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How will annexation fit species plan?

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Desert Hot Springs is forging ahead with plans to annex land leading to Interstate 10, but the city first must assure worried environmental groups it won't disrupt a new valley-wide conservation plan.

The city aims to annex 4,000 acres of sparsely populated Riverside County land in hopes of gaining better control over development there.

However, about half the area falls within the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, which took effect Oct. 2 after 12 years of planning.

Desert Hot Springs is the only valley city that initially declined to join the \$2.2. billion plan, which protects 27 endangered desert plants and animals species. But with new leadership the city now aims to join.

"The message we're getting from the city is they're very anxious to move forward and be included in the plan," Katie Barrows, director of environmental resources for the Coachella Valley Association of Governments, said Monday.

Still, environmental groups like the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity and the state Department of Fish and Game worry Desert Hot Springs could annex without protecting the area under the multi- species plan's standards.

It would take at least five months — but likely longer — for the city to join the plan through a "major amendment," Barrows said.

Meanwhile, the city's annexation plan could be approved as early as July 2009, Keith Carwana, a land-use consultant hired by the city, said in October.

The annexation plan does not "propose any binding method of ensuring that projects within (multi-species plan) conservation areas undergo adequate review," a Nov. 6 letter from the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club stated.

"The lack of enforceable ... measures raises a whole host of questions regarding how the project will actually mitigate biological impacts," the letter continued.

Other recent letters, including one from neighboring Palm Springs, echoed the concern that the annexation could give developers a window of opportunity to proceed free of the conservation plan.

However, Desert Hot Springs City Manager Rick Daniels stressed the city intends to stick to the plan's strict standards. City officials would reach out to reassure the concerned groups, he added.