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CALIFORNIA

## South O.C. Community Has Rabbits in Its Sights

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This may be the Easter season, but it's hardly the best of times for bunny rabbits in south Orange County.

The Mission Viejo City Council has given permission for one gated community to have rabbits shot on sight.

Many residents in the Casta del Sol retirement community, frustrated for years by the abundance of rabbits gnawing on native shrubs and plants and doing their bunny business on their lawns, want to thin the ranks. They want an exterminator with a pellet gun to take aim at the unwanted wildlife in the wee hours of the morning.

Mission Viejo banned bunny hunting with pellet guns in 1997, adopting a state Department of Fish and Game regulation that prohibits the use of firearms to ward off animals unless crops are at stake. For the next five years, residents in the 1,900-home Casta del Sol relied on diphacinone, a poison, to control the bunny population, and traps that would allow the rabbits to be released elsewhere. Then, in 2001, state officials banned the poison's use in urban settings.

Casta del Sol homeowners pushed for state legislation in 2004 allowing property owners to protect their yards from depredating animals with whatever means necessary. The bills foundered, but the state attorney general ruled 11 months ago that rabbits could be exterminated with pellet guns if they harmed shrubbery.

In July, Fish and Game adopted the attorney general's opinion, paving the way for the Mission Viejo City Council to grant a variance to the city's firearm ordinance earlier this week. The council voted unanimously to give the Casta del Sol homeowners association permission to hire a licensed pest control professional to trim the rabbit population with a pellet gun, from 1 to 5 a.m.

"It's a quality-of-life issue," said Councilman Lance MacLean. "They're a pest. We really weren't left with a whole lot of options. We have tried trapping, so we've kind of gone to our last resort."

In past years, the city considered bringing in foxes but backed off because they would go after not only rabbits, but also small dogs and cats.

Maye Russ, head of the community's greenbelt committee, has been lobbying City Hall to allow residents to arm themselves against the rabbits for three years. She said a recent informal poll showed that nearly

90% of residents were in favor of shooting bunnies to protect their landscaped lawns.

She said the timing of Casta del Sol's victory, so close to Easter, was coincidental.

"We were never thinking about Easter," Russ said. "I consider this the most effective and humane method. We've tried trapping and baiting and using so-called rabbit-tolerant plants. We've tried pretty much tried everything, but this is pretty much an impossible situation."

Animal rights advocates say the problem is manageable without using firearms.

"We think there are nonlethal solutions," said Nicole Paquette, an attorney with the Sacramento-based Animal Protection Institute. "Repellents can be used, shrubbery that's not attractive to rabbits can be planted, and fences can be built around yards."

She said the Mission Viejo City Council was setting a bad precedent.

"By shooting rabbits, you're not taking care of the attractant," she said. "All you're doing is continuing employment for the sharpshooter. And what happens to a domestic cat who wanders out there, and what happens if the animal doesn't instantly die? He dies a long painful death. It's not very humane."

The shooting can begin once the parties sign the paperwork.

In other news, Mission Viejo on Saturday celebrates its annual family festival Bunny Days.

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