



CONDORS

Proposed Tejon Ranch Development Would Harm Birds, Groups Say

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Plans to build thousands of square feet of new homes, golf courses and offices on the massive Tejon Ranch in Southern California have prompted criticism from environmentalists, who fear the projects would undermine a \$35 million effort to recover the endangered California condor.

The owners of the 270,000-acre ranch -- the largest privately held, contiguous land holding in California -- are putting the finishing touches on an application for an "incidental take" permit from the Fish and Wildlife Service that would legally protect the company if it accidentally harmed or killed the birds while it builds three new developments on the ranch, including a 5,000-acre golf resort and a 23,000-home subdivision. The projects, which also include an industrial park, would cover about 5 percent of the ranch's 270,000 acres. Some of the developments would be built in critical habitat for the condor.

With over 270,000 acres, Tejon Ranch is the largest contiguous expanse of land under single ownership in California. The sprawling ranch, located about 60 miles north of Los Angeles and 30 miles south of Bakersfield in the Tehachapi Mountains, is already home to one industrial park as well as livestock and mining operations.

Environmental groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club, say that the development projects will set back a 30-year effort to recover the condor, listed under a precursor to the Endangered Species Act in 1967. The service's recovery plan for the species identified roosting and feeding areas on Tejon Ranch as key to the bird's recovery.

"It's important condor habitat," said John Buse of the Center for Biological Diversity, which began a letter-writing campaign this week to convince FWS to reject the ranch's application. "It's really a linkage between the coast ranges and the Sierra Nevadas."

Tejon Ranch Co. spokesman Barry Zoeller said the company designed the new developments with condors in mind and plans to set aside more than 30,000 acres as a condor study area, where the birds could be reintroduced onto the property, enhancing reintroduction and recovery efforts. No condors currently inhabit the ranch, he said. "It's a win-win," Zoeller said. "It's a win for the condor and a win for the ranch.

"In the mid-1990s, after FWS requested permission to release captive-bred condors on the property, the ranch asked the agency to redesignate California's condor population as experimental -- a status that often allows for greater take of a species. The agency declined, and the ranch filed suit, resulting in a settlement that called for FWS to come up with a habitat conservation plan that would allow the company to develop the ranch while protecting the condor.

But Tejon Ranch Co. rejected the service's habitat plan and is now drafting its own, with agency input. That document and the accompanying application for an incidental take permit are near completion and should be submitted in the spring, Zoeller said.

"Nothing has been accepted or finalized," emphasized Alex Pitts, a spokeswoman for FWS. "Until that happens, it's all discussion."

If FWS granted the incidental take permit, it would be the first issued for a development in condor habitat, Pitts said. So far, the agency has only issued incidental take permits for volunteers handling birds or eggs as part of reintroduction and recovery efforts, Pitts added.

While there were once thousands of condors, their population began to decline in the 1800s and fewer than 20 of the birds remained in the 1980s. Scientists brought the condors into captivity in the late 1980s and began releasing them back into the wild in 1996 when their numbers grew. The \$35 million restoration effort has resulted in 127 birds living in the wild; 55 of those birds are in California. Another 146 are in captivity in California and Arizona.