

THE URBAN WILDLANDS GROUP, INC.

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September 3, 2003

Al Padilla, Coastal Program Analyst
California Coastal Commission
South Coast Area Office
200 Ocean Gate, Suite 1000
Long Beach, CA 90802-4302

Re: Waterview Street Landscaping Project (A-5-PDR-01-442/5-02-008)

Dear Mr. Padilla:

This letter concerns the landscaping plan proposed by the Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA) to fulfill the conditions required for the final issuance of Coastal Development Permit A-5-PDR-01-442/5-02-008. Thank you for allowing me to review this plan at your office yesterday.

As you are aware, the permit applies to the site of illegal development by LAWA along Waterview Street, Rindge Street, and Napoleon Street at the northern end of the El Segundo dunes. In early 2000, LAWA initiated construction of a pedestrian path and landscaping at this site, and installed approximately 90 non-native palm trees. This construction was undertaken without a Coastal Development Permit. The Urban Wildlands Group had urged LAWA to use native species in this area prior to the commencement of the project, but this suggestion was not heeded. The Urban Wildlands Group alerted the Coastal Commission to the illegal development and a violation file was opened by the Commission. Construction of the project was halted shortly thereafter, leaving the hardscape and palm trees installed on the site. LAWA sought a retroactive Coastal Development Permit from the City of Los Angeles, which The Urban Wildlands Group appealed to the Board of Public Works. The City permit was granted and The Urban Wildlands Group appealed to the California Coastal Commission. Not long before the Commission was to act on the appeal, LAWA changed the project proposal to include removal of all of the palm trees and the use of native plants in the landscaping. In April 2002, the Commission retroactively approved portions of the project, and imposed several conditions on the revised development proposal.

Only this last week has LAWA submitted a landscaping plan for the project as required by the Commission to issue the final Coastal Development Permit. In my review of the landscaping plan I came to the conclusion that it is inconsistent with the Commission's conditions in several substantial aspects.

1. LAWA does not appear to have completed the "Existing Native Plant Assessment" required in special condition IV.2/V.2. This report identifying the location of native plants on the project site was to be used to identify native plants that might be impacted by the development. The "Existing Native Plant Assessment" was not provided in the materials that I reviewed at the Coastal Commission office. Ironically, LAWA did provide a detailed enumeration of each palm

- tree that includes comments on the health of each palm to be removed, including damage by spikes used by LAWA's tree trimmers.
2. The proposed landscaping plan does not conform with the condition that "All identified Southern California native dune and prairie plants shall not be disturbed; however, in the event of unavoidable impacts to Southern California native dune or prairie plants during construction, including the removal of the palm trees, the native plant(s) shall be relocated prior to construction activity within the landscaped area" (IV.2/V.2).
 - a. Because native plants were not identified in an "Existing Native Plant Assessment," the Commission has no way to assess that they will not be disturbed.
 - b. The landscaping plan indicates that native plants will be preserved only in a small (approximately 0.1 acre) area of the site. The plan seems to imply that with the exception of the 0.1 acre that would be set aside, the entire site will be graded and most native plants will be lost. Given that the condition contemplates even the disturbance of a single "plant," removing nearly all plants is clearly not consistent with the Commission's decision.
 - c. The plan provides for salvage and relocation of only two species of plants, dunes lupine and croton, and then only if the plants are between six and twelve inches tall. Because of the inordinate length of time taken by LAWA to prepare the landscaping plan, many of the native plants that have recolonized the site are greater than twelve inches tall. Furthermore, additional native plant species have recolonized the site but are not of the two species identified for limited salvage.
 - d. The landscaping plan does not provide for the protection during construction of native plants that might be found along the fence line. These plants are not identified in the landscaping plan and no notes to the contractor are provided that would eliminate or minimize disturbance to these plants.
 3. The proposed landscaping plan relies entirely on hydroseeding a single seed mix on the entire site. Because condition IV.1.A/V.1.A requires that the landscaping plan be prepared by a qualified biologist with experience in dune restoration, we assume that the Commission intended for the landscaping to be ecologically appropriate and use the best available methods. Hydroseeding a single seed mix raises two problems. First, native seed suffers damage during hydroseeding, which can reduce germination rates. It is far preferable to sow seeds by hand, rake in, then apply a binder if desired. Second, a single seed mix is proposed for three different habitats. The different vegetation communities of the foredune, backdune, and prairie result from the different ecological conditions. These differences have not be incorporated into the landscaping plan. Even for decorative landscaping, it is possible to tailor the seed mix for different sections to reflect the ecological conditions.
 4. Condition IV.1.B.2/V.1.B.2 requires that the landscaping plan include a schedule for the removal of non-native plants. I was unable to locate a discussion of non-native plant removal in the materials that I was provided to review.

5. The landscaping plan apparently includes grading of nearly the entire site, which was not part of the project description as approved by the Commission. The amount and nature of cut and fill was not described in the project application and obviously will have adverse consequences for biological resources through the destruction of native species.
6. At the April 2002 Commission hearing, the design of the decorative fence was made subject to the approval of the Executive Director. LAWA had proposed to install an industrial-looking fence that is currently found around LAX in other areas. Local residents present at the Commission hearing in April 2002 (also project appellants) raised concerns about the aesthetics of this fence, and subsequently suggested alternatives to LAWA. Notwithstanding these suggestions, LAWA continues to propose to introduce this same industrial-looking fence to a scenic dune environment.
7. Although the Commission's decision specified that "the applicant shall remove all (90) existing Mexican Fan palms (*Washingtonia robusta*) within the proposed landscape area within 90 days from Commission approval of this permit," no palm trees have been removed to this date. The condition allowed for an extension by the Executive Director for good cause, and initially LAWA sought extensions so that all work could be performed at the site simultaneously, thereby minimizing impacts to the existing native plants. But now, after these extensive delays, the proposed landscaping plan does not even protect native plants on the site, save for a tiny area. If everything is to be graded anyway, it would appear that "good cause" for the delay in the removal of the palm trees did not, in fact, exist.

It is disappointing that LAWA has taken a year and a half to attempt to comply with conditions that should have been met within three months. Even now, LAWA appears unable to act in accordance with the resource protection laws that govern its operation in the Coastal Zone. It is likewise troubling that both LAWA and the Commission have allowed illegal development to stand in the Coastal Zone for three and a half years in plain view and in violation of the Coastal Act.

On behalf of The Urban Wildlands Group, I strongly urge the Commission to forbear from issuing the final CDP for this project until LAWA has met the conditions of the permit. This should not, however, further delay removal of the palm trees at the project site, which does not require satisfaction of the other permit conditions to undertake. Please feel free to contact me at (310) 247-9719 if you have any questions about these comments.

Sincerely,

s/

Travis Longcore, Ph.D.
Science Director

cc: Peter Douglas, Executive Director
Sara Wan, Commissioner