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Lawsuit Filed to Save San Diego's Vanishing Burrowing Owls and Wetlands

Groups Urge City to Stop Poisoning, Destruction of Burrowing Owls at Airport

SAN DIEGO, Calif.—A coalition of conservation and environmental justice groups filed a legal challenge today to the city of San Diego's development proposal that would destroy sensitive wetland and [burrowing owl](#) habitat at the Brown Field Municipal Airport. The lawsuit follows outrage within the environmental community last year after a [report](#) surfaced documenting the destruction and poisoning of burrowing owl homes at the Brown Field airport. San Diego now proposes to develop industrial, commercial and aviation facilities at Brown Field in the rapidly expanding border area of Otay Mesa.

"The last remaining large population of burrowing owls is located at Brown Field airport in Otay Mesa," said Jesse Marquez, executive director of Coalition for a Safe Environment. "On one of our visits we discovered that the owl burrows had been poisoned to eliminate the owls in order to avoid having to relocate them. We must do everything possible to protect these owls from becoming extinct in San Diego."

Brown Field airport has long been home to burrowing owls and vernal pools. Development at the site would evict the largest known burrowing owl colony in San Diego from their nests. Burrowing owls have been nearly eliminated from San Diego County by urban development. Vernal pools, like those found at Brown Field, are small, seasonal wetlands that support animals and plants uniquely adapted to an environment that may dry up for months or years at a time, including the endangered San Diego fairy shrimp. San Diego has lost about 98 percent of its vernal pools.

"San Diego rejected simple steps to protect sensitive wildlife from recklessly being paved over at the Brown Field airport," said Jonathan Evans, toxics and endangered species campaign director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Until San Diego follows its own policies to protect our rare and vanishing wildlife, and fixes the broken parts of its conservation program, we'll be forced to take them to court."

San Diego's "multiple species conservation program" was designed to protect a range of sensitive species in southwestern San Diego, including burrowing owls and animals and plants found in vernal pools. In 2006 a federal court ruled that San Diego's multiple species conservation plan failed to protect vernal pools when it was found that the city continually developed vernal pool areas.

"San Diego's conservation plan promised to preserve burrowing owls and vernal pools, yet both are on the brink of extinction because of business as usual development like Brown Field airport," said Rick Halsey, director of the California Chaparral Institute. "For imperiled wildlife to survive in San Diego the city must heed its own laws and follow advice from wildlife agencies about how to build projects that avoid sensitive species."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Wildlife proposed alternatives avoiding sensitive wildlife habitat, increasing mitigation for harming wildlife, and redesigning onsite solar projects or buildings to protect habitat. San Diego rejected those alternatives.

The legal challenge was filed by the Coalition for a Safe Environment, Center for Biological Diversity, Preserve Wild Santee, Community Dreams, California Kids IQ and California Chaparral Institute. The groups are represented by the Center for Biological Diversity and the San Diego law firm Coast Law Group.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 625,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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