
Los Angeles Times

FEBRUARY 13, 2006

A New Proposal for Tejon Ranch

Environmental groups offer to end opposition to development of the sprawling site if the builder preserves 245,000 acres.

by Louis Sahagun
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FORMAN, Calif. — A coalition of environmental groups says it will withdraw its opposition to development of the sprawling Tejon Ranch if the builder agrees to set aside about 380 square miles in the Tehachapi Mountains as wilderness.

The coalition hopes its offer persuades developers to scale back their plans on the 270,000-acre site and to more than double the amount of land to be preserved.

The coalition now wants to save 245,000 acres — a swath of land bigger than Chicago and Philadelphia combined.

Tejon Ranch officials dismissed the new proposal as unreasonable but left open the possibility for more discussions with environmentalists over the fate of the tableau of mountains, grasslands and twisted oaks 60 miles north of Los Angeles.

One thing is clear: The proposal marks yet another juncture in the

long-running debate over development of Tejon Ranch.

Just eight months ago, Tejon Ranch Co. and a national land trust hailed an agreement to sell more than one-third of the ranch for use as a nature preserve as the most significant conservation project this decade in the West.

But that failed to satisfy the Tejon Natural Heritage Park Committee, a coalition of 12 conservation groups, including the Wildlands Conservancy, Sierra Club and Center for Biological Diversity. The committee's proposal would require a rare alliance of state and federal wildlife agencies, county governments, developers and environmentalists — as well as hundreds of millions of dollars that would be raised mainly through bond measures — to buy the natural landscape, which has few roads.

Committee spokesman Dan York sees the proposal as a means of protecting a patchwork of ecological systems and endangered species worthy of state or national park status.

Hashing out an agreement now, York

said, could avoid a repeat of the 17-year battle over the giant Ahmanson Ranch development in Ventura County.

Tejon Ranch Co. plans to build three large urban centers in the ranch.

One project, Tejon Mountain Village would include a 23,253-acre resort with up to seven spas and boutique hotels, 160,000 square feet of commercial space and up to 3,450 homes.

The homes would mostly be within territory designated by the federal government as critical habitat for the California condor.

Tejon's plans call for two other projects near Interstate 5: Centennial, a city of 23,000 homes along the southern flanks of the Tehachapis, and Tejon Industrial Park on the northern flank of the mountain range.

York said these plans could have dire consequences for wildlife corridors, regional traffic and air quality and endangered species, including the condor.

“Our purpose in forming the coalition was to serve the developers as well as those concerned about the environment and to reach a negotiated settlement,” York said.

“Our research indicates that the lands Tejon currently wants to build on are the most biologically rich areas on the ranch,” he added. “If public money is to be used to purchase this land to preserve it, then the public should get the maximum benefit for those dollars.”

The committee wants to persuade Tejon Ranch stockholders and managers that their financial objectives can be met by building on a smaller portion of the ranch, on schedule and free of litigation.

How this will play with Tejon Ranch is an open question.

Robert A. Stine, president of Tejon Ranch Co., who has seen only a draft of the proposal, objected to the idea of reconfiguring development to fit the aspirations of environmentalists who are stirring up controversy to “increase their donations.”

“Our board of directors has authorized up to 100,000 acres for a nature preserve,” Stine said in an interview at his headquarters in the Tehachapis. “These environmentalists want more. But it’s not their land. They don’t own it. It belongs to our shareholders.”

He also took umbrage with the proposal to shrink Tejon Mountain Village. Waving his hand over a huge relief map of the project, he said, “This is some of the best real estate on the ranch. What you’re looking at

here is \$350 million to \$500 million worth of property.

“Let’s start with something we think is of sustainable and reasonable value for shareholders and go from there. Could we shrink it in size by, say, one house? Sure. By 3,400 units? Obviously not.”

The coalition’s proposal would remove about 350 homes from the village plan.

Tejon spokesman Barry Zoeller later tempered Stine’s remarks by pointing out that ranch officials were still willing to listen to suggestions from environmentalists.

“If we weren’t open to change, we wouldn’t still be talking to them,” Zoeller said.

“We believe our master plan for the ranch, which is an unprecedented level of conservation for a development, is extremely balanced and responsible. The challenge for environmentalists is to come up with something better,” he said.

At least one member of Tejon’s five-member panel of environmental advisors is tilting in favor of the coalition’s proposal.

“The condor is the developer’s Achilles’ heel,” said Joel Reynolds, senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council. “You can’t put development inside critical condor habitat without creating enormous obstacles.”

Mindful of that, Tejon expects to set aside 37,000 acres as a restricted condor study area. The company is also seeking an “incidental condor

take permit” from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which would relieve it of liability in the event that its projects are linked to the death of any of the endangered birds. The agency has never granted such a permit.

California condors and our developments are not incompatible,” Zoeller said. “In fact, we believe our conservation plan will actually enhance the condor’s chances of survival.”

That kind of talk rankles Peter Galvin of the Center for Biological Diversity, who believes that “Tejon Mountain Village would seal the doom of the California condor.”

“Tejon is trying to make their development plan sound like a fait accompli — that’s not true,” Galvin said. “If Tejon wants a fight, we’ll give it to them, and it will be one of the biggest environmental battles in the West.”

The prospect of cooperation between developers and environmentalists so early in the review process for Tejon, which would be built in phases over 25 years, has attracted the attention of federal and state authorities, as well as Kern and Los Angeles county officials who are seeking more affordable housing.

“I’m on the builders’ side of things, and builders don’t trust environmentalists,” said Los Angeles County Parks Commissioner Bill Korek. “But it’s hard to think they can’t find a way to work together.

“It’s a lofty goal and challenge, but achievable. The environmental groups would get what they want and save millions of dollars in legal fees. Developers would get to develop

more product sooner and save tens of millions of dollars in legal fees and carrying costs.”

Al Wright, executive director of the California Wildlife Conservation Board, agreed. But he also warned against pushing the landowners too hard.

“We may only get one shot at this,” Wright said. “If we end up polarizing issues, we will only make it harder for everyone in the long run.”

Don Geivet, who has tended the Tejon Ranch spread for 33 years, is not happy about the squabble over the fate of the immense place where he says old logging roads “can rise to a religious experience.”

Standing on a rocky promontory recently and surveying a panorama of forested hills, grasslands and rising flocks of wild pigeons, he mused, “I guess you could boil the debate down to this: Is smaller better now, or bigger better later?”