

Los Angeles Times

SEPTEMBER 14, 2004

Environmentalists Oppose Mormons' Forest Church

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Several prominent environmental groups are joining forces to oppose plans by Mormon leaders to build a 12,868-square-foot church facility that environmentalists say would threaten sensitive wildlife habitat and encourage further development in the fire-prone San Bernardino Mountains.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints won approval this summer from the San Bernardino County Planning Commission to build a chapel, cultural center, classrooms and offices on a 7.7-acre wooded parcel near Rim of the World Highway in Running Springs.

Several environmental groups that oppose the project are expected to ask the Board of Supervisors today to overturn that decision.

The Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society want the county to require a detailed environmental analysis to evaluate the potential harm to the Southern rubber boa, the California spotted owl and other sensitive animal species and plants that live in the area.

Environmentalists also have argued that approving the project would encourage further development in an area that remains a fire hazard because of a four-year drought and the widespread infestation of

the bark beetle, which has killed thousands of trees.

"Basically, they are trying to push it through with a much lower level of analysis," said Kassie Siegel, a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

Church representatives say they will work to address all the environmental concerns.

"The church tends to take a very respectful and thoughtful approach," said Kasey Haws, a church counselor and former Redlands mayor.

The planned facility is one of several major mountain developments proposed since the Old fire charred more than 91,000 acres, destroyed more than 1,000 structures and was blamed for several stress-related deaths in October.

The planning commission also is expected to consider a 50-acre Christian-sponsored camp for boys, with dorm rooms, swimming pools and amphitheaters in the community of Twin Peaks.

The decision on the church project could signal whether last year's disaster has made San Bernardino County more cautious about approving growth and development in the mountains, some environmentalists say.

Last year's fire charred about 75% of the trees on the site of the proposed Mormon facility, according to a county report. The

county report says the developers plan to remove more than half of the 472 trees that remain on the land to make way for the project.

The church would be used primarily for Sunday services. Plans for the church and cultural center show a seating capacity of 350. Meetings, social functions, counseling sessions and youth activities are expected throughout the week in the classrooms and offices.

A county study concluded that construction would not have a significant impact on sensitive plants and protected wildlife if the developers completed 29 mitigation measures, including a requirement that the church retain a biologist to monitor the project's clearing and grading.

County planners are also requiring the developers to shield or direct lighting away from adjacent trees to reduce glare that might frighten off the California spotted owl.

Steven Farrell, a conservation chairman for the Sierra Club's mountain group, said he was worried that the planning guidelines did not adequately address the fire danger at the site. He also fears that the project would encourage construction in an area that has remained undeveloped.

"Once you set the precedent of laying the pipes and creating the infrastructure, you are setting the stage for growth," he said.