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Tuesday, Dec 09, 2003

Science & Environment

Posted on Fri, Dec. 05, 2003

Burrowing owl can survive, state says

ASSOCIATED PRESS

SACRAMENTO - Development is stealing the habitat of the western burrowing owl, but not so much that the bird qualifies for protection under California's threatened or endangered species law -- at least not yet, state regulators decided Thursday.

The small ground-nesting owl is being driven out of urbanizing areas, but its population is stable in rural areas, wildlife commissioners said, unanimously agreeing with a finding by the Department of Fish and Game.

Groups that proposed protections for the owl said they will immediately sue.

They say declining habitat along the coast and in the rapidly developing Central Valley means trouble for the birds within decades. Already, they say, the owls are declining in half their historic range and are all but gone from another 22 percent.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, the San Bernardino Valley and Santa Clara Valley Audubon societies, California State Park Rangers Association and Tri-County Conservation League, all wanted the commission to kick off a yearlong evaluation of the species' status.

A threatened or endangered listing would mean new restrictions on developers who want to build on owl habitat.

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The owl lives underground, usually by taking over burrows dug by ground squirrels. It hunts insects and small rodents above ground.



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