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Secretary Wade Crowfoot  
Deputy Secretary Jennifer Norris  
California Natural Resources Agency  
1416 9th St #1311, Sacramento, CA 95814

**Subject: Nature as Infrastructure and Implementing 30x30 Conservation Goals**

Dear Secretary Crowfoot and Deputy Secretary Norris,

On behalf of the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority (Authority), I want to thank you for your tremendous leadership on climate resilience and equity with Governor Newsom's Executive Order N-82-20. As the state develops its strategy for conserving 30% of California's lands and waters by 2030, referred to as "30x30," we offer the below remarks, which include insights into the work and opportunities taking shape in the Coyote Valley. Coyote Valley, located at the southern edge of San Jose, is as a model for climate mitigation, adaptation-focused preservation, restoration, stewardship, and cross-jurisdictional partnerships, all of which provide significant benefits to adjacent communities, the region, and the state.

The Open Space Authority is a public, independent special district created by the California State Legislature in 1993 to conserve the natural environment, support agriculture, and connect people to nature by protecting open spaces, natural areas, and working farms and ranches for future generations.

**Timing**

The urgency of developing Pathways to achieve 30x30 goals, and acting on them, has never been greater. From the 2019 IPBES Global Assessment Report highlighting the threats to the world's species, to the very recent IPCC 6<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report underscoring the imperative for significantly increased climate mitigation action, it is clear that we must do all that we can to limit greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the atmosphere and enhance resilience of our ecosystems. We believe that in many cases, bold, strategic approaches to 30x30 can do both.

**Synergy with the State's Natural and Working Lands Climate Smart Strategy**

As the state develops the Pathways to 30x30 to support global efforts to combat the biodiversity and climate crises, it is important that these efforts not only complement *but also leverage* the Natural and Working Lands Climate Smart Strategy efforts that implement nature-based (especially land-based) solutions to reduce GHG emissions. For example, existing funding and incentives for species protection through land protection in high growth areas of the State could be increased or even doubled if they also work achieve Climate Smart Strategy goals, such as halting urban sprawl and thereby reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT). These are not just co-benefits but urgent, overlapping priorities.

**Coyote Valley and Cross-Jurisdictional Partnerships as a Model**

The conservation of Coyote Valley, a top priority for the Authority, can be a tremendous model for achieving 30x30 goals through cross-jurisdictional partnerships. In November of 2019, an innovative partnership between the Authority, Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), and the City of San Jose protected 937 acres of land previously slated for industrial development in North Coyote Valley, including the heart of the historic Laguna Seca wetland. Additional lands are being conserved to the

south along the course of Fisher Creek in what is known as Mid-Coyote Valley. In concert with these conservation efforts, the County of Santa Clara is implementing bold land use policy changes that will restrict development and provide conservation incentives to landowners in Mid- and South Coyote Valley. These conservation efforts, which are closely coordinated across jurisdictional boundaries, lie at the southern edge of a thriving Silicon Valley, and preserve and enhance the most critical wildlife linkage between the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Diablo Range. Without this linkage, megafauna in the Santa Cruz Mountains would not retain sufficient genetic diversity to survive.

In addition to wildlife connectivity, this vital landscape provides many other natural infrastructure benefits to the South Bay region, including essential flood risk reduction, groundwater recharge and improved water quality, wildfire risk reduction, improvement of local food security, wildlife-friendly agriculture, and improving equitable public access and recreational opportunities while redirecting growth to existing urban areas and therefore avoiding VMT and GHG emissions. Overall, the preservation of Coyote Valley is helping to build a climate-resilient future for the residents of San Jose and the greater Santa Clara Valley region.

The list of examples below demonstrates how the Open Space Authority and its partners have been collaborating to achieve precedent-setting biodiversity preservation and climate mitigation actions across this significant natural and working landscape:

- **San Jose's 2018 Measure T**, a \$650M infrastructure bond, included \$50M for protection of natural infrastructure, which was crucial for the purchase of highly developable lands in Coyote Valley
- **City of San Jose and Santa Clara County Climate Emergency Declarations**
- **Joint planning** in partnership with the Santa Clara Valley Water District to estimate the water supply protection, downstream flood risk reduction, and ecological benefits of land conservation and restoration in Coyote Valley
- **POST and the Open Space Authority's land conservation efforts** - that have brought significant private funds to bear – have resulted in protection of over half of the Fisher Creek floodplain, upstream of urban San Jose, just in the past 18 months.
- **The Sustainable Ag Land Conservation** (SALC)-funded Santa Clara Valley Agricultural Plan, which prioritizes farmland in need of protection for climate mitigation and resilience, calls out that conversion of ag lands to urban uses produces 70x more GHG emissions.
- **The creation of the Coyote Valley Conservation Program** in State statute via AB 948 (Kalra, 2019) that identifies Coyote Valley as a landscape of statewide significance.
- **San Jose's steps towards amending its General Plan** to “downzone” lands designated for Industrial Development in Coyote Valley to Agriculture and Open Space, shifting jobs to infill locations and effectively stopping sprawl in its tracks. The first step in this process has already been completed with the re-allocation of 35,000 jobs from Coyote Valley to downtown San Jose.
- **The County of Santa Clara is creating a Climate Change Overlay Zone in Coyote Valley**, which will restrict development in order to preserve agricultural resources, reduce GHG emissions and is designed and timed to match proposed zoning in adjacent areas of Coyote Valley under the jurisdiction of the City of San Jose.

Together, these well-coordinated, cross-jurisdictional land acquisition and land use policy strategies represent a scalable and efficient conservation approach that is resilient to shifting political tides. Across the state, we need climate-focused local land use policies that complement other land protection strategies and robust policies that protect resources and qualify as “protection” under 30x30.

In addition to the Authority's work in Coyote Valley, the agency is also working in partnership with the City of San Jose to

develop a Natural and Working Lands Element of Climate Smart San Jose, the City's Climate Action Plan. The Element seeks to quantify and describe the role that conservation and restoration of the City's natural and working lands can play in avoiding GHG emissions and providing other natural infrastructure benefits including protection of wildlife habitat. This project will evaluate different land use scenarios on natural and working lands (NWL) throughout the City's sphere of influence including Coyote Valley. This work could serve as a model for how cities can evaluate natural and working lands strategies in their respective climate action planning efforts.

#### Recommendations:

- **Strategies to direct growth away from NWL:** In addition to permanently conserving land, the state needs to develop and promote new strategies, policies, and incentives that direct growth away from natural and working lands. These lands represent existing or potential habitat for at-risk species (even within city spheres of influence), areas where VMTs from sprawl development can be avoided, and critical natural infrastructure at the urban edge that is essential to addressing climate change and resilience.
- **The elevation of NWL stewardship in local land use planning:** Through incentives, guidance, and regulations at the State level, the conservation and ongoing stewardship of natural and working lands needs to be elevated in local (City and County) land use planning, such as: Climate Action Plans, General Plans, transportation and community resilience plans, groundwater sustainability plans, drought response plans, hazard mitigation plans, and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) statutes. We urge 30x30 to coordinate with the Office of Planning and Research and Strategic Growth Council, for example, to reinforce and coordinate public policy.
- **Complementary urban greening and urban forestry plans:** Urban greening and urban forestry plans should also complement local land conservation planning strategies so that they work in concert, connecting and mutually supporting ecological systems across the urban-rural spectrum. The [Integrated Planning with Nature](#) report, created through a partnership between the San Francisco Estuary Institute, SPUR, and the Authority, is an excellent resource.
- **Establishing durable, long-term protection:** Durable conservation strategies must not be limited to permanent protection only; multi-decade protection, such as the former Williamson Act, should be considered "protected" under 30x30 since they would increase subscribership and provide a cost-effective alternative to permanent protection.
- **Restoration and stewardship of agricultural land:** Another critical role and opportunity for the State is to develop guidance, implementation strategies, and funding for the large-scale restoration and stewardship of less productive agricultural landscapes for biodiversity and climate resilience, including those that may need to be fallowed to achieve state sustainability goals in the case of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).
- **Acceleration of climate smart and wildlife friendly land management on NWL:** Climate-smart and wildlife-friendly land management on farms, ranchlands, and other lands needs to be greatly accelerated through increased and more consistent funding voluntary programs that are currently over-subscribed, such as Healthy Soils. These programs should NOT be forced on private landowners through conservation easement restrictions, as this discourages land conservation. At the State level, plans should consider biodiversity, carbon storage, species range shifts, and climate resilience at a landscape scale.
- **Supporting the needs of the State's housing crisis:** Local land use plans should consider, integrate, and incentivize the protection of NWL while addressing the needs presented by the State's housing crisis. Not only should we avoid one issue being addressed at the expense of the other, but we should maximize the co-benefits of smart strategies, such as the protective natural infrastructure benefits provided by NWL. The strategies proposed in CalCAN's [Resilient California](#) report provide excellent recommendations for encouraging integrated local planning.
- **Long-term, consistent NWL funding:** There is a great need for long-term, dedicated funding for planning and implementation of natural and working lands conservation, especially in peri-urban areas, with an emphasis on

lands that protect at-risk species and offer Climate Smart Strategy benefits such as VMT containment. While land protection near the urban edge can come with a high price tag, the return on this investment is significant given the alternative cost for not protecting these lands for climate resilience.

- **Streamlining the grant process:** It is critical to streamline the State grant process, especially to address the lengthy delays in approval of real property appraisals, in order to make efficient use of the State's conservation funding.
- **Addressing regulatory barriers:** The conservation efforts underway in Coyote Valley provide an example of work across multiple jurisdictions and regulations that often have conflicting requirements or goals. The State's Cutting the Green Tape initiative represents a major step forward towards addressing regulatory barriers for environmental restoration and enhancement projects and should be accelerated where feasible.
- **Investing in and expanding innovative programs:** The State should also continue to invest in programs like the Strategic Growth Council's Transformative Climate Communities Program, though augmenting that program or creating a similar program that supports NWL-based climate solutions, which are likely to benefit affected communities in multiple ways. Such a program could help local jurisdictions build their capacity to rapidly plan and implement large-scale land conservation and restoration projects, and to plan for their ongoing stewardship, and use these projects as case studies in how this work can be scaled and what else needs to be done by the State to scale it even faster.
- **Elevating equity-driven multi-benefit projects:** The State should accelerate efforts to elevate multi-benefit conservation and land management projects that also provide more equitable benefits to the public – for example, those that provide benefits in the areas of water supply, biodiversity, fire risk reduction, urban heat island, biomass, erosion control, green jobs, and support for more resilient local economies.
- **Technical assistance for land use analysis tools:** Supporting, promoting, and providing technical assistance for land use analysis tools available in California - for example: TerraCount, UrbanFootprint, Greenprints, Conservation Lands Network in the Bay Area - would help inform complex land use decisions and optimize climate benefits in local jurisdictions.
- **Expanding access to NWL data:** New natural and working lands data sets should be expanded across the State and hosted by CA Nature as an authoritative clearinghouse of NWL data for local planners. An excellent example of this is the Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network's Landscape Database Project.
- **Strengthening and incentivizing community engagement:** The State should increase incentives for engagement of communities in climate change plans, related activities, and through public education.

In closing, the Open Space Authority is grateful for the State's increased focus on addressing the climate crisis through natural and working lands, and its leadership, recognized worldwide, in developing creative and effective climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. Thank you for your leadership and partnership, and we look forward to working together to design and implement a successful initiative to conserve 30% of California's lands and waters by 2030.

Sincerely,



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General Manager

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