

**ATTACHMENT 3  
NOTICE OF EXEMPTION**

**TO:** Santa Barbara County Clerk of the Board of Supervisors

**FROM:** Katie Nall, Santa Barbara County Planning and Development Department

The project or activity identified below is determined to be exempt from further environmental review requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) of 1970, as defined in the State and County Guidelines for the implementation of CEQA.

**APN:** County of Santa Barbara      **Case No.:** NA

**Location:** County of Santa Barbara

**Project Title:** Burrowing Owls Habitat Enhancement

**Project Applicant:** Regents of the University of California Santa Barbara

**Project Description:** The applicant, Regents of the University of California Santa Barbara, requests approval of a Santa Barbara County Fish and Wildlife Commission (SBCFGC) grant in the amount of \$40,000.00 to evaluate and enhance overwintering and breeding Burrowing Owls (*Athene cunicularia*) habitat within the County of Santa Barbara. The applicant will first identify suitable habitat areas within a list of large ranch sites, including El Chorro Ranch, Jack and Laura Dangermond Preserve, Jalama Canyon Ranch, the Casmalia Asset Corporation land, and potentially Vandenberg Space Base. Once suitable burrowing owl habitat sites are identified, the applicant will coordinate with landowners to install approximately 100 artificial burrows and multiple small rodent prey support structures throughout the approved ranch sites. Once installed, the applicant will create a map of the installed burrow entrances and document their usage during overwintering periods, monitoring the success of the burrow sites. The rapid habitat survey data will determine (1) the frequency and distribution of suitable burrows (for overwintering and nesting owls); (2) characterization of the surrounding vegetation, and (3) nearby predator perches and activity. The conclusions of the survey will provide a habitat suitability model based on conservation goals for Burrowing Owls breeding habitat and inform actions taken to enhance burrowing owl habitat. Some enhancement actions may include increasing populations of terrestrial rodents and other owl prey, reducing problematic predator perches, and providing direction for grazing management to reduce cover of habitat altering weeds. Within 60 days of completion of the project, a final report will be prepared synthesizing the rapid habitat assessment results, the burrow map, document usage rates, and make recommendations for additional work.

**Name of Public Agency Approving Project:** County of Santa Barbara

**Name of Person or Entity Carrying Out Project:** Lisa Stratton, Regents of the University of California Santa Barbara

**Exempt Status:**

☐ Ministerial  
☐ Statutory Exemption  
☒ Categorical Exemption  
☐ Emergency Project  
☐ Declared Emergency

**Cite specific CEQA and/or CEQA Guidelines Section:** 15306 [Information Collection] & 15333d(4) [Small Habitat Restoration Projects]

**Reasons to support exemption findings:**

Class 6 consists of basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. These may be strictly for information gathering purposes, or as part of a study leading to an action which a public agency has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. The project intends to create a habitat suitability model for ideal conditions for burrowing owl overwintering and breeding habitats through studying success rates of approximately 100 sites installed throughout the County. The habitat suitability model will then be used to inform landowners what conservation actions can be taken to increase the burrowing owl population within Santa Barbara County.

Class 33 consists of projects not to exceed five acres in size to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife; including (4) projects to restore or enhance habitat that are carried out principally with hand labor and not mechanized equipment. Installation of artificial burrows and small rodent dens will create a habitat for burrowing owls and their prey. The artificial burrows/small rodent prey support structures will be constructed by hand labor to avoid disturbance to the surrounding environment. The project will not cause impacts to endangered species.

The proposed project does not involve unusual circumstances, including future activities, resulting in or which might reasonably result in significant impacts which threaten the environment. The exceptions to the categorical exemptions pursuant to Section 15300.2 of the State CEQA Guidelines are:

- (a) Location. Classes 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11 are qualified by consideration of where the project is to be located – a project that is ordinarily insignificant in its impact on the environment may in a particularly sensitive environment be significant. Therefore, these classes are considered to apply all instances, except where the project may impact on an**

**environmental resource of hazardous or critical concern where designated, precisely mapped, and officially adopted pursuant to law by federal, state, or local agencies.**

The project is intended to identify characteristics of successful overwintering and breeding Burrowing Owl habitat, which could then be used to inform actions taken by landowners and conservationists to increase the population of the burrowing owl. The project includes research and coordination with landowners to identify suitable locations and the construction of additional habitat using hand labor only. The project will not lead to additional disturbance to the areas identified. This project will provide substantially improved habitat for Burrowing Owls, directly relieving current and future populations of the burrowing owl, which is now a candidate species for listing under the California Endangered Species Act. The Class 6 and Class 33 exemptions are intended for habitat improvement projects. The information resulting from the success of the project could lead to additional enhancement opportunities in areas that did not receive any of the artificial burrows associated with this project. Therefore, this exception to the categorical exemption does not apply.

**(b) Cumulative Impact. All exemptions for these classes are inapplicable when the cumulative impact of successive projects of the same type in the same place, over time is significant.**

The project is research based in an effort to create a better understanding of how to enhance Burrowing Owls breeding habitat to meet applicable conservation goals. The artificial burrows and small rodent prey support structures will provide habitat, therefore enhancing populations of terrestrial rodents and other owl prey and reducing problematic predator perches. The 100 sites identified are intended to create a positive enhancement to burrowing owl habitat within Santa Barbara County. Therefore, this exception to the categorical exemption does not apply.

**(c) Significant Effect. A categorical exemption shall not be used for an activity where there is a reasonable possibility that the activity will have a significant effect on the environment due to unusual circumstances.**

The project is for the placement of approximately 100 artificial burrows and small rodent prey support structures throughout the County's native habitat areas for the intended use of habitat enhancement. There is no substantial evidence that the proposed project involves unusual circumstances, including future activities, resulting in or which might reasonably result in significant impacts which threaten the environment. Therefore, this exception to the Categorical Exemption is not applicable to the proposed project.

**(d) Scenic Highways. A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may result in damage to scenic resources, including but not limited to, trees, historic buildings, rock outcroppings, or similar resources, within a highway officially designated**

**as a state scenic highway. This does not apply to improvements which are required as mitigation by an adopted negative declaration or certified EIR.**

The project involves the addition of 100 small habitat structures spread throughout the County, which would not be visible or distinguishable as man-made structures from any scenic designated state scenic highway. The project would not result in damage to any protected or scenic resource. Therefore, this exception to the categorical exemption does not apply.

**(e) Hazardous Waste Sites. A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project located on a site which is included on any list compiled pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code.**

The project areas are not identified as hazardous waste sites included on any list compiled pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code, and therefore this exception to the Categorical Exemption is not applicable to the proposed project.

**(f) Historical Resources. A categorical exemption shall not be used for a project which may cause a substantial adverse change in the significance of a historical resource.**

The Class 6 and Class 33 exemptions are intended for habitat improvement projects. The project involves the placement of small habitat structures designed to provide habitat for small rodents within protected open space areas throughout the County. However, the project does not require disturbance or excavation of soil beyond placement, will not be visible or distinguishable as man-made structures, and would not impact or change any historic or archeological resources nearby. Therefore, this exception to the categorical exemptions does not apply.

**Lead Agency Contact Person:** Katie Nall

**Phone #:** 805-884-8050      **Department/Division Representative:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** July 24, 2025

**Acceptance Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Distribution:** Hearing Support Staff

**Date Filed by County Clerk:** \_\_\_\_\_