explained that the non-profit Alliance's interest in the burrowing owl colony connects to its concern about plant and animal habitat throughout the Alameda Creek watershed, which includes Dublin.

The final EIR for The Crossings already has been approved. Although the Alliance missed the comment period deadline, Miller said that he is advocating for owl habitat preservation on the site.

The Dublin colony represents the last sizable one in the Livermore-Amador Valley, according to Miller. There is a higher population of burrowing owls in the Altamont, but many die in the blades of wind turbines. He cited about 200 burrowing owl deaths annually.

The colony on The Crossings property, comprised of 187 acres where homes will be built, numbered five nesting pairs in 2009 and two pairs in 2010. The Camp Parks site is much larger with 12 nesting pairs in 2009, and 14 one year later, said Miller. SunCAI will be building facilities for the military at Camp Parks on the northern areas, where the bulk of the burrowing owl habitat is located.

Burrowing owls are not an endangered or threatened species. However, California lists them as a "species of concern."

Miller said that in reading the draft EIR, he noted, "They won't preserve burrowing owls on the site." There are measures in the EIR that the developer is supposed to undertake, such as survey the area, and not disturb the owls in mating season. "However, there is nothing to protect them after mating season," said Miller. They can fill in the burrowing owls' holes and eliminate the habitat, he said.

If the city and developer want to preserve the habitat, they could create a development plan that leaves enough nest burrows in place. Alternatively, they could put aside a portion of the area in which owls have nested, and make sure there is enough foraging habitat, suggested Miller.

Miller said that he might ask Dublin to reopen the EIR hearing on The Crossings, or else ask Fish and Wildlife to add conditions to the permit to preserve the habitat.

Marcia Grefsrud, an environmental scientist with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, said that the department recommended to Dublin that it "conserve burrowing owl habitat."

The burrowing owls themselves are protected by the Fish and Game code and the migratory bird code, stated Grefsrud. The department does not allow any direct take of the owls, or their eggs, she added.

Jacqui Diaz, spokesperson for Dublin, said that because it is known that owls have been found on the site, before any portion of the project area can be disturbed, the developer will need to comply with the mitigation measures identified in the final EIR. The developer will also need to secure permits through state Fish and Wildlife.

"Fish and Wildlife is the agency that approves mitigation measures to offset any project-caused losses of listed species populations and their essential habitats," said Diaz.