

Agency to decide fate of 4,000 acres

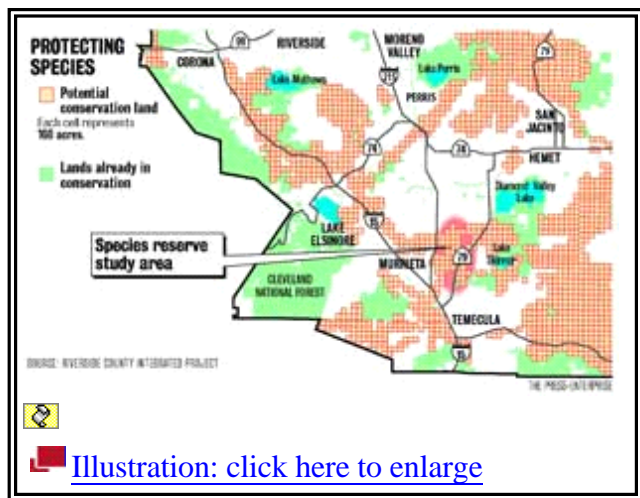
HABITAT: A UCR study favors making the parcel near Murrieta a refuge, blocking development.

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By JENNIFER BOWLES

The Press-Enterprise

A regional conservation agency will be asked to decide Monday whether more than 4,000 acres of open land in southwestern Riverside County should remain largely undeveloped as a refuge for an endangered butterfly and other species.



Based on a biological study released Wednesday, the staff of the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority will recommend that the board move to protect the central portion of the land near Murrieta while possibly allowing minor development on its edges.

The agency's 19-member board includes representatives of Riverside County and 14 cities.

The report by UCR's Center for Conservation Biology said the hills, creeks and ridges are vital to conserving rare plants and animals that depend on the unique habitat.

"We said from the beginning this would be guided by the science," said Joe Richards, the regional agency's deputy executive director. "We think the experts believe it's important, so we're going to conserve it."

Richards said the agency would seek to buy and preserve 454 acres from Winchester 700, a developer that had planned to build 1,034 homes in the area.

A spokesman for the Palos Verdes-based developer didn't immediately return a call seeking comment.

Richards' agency is in charge of acquiring habitat for endangered species so that development can occur elsewhere with less interference from state and federal endangered-species laws. The purchases are funded by state and federal grants and fees charged to developers.

The UCR report looked at the habitat in an area called "Core 2," an 8,807-acre territory east of Interstate 215 marked by the Hogbacks -- a row of ancient rocky hills blanketed by sage and chaparral that reach up to 1,800 feet above the meandering Warm Springs Creek. About half of the area remains in a natural state.

Some who live there said they would be happy if the open spaces are preserved for residents and animals.

"To me, it's what our area used to look like before the tract homes moved in," said Jeff MacLean, a high school science teacher. "It's still wild, and I know that's pretty rare out here."

The UCR study stemmed from a request by Riverside County and the city of Murrieta to determine whether a reserve in Core 2 made sense, given all the development around it and the cost to preserve it. They wanted to know if funds would be better spent buying private land elsewhere for conservation.

A two-day workshop of experts convened by UCR's Center for Conservation Biology concluded that Core 2 remains unique in western Riverside County despite development pressure. The habitat is substantially different from Wilson Valley, land several miles east that was considered a possible substitute for Core 2.

According to the UCR report, Core 2 is the northwestern-most location with a consistent population of the Quino checkerspot butterfly, an endangered species. It also provides a linkage between eastern and western populations of the coastal California gnatcatchers, a threatened songbird. And the area has important patches of undisturbed coastal sage scrub, an increasingly rare habitat used by many species.

The regional conservation agency also released its annual progress report Wednesday, saying that efforts to conserve land are not keeping pace with development in the rapidly growing area. Only 19 of the 37 habitat areas targeted for conservation have met acquisition goals; however, 12 of those areas are less than 50 acres behind, the report said.

Richards said the report would help direct the agency in making future conservation purchases.

Environmental groups said they worried that the lagging acquisitions would make it harder and more expensive to buy land and keep the planned reserve system intact.

"My concern is that the development acreage is going to get out of control," said Ileene Anderson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Karen Goebel, assistant field supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which issued a permit for the plan in 2004, said the agency had not seen the report yet.

"It's flexible, but development should not get too far out ahead of the conservation," she said.

Richards said the 25-year plan to buy 153,000 acres is still in its early stages. Altogether, 33,000 acres have been conserved since 2000.

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