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Interior chief gets earful on conservation

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Lori Pierson Cripe had a personal and poignant story to tell the secretary of the interior about problems with the Endangered Species Act.

Her late father bought 14 acres on Pepper Avenue in Colton years ago and counted on it for retirement.

But the endangered Delhi Sands flower-loving fly has stymied development there, leaving her mother to get by on \$800 a month from Social Security.

"(The property is) not in a wildlife area," she said.

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, who started his political career as student body president at San Geronimo High School in San Bernardino before becoming a senator and then governor of Idaho, spent more than three hours Thursday at the Clarion Hotel and Convention Center in San Bernardino listening to developers, environmentalists, city officials and plain citizens talk about environmental protection.

The session was one of more than two dozen such meetings that have been held throughout the nation to gather input from the public about conservation and the federal government's role in it.

The Delhi Sands fly got a lot of attention as Colton Mayor Dierdre Bennett spoke about the city's problems trying to come up with a conservation plan that would allow development near Arrowhead Regional Medical Center to resume.

"Not surprisingly, this habitat set-aside has had a tremendous impact on the city of Colton," she said. "The community where the greatest amount of habitat is set aside has the lowest median income."

The city has tried to come up with creative ways of protecting nearby habitat, but still does not have approval, and the habitat that has been set aside is covered with trash and invasive plants.

Many of the more than 50 people who spoke said the resource agencies, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which enforces the Endangered Species Act, don't have enough money to pursue efforts that could help species recover.

The theme of the meetings has been to ask the public how to improve what federal officials dubbed "cooperative conservation."

Defenders of the Endangered Species Act argue it already promotes cooperation by forcing developers, local governments and developers to the table.

Ilene Anderson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said there's a perfect example of cooperation on the north side of the San Bernardino Mountains.

Several agencies, four carbonate mines and environmentalists got together to develop a plan to protect several rare plant species that exist only in that area.

She also lamented the lack of funds that prevent them from putting the conservation plan into action.

"We're waiting for an infusion of federal funds to start the project," she said.

Development groups argued the law needs a major overhaul.

"We share concern for the environment and for balanced development," said Paul Poister of the Partnership for America, a coalition of agriculture, industry, recreation and property-rights groups. "But the Endangered Species Act needs to be modernized."

Both sides agreed incentives and rewards are needed for private-property owners to protect rare species.

In a news conference before the meeting, Kempthorne said there must be a greater emphasis on helping species recover instead of just putting new species on the list.

"We would hope we can make improvements to the Endangered Species Act," he said.

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