



Tejon plan alarming for what it leaves out, critics say

By BOB CHRISTIE

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Critics of development on Tejon Ranch wasted no time panning the conservation plan set to be unveiled today.

"It looks like they're omitting a lot of land that is critical to endangered species," said Monica Bond, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "I don't want to disparage Tejon -- at least they're doing something -- but there are some very important ecological areas missing, and that whole Antelope Valley area is missing." Tejon and The Trust for Public Land will publicly announce today the location of a 100,000-acre preserve they hope will be sold to either a public or private entity for preservation. That acreage was chosen after more than a year of study by a group of consultants advised by scientists who reviewed the 270,000-acre ranch and its plants, animals and geography.

Tejon CEO Bob Stine said criticism comes with the territory, but that the ranch's vision of limited growth and conservation is a sound one. He noted that the ranch land preserve could be parceled out and sold piecemeal, but that would not fulfill their commitment of being good stewards of the land.

"This 100,000 acres is not undevelopable," Stine said. "It could be divided into small ranch estates of 160 acres, or 80 acres, and you could use gravel roads and septic tanks and develop it all.

"But we can create a better environment and more real estate value ... with a conservation plan and mountain village than we could do just carving up."

Tejon has plans to develop portions of the ranch, including two new communities, a 23,000-home city called Centennial in the western Antelope Valley, and the Tejon Mountain Village east of Interstate 5 at Tejon Lake.

Both developments send shudders down the spines of some environmentalists, who say they're suspicious of Tejon's motives.

"Tejon is one of the most special and important lands for biodiversity for the whole state," said Kristeen Penrod, director of South Coast Wildlands, a nonprofit group that has been working to maintain habitat connectivity in Southern California. "I actually think they're going to take this money and use it to develop the mountain village -- they're land rich and cash poor and this is a way for them to move forward with their development proposals."

The lands selected for conservation do not include many of the corridors that Penrod's group believes are imperative to maintain wildlife movement between the coastal mountains, desert, Sierra Nevada and the San Joaquin Valley floor.

Penrod noted that the area to be developed as Tejon Mountain Village follows Bear Trap Canyon, considered one of the most spectacular oak habitats in California. Grasslands at the base of the Grapevine that are critical migratory habitat for kit foxes are missing from the conservation plan, she noted.

Penrod and Bond both said they would like to see the entire ranch preserved, although they acknowledge that's highly unlikely.

"The ideal thing would be for the state or the feds to buy it," Penrod said.

The ranch is critical habitat for several endangered species, including the California condor, and holds a rich array of plants and animals in a rare, relatively untouched region.

Parts of Tejon Ranch safe from development