Bloom Biological, Inc., "Summary of Late Winter and Spring Avian Survey with Focus on the California Condor (Gymnogyps californianus) on Portions of Newhall Land and Farming Company Property, Los Angeles County, California" (July 13, 2007; 2007A)

SUMMARY OF LATE WINTER AND SPRING AVIAN SURVEY -- WITH FOCUS ON THE CALIFORNIA CONDOR (*GYMNOGYPS CALIFORNIANUS*) ON PORTIONS OF NEWHALL LAND AND FARMING COMPANY PROPERTY, LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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INTRODUCTION

Extensive field surveys of all occurring and potentially occurring special-status, or sensitive, avian species and all raptors (both common and special-status) were conducted on portions of Newhall Land and Farming Company property by Bloom Biological, Inc. from February through June, 2007. Special emphasis was placed on finding raptor nest locations and sensitive riparian birds. This summary focuses on the findings of the survey effort relative to the California condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*).

The entire survey area consisted of approximately 25 miles of the Santa Clara River and its major tributaries in and around Valencia, Los Angeles County, California. Tributaries that were included in the survey area were lower Castaic Creek, San Francisquito Canyon, and the South Fork of the Santa Clara River. The limits of the survey area include the entire Santa Clara River from ¼ mile downstream of the Las Brisas Crossing in Ventura County upstream to the future location of the Golden Valley Bridge (east of the Los Angeles Aqueduct). The survey area encompassed all habitats within the riverbed and approximately ½ mile on each side of the river. Contained within this general survey area was the Landmark Village project impact area (**Figure 1**), including an area up to one mile beyond the project site boundary.

METHODOLOGY

Wintering bird surveys, burrowing owl surveys, and raptor nest surveys were conducted between 24 February and 25 March, 2007. Raptor nest surveys continued throughout the spring and continue beyond the writing of this report. Surveys were conducted up to one mile out from the Landmark Village project impact area boundary. Surveys were conducted during daylight hours as well as up to four hours after sunset. Surveys were conducted by walking and/or driving systematically along dirt roads, foot paths, streambeds, and canyon bottoms throughout the survey area. GPS waypoint locations were recorded for all active raptor nests as well as suspected nest sites. All active nests were monitored throughout the survey period to determine outcome.

Although all bird species detected were recorded, special emphasis was placed on finding those considered to be of special status by federal and state resource agencies and conservation organizations. Special-status birds were surveyed within the riparian area and within the adjacent agricultural areas within the Landmark Village impact area. No effort was spent surveying for special-status upland (e.g., coastal sage scrub) bird species during these surveys, but species were noted when detected.

SUMMARY

California Condor **Not Observed**
(*Gymnogyps californianus*)

CONSERVATION STATUS: Federally Endangered, California Endangered, California Fully Protected, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Sensitive, National Audubon Society Watch List, American Bird Conservancy Green List, U.S. Bird Conservation Watch List.

THREATS: Currently, lead poisoning, consumption of microtrash, collisions with wires and poles, shooting, contaminant poisoning, and long-term habitat loss.

HABITAT: Remote hilly and mountainous regions with cliff sites for nesting and adequate numbers of deer and livestock to provide carrion food source.

DISTRIBUTION: In historic times, Tehachapi and Greenhorn Mountains, Coast Ranges, and southern Sierra Nevada. Relocation efforts have centered on historical range as well as Grand Canyon of Arizona and in northern Baja California.

POTENTIAL TO OCCUR ON SITE: Re-introduced into the local mountains beginning in 1992 from captive breeding program as part of the California Condor Recovery Program. This wide-ranging species nests on remote cliffs but forages over hundreds of square miles, and is known to at least fly over the site (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Ventana Wilderness Society).

BACKGROUND

The California condor is the largest of the New World vultures, in the family Cathartidae (AOU 2006), with the Andean condor (*Vultur gryphus*) as the closest extant relative. Because of their morphological and behavioral similarity, Andean condors were first used as surrogates of California condors to develop the current reintroduction programs. Adult California condors weigh, on average, 8.8 kg (male) and 8.1 kg (female) with a wingspan of approximately 2.8 meters (Snyder and Schmitt 2002). Sexual maturity is typically reached between 6 and 8 years of age for both males and females (Koford 1953, Snyder 1988, Snyder and Snyder 2000, Snyder and Schmitt 2002). Condors are known to be monogamous, with pair bonds maintained over multiple years. Nest sites are in large diameter trees or in potholes on cliffs; both types of nest sites are sheltered from inclement weather. One egg is laid per nest attempt (end of January – April) (unless a nest failure occurs; recycling has been documented for this species); incubation is approximately 57 days, with fledging of chicks at 5.5-6 months old, and independence approximately 6 months later (Snyder and Hamber 1985, Snyder and Snyder 2000, Snyder and Schmitt 2002).

Paleontological evidence of the California condor shows that the species was common throughout North America from at least the late Pleistocene (40,000 years before present) (Snyder and Snyder 2000, Snyder and Schmitt 2002). In the early nineteenth century, the species occurred in California, Oregon, Washington; southern British Columbia, Canada; and Baja California, Mexico. By the mid-twentieth century, California condors were largely confined to southern California.

HABITAT USE

The California condor is found in varying habitat and climate tolerances; from sea level to upper elevation meadows and forests, including redwood, open grasslands, oak savannahs, Sequoia, and potreros (cattle ranch or pasture) (USFWS 1996). Suitable habitat contains adequate food supply (carrion), open areas, and reliable winds and air movement to allow for long duration soaring during foraging. Flights over vast areas have been measured over several hundred linear miles of travel each day (Meretsky and Snyder 1992). California condors are scavengers of fresh, medium to large-sized carcasses, such as sheep, cattle, deer, and elk (Koford 1952, Snyder and Snyder 2000, Collins et al. 2000). As the largest avian scavengers in North America, they are evolutionarily adapted for feeding on the carcasses of deer, elk, whales, mastodons, and other large (+ 20 kg), dead animals that were often found in the Pleistocene (Emslie1988). Condors are not known to feed on vehicle killed animals (Snyder and Schmitt 2002).

The arc of the southern (central) San Joaquin Valley was the last remaining range of California condors until all were removed for captive breeding. After the turn of the 20th century, they utilized pine and chaparral habitat within what is now the Los Padres, Angeles, and Sequoia National Forests in present day San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, and Tulare counties. Foraging habitat included the above, in addition to grassland and oak savannah habitat in Sean Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Kern, Tulare and Fresno counties.

Most condors forage within 50 – 70 km of nesting areas, with core foraging areas ranging around 2,500 to 2,800 square km. This wide ranging foraging area appears to be an adaptation to unpredictable food supplies. Most remaining condors in the 1970-1980's were familiar with the primary foraging areas, which comprised an area of 7,000 square km in the foothills of the southern San Joaquin Valley and auxiliary valleys in San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Kern, and Tulare counties (Meretsky and Snyder 1992). After 1982, most visual sightings of foraging occurred in the Elkhorn Hills/Cuyama Valley/Carrizo Plain complex and in the foothills of the southern San Joaquin Valley (Meretsky and Snyder 1992). Telemetry studies and visual observation of California condors pre- and post-nadir show that the birds tended to avoid cities and areas with severe habitat loss or degradation (i.e. residential, commercial, and high intensity agricultural areas). When condors have landed amongst anthropogenically altered environments, (parking lots or buildings), it has been noted that those particular birds have had inappropriate familiarity (imprinting) with humans while in captivity prior to release.

POPULATION STATUS: SUMMARY

California condor populations were apparently in decline at the time of European contact in North America (ca. 400 years BP) (Snyder and Snyder 2000). Since the early 1900's, the condor population was precipitously declining. Early research suggested a population of 60 condors from the 1930-1950's (Robinson 1939, 1940; Koford 1953), though further analysis suggests a more likely population at that time period of 150 individuals (Snyder and Schmitt 2002). Using Koford's early estimate of population size, Miller et al. (1965) suggested that just over 40 birds remained in the early 1960's. Further analysis in the late 1970's showed that the population had

declined even further to approximately 30 (Wilbur 1980). Photo-censusing allowed reliable identification of individuals (Snyder and Johnson 1985), which encouraged a more precise enumeration of the population; (i.e., 21 individuals in 1982, to 19 individuals in 1983, 15 individuals in 1984, and 9 individuals in 1985 (Figure 1, Table 1). The final groups of individuals were removed for captive breeding in 1986 with the last wild California condor captured on April 19, 1987.

Since that time, from January 1992 to the present, California condors have been re-introduced into suitable habitat in eastern Ventura County, generally near the proposed Landmark Village site. (Meretsky et al. 2000). These released birds have attempted to breed at several locations in southern California; the present breeding range includes the Los Padres National Forest; these condors have been observed foraging out onto private land near the Landmark Village project area. Most nesting attempts since the nadir have failed due to embryo mortality, or reproduction has failed when the chicks are approximately 3-5.5 months old (Condor Recovery Program 2006). Current reproductive success of 4 young during 2007 (Grantham 2007) may be predicated by potential mortality as the nesting season progresses.

REGULATORY HISTORY

The California condor was listed as endangered (32 FR 4001) with critical habitat designated (41 FR 41914), except where it has been determined to be a nonessential experimental population (i.e. northern Arizona) (61 FR 54043 54060). The recovery plan for the species was completed April 25, 1996. The designated critical habitat for the California condor does not fall within the boundary of the approved Newhall Ranch Specific Plan, which includes the Landmark Village project area. **Figure 2** depicts the California condor's critical habitat in relation to the boundary of the approved Newhall Ranch Specific Plan.

SURVEY RESULTS

Presence on project area: As opportunistic scavengers, California condors travel up to 225 km per day (Koford 1958, Wilbur 1978, Meretsky and Snyder 1992, Snyder and Snyder 2000, Meretsky and Snyder 1992). California condors are a resident, non-migratory species that have the largest home range of any terrestrial bird in North America (Bloom pers. obs.). The Landmark Village project is approximately 25 miles from the closest known nest, and within the normal flight range of several pair of condors and all of the single, non-mated individuals.

Under most circumstances, condor infrequently fly over valley floor habitats. This is probably because most of valley floor habitat in California has been converted to agriculture or housing. However, condors will fly over (and currently do) fly over the Santa Clarita Valley but will rarely land for roosting or foraging (Bloom pers. obs.). Most condor forage flights are probably at fairly high altitudes above the ground when moving between Hopper National Wildlife Refuge and Newhall Ranch and beyond. For example, no condors with transmitters were known to fly across California's Central Valley, but instead followed the foothills and mountains in an arc around the circumference.

The Landmark Village project area is not currently nesting or roosting habitat and, to my knowledge, no condors are known to have recently landed within the project area (last 25 years).

Landmark Village has no potential for nesting opportunities for California condors. As the population increases, condors may fly more frequently over the Landmark Village project area on their way to foraging opportunities. As seasonal shifts occur, condor movements have been affected during annual periods (Meretsky and Snyder 1992, Stoms et al. 1993). However, in large part because of limited prey and reduced wind and thermals, the Landmark Village project area does not contain the essential elements that define suitable California condor habitat (Snyder and Snyder 2000; Bloom pers. obs.).

It is my determination that while the Landmark Village project area will cause a permanent alteration to the landscape, it will not induce significant direct impacts to the California condor resurging population, specific individuals, their individual and combined behavior, or to their critical habitat.

As indicated above, I predict no direct negative impacts to the California condor as a result of the project. There is a potential for indirect cumulative impacts resulting from an increase in human population (and concomitant increase in power lines, utility poles, microtrash, increased hunting, greater risk of lead poisoning, other contaminants and long-term habitat degradation) however with the incorporation of project design features and the preparation of a management and enhancement plan relative to the Newhall Ranch High Country/SMA 20, these cumulative indirect impacts are reduced to a less than significant level.