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## Plan allows development in Southern California deserts

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LOS ANGELES - The federal government announced the nation's largest conservation plan for 9.5 million acres of desert in Southern California that would protect wildlife but make development easier in fast-growing regions.

The 30-year plan unveiled Thursday by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management seeks to balance an ancient landscape of rugged volcanic mountains, 11,000-year-old creosote bushes and more than 100 species, including the threatened desert tortoise and the Mohave ground squirrel, with developers' push for new homes and businesses.

More than 10 years in the making, the plan covers parts of the Mojave Desert, Joshua Tree National Forest and the Algodones Dunes, which is a popular destination for off-road enthusiasts. It also covers dozens of cities and communities in San Bernardino, Kern, Los Angeles and Inyo counties.

"Everybody out there in this tremendously large, 9-million-acre area will know which areas are

targeted for conservation and which areas would be allowed for development," said Jan Bedrosian, spokeswoman for the BLM's California office, which began developing the plan a decade ago.

Conservation areas for the tortoise and squirrel would increase by an average of 28 percent, totaling 1.5 million acres, according to the plan. In addition, it establishes 14 new areas where only 1 percent of the land can be disturbed.

Off-roading would be restricted in some areas, including a 15-mile-long area on the northeastern edge of San Bernardino County.

The plan would ease building restrictions in some areas. In return, however, developers would pay fees to help manage the 1.5 million acres of wildlife. The fees are about \$770 per acre.

The BLM plans to finalize the guidelines by May 1, after reviewing public comments and getting support from state and federal wildlife agencies.

Some environmental groups say the plan doesn't go far enough to protect

desert wildlife.

Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the plan allows cattle to remain in some grazing areas that are critical habitats for the tortoise.

"The plan's stated goal was to recover the desert tortoise and this plan won't do that," Patterson said, adding his organization would sue to block the plan.