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Judge allows expansion of industrial site

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The Tejon Ranch Co. cleared a major legal hurdle on Friday that will allow it to develop another part of its sprawling property despite concerns from environmental organizations.

The Center for Biological Diversity, the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment and the Sierra Club sued the county, which approved the plan in 2003.

These organizations believed that not enough research was completed on the environmental impact to satisfy state law.

A Kern County Superior Court judge agreed and ordered further study at the time.

More study was done over the past couple of years and the company made a deal to give money to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

That money would be spent to help clean the air, and offset the pollutants the industrial complex may cause.

The money will also replace old and pollution-producing equipment.

The judge reviewed these changes and ruled Friday that the company fulfilled its obligations needed to build.

Company spokesman Barry Zoeller said no date is set yet to break ground, nor is a completion date set.

The new development will cover about 1,110 acres. The complex already developed 330 acres just west of this, Zoeller said. It will include industrial and commercial buildings, he said.

But John Buse, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, a Tucson, Ariz.-based environmental policy group, said he fears the company's proposal to offset pollutants may not be successful in the long run.

Buse also said that any new equipment would need to be replaced in the coming years.

That means the air pollution would only be helped for those years when

the equipment would have been used, but the complex will continue to pollute every year, Buse said.

He said polluted air can cause long-term health problems including increased sickness and, at times, death.

Tejon Ranch attorney Robert McMurry said the project would not cause pollution.

The air quality control board agreed to offset this development's pollution every year, McMurry said.

Buse said his organization will consider an appeal and also will continue to monitor the development at Tejon Ranch.

The ranch has about 270,000 acres of land, and about 5 percent will be developed in the coming years, Zoeller said.