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Ventura County Public Works Agency Study Shows Owls and Hawks are More Effective than Poisons for Rodent Control

Study is first to quantify the impact of raptors on ground squirrel damage at a levee.

(VENTURA COUNTY, Calif.)— The Ventura County Public Works Agency has demonstrated that hawks and owls are more effective than poisons for controlling rodent damage. At a presentation to the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, VCPWA showed how raptor-friendly habitats reduced ground squirrel burrowing by 50 percent. The study marks the first time any agency has quantified the impact of birds of prey on rodents in public works projects.

In the Ventura County area, there is heightened awareness of the dangers of secondary poisoning from rodenticides when a target rodent is consumed by a higher predator. Deceased bobcats, coyotes, and mountain lions in the area have been found with anticoagulant rodenticide residues in their blood. Accordingly, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors has directed all county agencies to discontinue the use of these rodenticides on County property with the exception of flood control facilities where there was previously no effective alternatives to control rodents. The Raptor Study's results show that installing and maintaining perches, owl boxes and nesting stands could eliminate the need for applying anticoagulant rodenticides at flood control facilities.

As part of the raptor study, VCPWA staff installed 14 raptor perches, one hawk nesting platform, and one owl nesting box along the Revolon Slough in Oxnard, which consists of flood control levees that have been plagued by burrowing rodents. During the 17-month study, the staff recorded 50% less burrow damage to the levee where perches were installed while observing Red-tailed Hawks, and other local hawks and owls using the perches and hunting.

Expansion of the raptor study into a full program is underway and includes installing raptor structures at other flood control facilities, including five owl nest boxes. It is essential for public health and safety that flood control facilities are protected from burrowing rodents. Rodents can cause significant damage and even failure of levees, earth dams and other flood control channels. A ground squirrel tunnel can be 35 feet long, and a single gopher is capable of moving about one ton of earth every year.

"We believe this study is the first to quantify the dramatic impact of attracting raptors and finds a natural, chemical-free way to control burrowing rodents." said Karl Novak, VCPWA Deputy Director of Operations and Maintenance. "We think that comprehensive monitoring and continued expansion of the raptor program will result in cost effective and environmentally safe rodent control throughout our watershed."

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