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Environmental coalition digs in at Tejon Ranch

When the owner rebuffed a proposal to scale back the Centennial housing project, Sierra Club and others vowed to fight.

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Developers of the largest chunk of privately owned wild lands remaining in Southern California and representatives from the nation's most powerful environmental groups gathered at a special summit last spring to consider a deal.

Under it, environmentalists would forgo legal challenges if the proposed 23,000-home Centennial development on Tejon Ranch were reconfigured to more than double the amount of land set aside for a preserve. The May 19 meeting was supposed to have produced agreement on a tangle of thorny issues at the center of the negotiations.

It failed.

Tejon Ranch Co. rejected the proposal, opting to continue working with officials in Los Angeles and Kern counties on plans for Centennial and two other developments on the 270,000-acre ranch.

The company wants to develop houses, resorts, industrial parks and golf courses on 5% of the property and set aside 100,000 acres of backcountry as a natural preserve, creating the biggest conservation area carved from private land in California. There are no specific plans for the rest of the ranch land.

"The ranch's activities are very balanced," said Tejon Ranch spokesman Barry Zoeller. "We're not developing the entire ranch."

The company's rebuff incensed environmental leaders for the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Center for Biological Diversity and others. They want a vast natural preserve — as big as 245,000 acres. Zion National Park, by comparison, is about 147,000 acres.

They also want fewer houses on less land. There is concern that the Tejon Ranch projects would trigger new sprawl across a swath of Southern California that so far has been virtually untouched by development.

Failing to obtain concessions at the bargaining table, a coalition of a dozen environmental groups has united in opposition to the developer. They vow to take their fight to court

under the federal Endangered Species Act.

It is a bludgeon environmentalists have wielded with success since the snail darter was used to block for years the Tellico Dam in Tennessee a generation ago.

"A lot of people have walked away from the table," said Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club. "We've decided it's time to play hardball. Sometimes you have to hit a mule upside the head with a 2 by 4."

The Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson, has sued Tejon Ranch Co. over the air quality effects of the warehouse and industrial super-center it is building at the bottom of the Grapevine on the flatlands of Kern County. The group has used aggressive litigation to thwart timber, ranching and development across the Southwest.

"We will fight this, one project at a time, for as long as we have to, if that's what it takes," said Peter Galvin, the group's conservation director. "We can and will defeat the [Tejon Ranch] projects in court, no matter how long it takes."

This is not how Tejon Ranch officials wanted things to go. The company rarely misses an opportunity to tout its environmental credentials. It has collaborated with environmentalists for six years and worked with the Trust for Public Land to help identify acreage suitable for the 100,000-acre preserve.

"As landowner, we have a commitment to stewardship, and we've been doing that for 160 years," Zoeller said. "The ranch is in the condition it is today because of that commitment."

The clash is more than just another development dispute. Pope and other environmental leaders say they have made Tejon Ranch their top priority in California, with the fight shaping up as the biggest land-use clash since the Desert Protection Act settled the fate of the Mojave 12 years ago.

Tejon Ranch sits atop the Tehachapi Mountains, the demarcation between Central and Southern California, 30 miles south of Bakersfield and 60 miles north of Los Angeles. This is where ecology and progress collide.

The mountain land with pine-covered peaks soars into the clouds. The Mojave plateau unfurls to the east and the San Joaquin Valley lies to the north, with the San Andreas fault slicing through it. There are distinct bio-regions, including desert, oak woodlands, valley grasslands and conifer forest.

Animals move from the Sierra to the Tehachapis to the desert to the mountain ranges in Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. Critters abound, including wild turkeys, elk, deer, bears, bobcats, coyotes and eagles.

Condors fly there, riding warm air currents from coastal mountains to the Sierra. Tejon Ranch, which includes critical habitat for the gigantic prehistoric bird, is part of the United States' most ambitious endangered species recovery program; officials have spent 16 years and \$40 million to increase condor numbers from 22 to about 300 in the West. Other endangered species in the area include the San Joaquin kit fox and the blunt-nose leopard lizard.

"Tejon Ranch is the spinal cord of the state, a bridge to the Sierra and the Coast Range and the Tehachapis," said Joel Reynolds, senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It is very high on our priority list."

The ranch is also the linchpin for development in Southern California. The vast open expanse of mountains and desert between the Santa Clarita and San Joaquin valleys marks the historical boundary between the Los Angeles region and the rest of California. If development takes root there, environmentalists warn, it could eventually lead to a continuous expanse of subdivisions from Camp Pendleton to Bakersfield.

"There are moments when decisions are made that shape a metropolitan area and its wild matrix," Pope said. "The last one decided where Orange County would grow. This is the next one."

The Tejon Ranch Co. is pursuing three main projects in three locations over the next 25 years. The Tejon Industrial Complex is already home to Ikea's 2-million-square-foot main distribution warehouse, among others.

On the summit near Castac Lake in Kern County, the company proposes Tejon Mountain Village featuring 3,450 estate homes along ridgelines up Bear Trap Canyon, as well as golf courses, resort hotels and lakeside cabins. An environmental impact report is due in late 2007.

Centennial is a planned community of 23,000 dwelling units over 6,000 acres east of Quail Lake in northern Los Angeles County.

Each of the developments includes its own set-asides for wildlife habitat and open space. The project's environmental review is expected to be completed by summer and forwarded to the regional planning commission, then to the Board of Supervisors.

Reed Holderman, executive director of the Trust for Public Land in California, said those projects are more palatable because Tejon Ranch has agreed to create the 100,000-acre preserve. He said he has participated in discussions with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Department of Fish and Game about ways to preserve that land.

"A 100,000-acre preserve is a significant acquisition by any measure in the United States," Holderman said. "Tejon Ranch could build the whole property and carve that

property up like Swiss cheese if they want. But Tejon Ranch is just building those three projects and trying to save the rest."

But environmental leaders say studies done by the Conservation Biology Institute of Corvallis, Ore., show that some of the most valuable habitat for condors and other wildlife occurs where Tejon Mountain Village would be built. Further, they contend that the preserve is not configured to ensure that wild lands remain connected and provide "wildlife corridors."

Although Tejon Ranch officials say their project is environmentally sound, Zoeller said that, after months of difficult negotiations, the two sides remain "far apart."

But Zoeller also sounded an optimistic chord.

Recently, the company partnered with DMB Associates, a real estate and investment company based in Scottsdale, Ariz., to help develop the Tejon Mountain Village project.

Environmentalists praised that move, citing DMB-led compromises that benefited developers and conservationists at the Rancho Mission Viejo project in Orange County and the 25,000-acre Martis Valley development near Lake Tahoe.

"We will continue to talk and meet with environmental and conservation groups," Zoeller said. "Sometimes we reach out to them, sometimes they reach out to us, sometimes we reach out together."