



Puente Hills Habitat Preservation Authority

Endowment Provided by the Puente Hills Landfill

March 20, 2013

County of Los Angeles
Department of Regional Planning
Attn: Emma Howard
Regional Planning Department
Room 1354
320 W. Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Comments on the Draft Significant Ecological Area Ordinance dated December 20, 2012

Dear Ms. Howard:

The Puente Hills Habitat Preservation Authority (Habitat Authority) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Draft Significant Ecological Area (SEA) Ordinance (dated December 20, 2012). The Habitat Authority is a joint powers authority established pursuant to California Government Code Section 6500 *et seq.* with a Board of Directors consisting of the City of Whittier, County of Los Angeles, Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County, and the Hacienda Heights Improvement Association. According to its mission, the Habitat Authority is dedicated to the acquisition, restoration, and management of open space in the Puente Hills for preservation of the land in perpetuity, with the primary purpose to protect the biological diversity. Additionally, the agency endeavors to provide opportunities for outdoor education and low-impact recreation. The Habitat Authority owns and or manages over 3,800 acres which lie within the Cities of Whittier and La Habra Heights, as well as in the County unincorporated areas of the Puente Hills known as Hacienda Heights and Rowland Heights.

The Habitat Authority thanks and acknowledges the Department of Regional Planning for the incorporation of certain comments on the previous SEA Ordinance Summary Draft dated June 2012, as discussed in the attached comment letter dated July 26, 2012. These comments included suggested language for development standards within SEAs, such as exclusion of invasive plants, fencing to promote wildlife movement, and avoidance of habitat impacts from fuel modification. However, certain comments were not addressed in the current Draft Ordinance and are included below for reference, along with additional comments.



Section 1 (22.08.190)

In this section the definition of an SEA has been amended and “means any portion of a lot or parcel of land containing an ecologically important land or water system that supports valuable habitat for plants and animals integral to the preservation of rare, threatened or endangered species and to the conservation of biological diversity in the County.” As currently worded, it could be narrowly interpreted that an SEA is only an area that supports habitat for sensitive species AND biological diversity; rather, the definition should be for areas that support either sensitive species AND/OR biological diversity, not necessarily both. As such, this definition would indirectly acknowledge the importance of wildlife movement and habitat connectivity in promoting biological diversity.

Section 22.52.2610 – Definitions

The definition of “Ground Disturbance” is given as “any removal or thinning of vegetation, clearing to bare earth, agricultural discing, earthworks or any cubic yardage, or any other activity which would alter topography or affect areas of indigenous vegetation.” This definition implies that only activities that affect “indigenous” vegetation are considered ground disturbance. Since non-indigenous vegetation can also provide habitat for sensitive species or wildlife movement, it is recommended that the word “indigenous” be removed from the definition to avoid misinterpretation.

Section 22.52.2620 - Applicability

The following changes are recommended to the first paragraph for clarification (suggested text in **bold**): “The provisions of this Part 25 shall apply to any ground disturbance wholly or partially located within an SEA and to any use or project (**including those that do not involve ground disturbance**), including construction activities, storage, Fuel Modification Zones, and related on-site and off-site improvements such as grading, roads, sewer lines, water lines, and drainage facilities wholly or partially located within an SEA, except for:”. The first suggested change is recommended so that the SEA Ordinance would also clearly apply to certain activities that may indirectly affect habitat but may not involve ground disturbance, such as lighting for a new tower on top of an existing structure or adding height beyond 200 feet to a structure. The second suggested change (from “off-site” to “on-site”) was recommended to correct an assumed error.

Subsections A through D exempt previously filed or approved projects. We suggest that these exemptions prohibit the removal of any native habitat that may have developed or recovered on or adjacent to the site, and consider protection of any sensitive species or important wildlife movement corridors that may have since been identified. In addition, we recommend that this standard also consider any cumulative effects from other nearby projects that may have not been approved when the original permit was approved but which could now have a cumulatively negative impact on biological resources within the SEA.

Subsection E

We understand that projects outside of SEAs are not subject to this Ordinance, however, please consider that for projects immediately adjacent to SEAs that they be reviewed by the County Biologist for capability. Just as the Fire Department, Parks, and other County departments review

projects prior to approval, so to would the County Biologist in these instances, and would check the project for compatibility issues associated with noise, lighting, runoff, etc.

The exemption from the SEA Ordinance noted in Subsection H is for “any of the following activities required, requested, or *permitted by* a governmental agency: (1) Removal or thinning of vegetation for fire safety; and (2) Hazard management activities in response to public safety concerns.” We suggest that activities *undertaken by* a governmental agency also be included in this exemption, per the June 2012 Draft SEA Ordinance. In addition, we also suggest that activities involving removal of non-native vegetation (including by herbicide) and habitat restoration (including, but not limited to, seeding, planting of container plants, and irrigation) also be exempted activities by open space management government agencies. We also suggest exemption of government agency activities such as scientific studies, erosion control, and construction, maintenance or demolition of trails, structures or facilities necessary for open space management activities.

Section 22.52.2640 - Development Standards

This section lists the development standards non-exempt activities would need to adhere to when conducted within SEAs.

Subsection A states that “Landscaped area within an SEA shall not include invasive species listed in the Invasive Species List of the SEA Design Manual.” Please consider the following revised language (new text in **bold**): “Landscaped area within an SEA shall not include invasive species listed in the Invasive Species List of the SEA Design Manual **or has a California Invasive Plant Council inventory rating of high or moderate.**”

Subsection B notes that “all outdoor lighting shall comply with the standards in Part 9 of Chapter 22.44”, which refers to the Rural Outdoor Lighting District. Please add clarifying language indicating that these lighting standards shall apply even if the SEA is not located within the Rural Outdoor Lighting District.

Subsection F notes that construction of new roads, or improvements to existing roads, bisecting habitat linkages or wildlife corridors shall include “wilderness crossing points for the safe passage of species.” The addition of this language is much appreciated. Please consider clarifying the language with the following substitution: “wildlife crossing structures to facilitate the movement of species.” Crossing points could possibly be misinterpreted as something as minor as installing a sign cautioning drivers to crossing wildlife which may help facilitate safe passage for a few fortunate animals would not promote connectivity between populations within and between SEAs.

Subsection H notes that new ground disturbances may not encroach upon a habitat linkage, whereas encroachment is defined as resulting in the narrowing of the habitat linkage width to fewer than 1,000 feet. Please include a written and illustrative definition of “habitat linkage” in the SEA Ordinance.. We look forward to seeing the SEA Habitat Linkages and Wildlife Corridors Map when it is available for review on the Department’s GIS-NET3.

Similarly, subsection I notes that encroachments cannot result in the narrowing of a wildlife corridor to fewer than 200 feet. Please also include a written and illustrative definition of “wildlife corridor” and a justification for the minimum width of 200 feet.

Subsection J includes requirements for activities that may affect special status species. Please consider the following revised language for clarification (new text in **bold**, deleted text in ~~strikeout~~): “When any ground disturbance, use, or project may encroach upon a **an individual of or habitat for a likely to occur** species of special status identified in the SEA’s Description in the General Plan and/or discovered during the biologist site visit required by Section 22.52.2650.B.1, such ground disturbance, use or project shall not impact an area of exceeding ~~50~~**10** percent of the habitat area for the species of special status on the lot or parcel of land.” Changes in the first part of the sentence are suggested to clarify that encroachments could occur to individuals or habitat, and that special status species other than those identified in the SEA’s Description could be discovered by the biologist. The change in the last part of the sentence, from 50 to 10 percent, represents a more conservative approach and would reduce the threshold for requiring a Conditional Use Permit. Depending on the species or size of the parcel, removal of half of the habitat for a special status species could threaten the viability of a population on that parcel or even within the SEA, and should require additional analysis.

Subsection K, 3a states that the setback requirement for vernal pools is 150 feet. To protect the watershed and uplands that provide habitat for amphibians, reptiles and vernal pool plant pollinators, consider increasing the buffer distance to 250 feet.

Finally, we suggest adding an additional standard, which would require that structures be clustered as close as possible to other existing structures and be located as close as possible to existing roads in an effort to reduce fragmentation and edge effects.

Section 22.52.2650 –Permitted Uses

This section notes the types of low-impact uses that are permitted under the SEA Ordinance through a Site Plan Review process; higher impact uses would require a Conditional Use Permit.

Subsection A.2 allows for uses or projects located within developed or disturbed areas identified in the SEA Developed or Disturbed Areas Map. However, based upon a review of the Proposed Disturbed/Developed Areas available through the Department’s GIS-NET3, many of these mapped areas in the proposed Puente Hills SEA appear to be incorrect. Some existing fuel modification zones are mapped, and others are missing. Since fuel modification practices are exempt activities, please remove from the map all fuel modification areas that are identified as disturbed/developed that are on Habitat Authority properties. Since the Habitat Authority will not be allowing expansion of development activities within fuel modification zones on lands managed/owned, this layer on the map needs to be adjusted. See attached comments. In addition, many of the Authority’s and County’s trails (which are shown as disturbed/developed on the map) within the Habitat Authority’s Preserve are missing or incorrect (e.g. the Coyote, Ahwingna, Puma, and Native Oak trails all are missing from the map in Hacienda Hills). The Habitat Authority would be happy to share its trails GIS layer, and to work with the Department to create an accurate map of disturbed/developed areas and trails.

Subsection A.3 and A.4 allow for expired projects that are deemed fundamentally similar to the previous authorization and for modifications to previously approved projects. We suggest that these projects prohibit the removal of any native habitat that may have developed or recovered on or adjacent to the site, and consider protection of any sensitive species or important wildlife movement

corridors that may have since been identified. In addition, we recommend that this standard also consider any cumulative effects from other nearby projects that may have not been approved when the original permit was approved but which could now have a cumulatively negative impact on biological resources within the SEA.

Subsection A.5 allows for activities conducted by governmental agencies to improve the quality of biological resources in an SEA, including non-native vegetation removal programs, native habitat restoration programs, and construction of wildlife under and overpasses for habitat linkages and wildlife corridors. It was requested earlier in this letter and in previous letters that such activities be exempt and we still make that recommendation, as they are conducted for the sole benefit of habitat improvement and generally have very minor impacts. However, if they remain as Permitted Uses requiring Site Plan Review, it is our understanding that such review would only apply to new or existing programs, and would not be required for every individual project, some of which are quite small and isolated. For example, the Habitat Authority has an existing Resource Management Plan (RMP) which includes non-native vegetation removal and habitat restoration programs; it is our understanding that the RMP could be submitted for Site Plan Review and approval, and that any subsequent activities consistent with that RMP would be permitted. It was also requested earlier in this letter and in previous letters that activities such as scientific studies, erosion control, and construction, maintenance or demolition of trails, structures or facilities necessary for open space management activities be exempt; however, if not exempt as recommended, please include such activities in this subsection as activities allowed under the SEA Ordinance with a Site Plan Review if conducted by open space management government agencies. These activities are integral to the management of biological resources, and often have minor impacts compared to other permitted uses such as single-family residences. The requirement for open space management activities (such as non-native vegetation removal or demolition of trails) to undergo a Site Review or Conditional Use Permit process would cost land management agencies (which are already struggling with limited resources) additional unanticipated funds which could be used for actual improvement of biological resources and would unnecessarily delay safety, maintenance, and educational management actions on properties enjoyed daily by the public. Please also consider indicating in the ordinance that the Site Plan approval has no term limits.

Section 22.52.2670 –SEA Conditional Use Permit Review

Subsection B.5 notes that a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) application will be required to include an SEA Site Assessment Report and an SEA Site Impact Report. This subsection notes that the required contents of these reports are provided in the SEA Design Manual; however, that section the Manual was not available during our review of the current Draft SEA Ordinance. We look forward to reviewing this as soon as it is available.

Subsection C.1 lists criteria for projects within SEAs that will require a Type B CUP (for higher impact projects, requiring more open space mitigation and review by the SEA Technical Advisory Committee [SEATAC]) instead of a Type A CUP (for lower impact projects). The criterion under (b) is that “the project may result in the creation of a habitat area which no longer maintains connectivity with the rest of the SEA’s natural areas.” This threshold is too high to require a Type B CUP. Very few, if any, projects will be on a scale such that they would completely isolate one habitat area from the rest of the SEA. Using the proposed criterion, if a project maintains a very narrow or limited habitat connection, it would only require a Type A CUP. The following language

is suggested instead: “the project may result in the creation of a habitat area which is threatened by a substantial reduction in connectivity with the rest of the SEA’s natural areas.”

Similarly, subsection C.2 lists criteria for projects within Ecological Transition Areas (ETAs), located within SEAs, that will require a Type B CUP. The criterion under (b) is that “the proposed project may result in the creation of an undisturbed habitat area which no longer maintains connectivity with the rest of the SEA’s undisturbed habitat areas.” It is suggested that the language be changed as noted in the previous paragraph. Also, since the definition of an ETA includes lands which are degraded but are “functionally integral to the SEA or support important plant or animal populations, it is suggested that a criterion be added which ensures that such functional integrity is not compromised by an activity; the functional integrity designating a particular area as an ETA should be adequately described in each SEA description to facilitate evaluation of such a criterion. In addition, it is suggest that the word “undisturbed” be clarified so that it refers to areas that are not developed or disturbed, as the term “undisturbed” could be misinterpreted as areas that support non-native vegetation or are not in a pristine state. Finally, to be consistent with the ETA definition, a criterion should be added (similar to 22.52.2670.C.1.c) such that if special status species may be adversely impacted, a Type B CUP will be required. Although many developed or disturbed areas do not support special status species, some areas do.

Subsection E.2 describes open space requirements for Type A CUP conditions of approval, and gives preference to open space preserved on the same lot or parcel as the impact. This preference may not always result in the highest conservation value, especially if the resulting open space is small or isolated. Rather, preference should be given to preserving open space that is contiguous with other preserved lands, or to areas that will create or strengthen a habitat linkage or wildlife corridor. This type of strategic conservation will promote the viability of SEAs more than a piecemeal approach.

Subsection E.4.a notes that required open space shall remain in a natural condition, and that no improvements shall be allowed except for any applicable provisions in Section 22.56.215. However, this section refers to the existing Hillside Management and Significant Ecological Areas, and this section does not mention improvements that may be allowed in open space areas within SEAs. Any improvements allowed in required open space areas should be specified in this subsection, and should include (as appropriate) trails, signage, fencing, non-native vegetation removal, habitat restoration, and improvements associated with biological resource monitoring, research and management.

Subsection E.6 notes that required off-site open space shall be managed and protected in perpetuity through dedication to a governmental entity, a qualified non-profit land conservation organization, or a home owners association. Along with the dedication, funds should be provided that are sufficient for land management in perpetuity. In addition, home owners associations are not recommended to manage open space, as they often lack the staff or expertise to manage the biological resources as necessary for SEA maintenance.

Subsection F notes that a Type A CUP will be considered by a Hearing Officer, whereas a Type B CUP will be reviewed by SEATAC and considered by the Regional Planning Commission. Regarding Type A CUP considerations by Hearing Officers, it is our understanding that a Department staff biologist will have already reviewed the submission and made recommendations.

Howard

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Subsection H lists the Findings required for the Hearing Officer or Regional Planning Commission to issue an SEA CUP. Subsection H.3 requires that a project cannot result in the loss of SEA viability, which is defined as (a) bisecting the SEA, (b) closing a habitat linkage or wildlife corridor, (c) removing habitat characteristic of the SEA, (d) removing the only known location of an SEA species, or (e) removing the only known location of a new or rediscovered species. Items b, d and e provide a very high threshold for determining the loss of SEA viability. For example, the substantial narrowing of a habitat linkage, not just the closing of the linkage, could result in SEA viability loss. Or the removal of key habitats or populations of certain species could, not just the removal of the only known locations of that species, could also result in SEA viability loss. These SEA viability thresholds should be revised to be less limiting.

Draft SEA Design Manual – Trees and Invasive Species

This section of the Draft SEA Design Manual includes a list of native tree species requiring a 50-foot setback, and a list of invasive plant species which would be prohibited from landscaped areas. It would help for clarification to identify the trees on this list as “native” trees, to differentiate them from the rest of the list which identifies “invasive” plant species. Please also refer to “invasive” plants consistently, and not as “non-native”, to avoid confusion. Finally, please indicate the source for the list of “invasive” plant species and add that plants given a California Invasive Plant Council inventory rating of high or moderate shall not be planted”.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. We look forward to reviewing the SEA Habitat Linkages and Wildlife Corridors Map and the remainder of the SEA Design Manual (including requirements for SEA Site Assessment and Site Impacts Reports required as part of a CUP Application) as soon as they are made available. Feel free to contact me or Andrea Gullo, Executive Director, at (562) 945-9003 for further discussion.

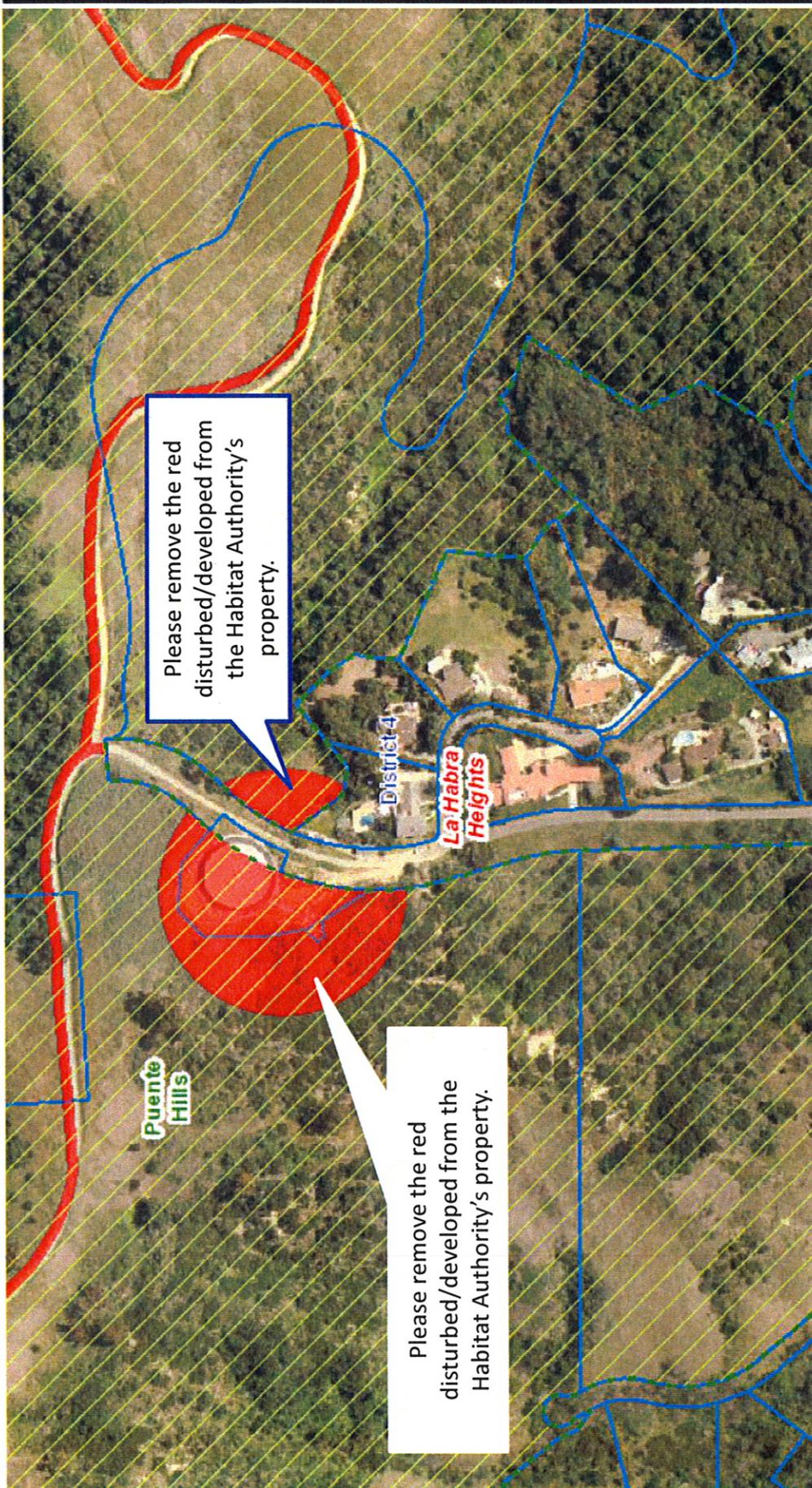
Sincerely,



Bob Henderson
Chairman

cc: Board of Directors
Citizens Technical Advisory Committee
Mitch Glaser, Los Angeles County Department of Regional Planning

Attached:
Comments on SEA maps
Previous letter dated July 26, 2012



Please remove the red disturbed/developed from the Habitat Authority's property.

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La Habra Heights
Map 1