

[Side note – Despite their dilapidated appearance, the railroad tracks pictured below are in use daily for sand mining / hauling, probably illegally given their condition, and cut through the heart of crucial Peninsular bighorn sheep habitat in southern San Diego County. No environmental analysis or ESA review has ever been conducted.]

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## Habitat and Development Plans Spread North, East



Habitat plans under development would outline preservation targets from areas such as Jacumba (pictured above) north to the Orange County border. Photo: Rob Davis

By ROB DAVIS Voice Staff Writer

Within two years, San Diego County could have a complete blueprint for how it will conserve land for endangered species and allow developers to build homes across the entirety of the county's 4,200 square miles.

Two plans under development by county officials would establish the rough boundaries of a habitat to preserve that, if combined, would cover about 312 square miles -- almost as large as San Diego's sprawling city limits. They would compliment two existing blueprints that have outlined large preserves throughout many of the region's coastal cities.

A North County plan contains a blueprint for development and conservation from the Orange County border to Ramona, aiming to provide habitat for 63 species, such as the coastal California gnatcatcher. An East County plan will do the same from the Imperial County border nearly to Alpine, aiming to provide habitat for 156 different species across more than half of the county's land, including the Peninsular bighorn sheep.

Without the plans, development and land preservation would occur on a case-by-case basis. For each housing subdivision proposed, developers would identify a patch of land to preserve as mitigation. They'd have to endure a slow regulatory approval process that would painstakingly evaluate what impact the building would have on a host of endangered species.

With the plans in place, developers can expedite their permitting process, while contributing to a regional preserve system -- one that aims to preserve contiguous stretches of habitat. The plans make development easier while making conservation simpler, too.

But the existing plans have been imperfect. And as the final two plans are developed, environmentalists say they are concerned that important lessons from earlier efforts are being ignored.

When the region's first habitat plan was adopted in 1997, the region's elected officials promised they'd find a way to pay for the long-term maintenance and monitoring of protected land. The money would pay for everything from keeping an eye on species' health to making sure the habitat stayed litter free. It was due in place by 2000.

But the region has never figured out how to pay for that. The decade-old promise has gone unfulfilled, drawing criticism from environmentalists and a federal judge.

The two plans under development will rely heavily on a speculative source that is not guaranteed: A 2010 ballot initiative being

proposed by the San Diego Association of Governments. It would seek voter approval for between \$1.8 billion and \$2.4 billion to conserve and manage habitat and monitor protected species throughout the county. It is still under development and the funding source to generate that money has not been identified.

The county aims to finish the North County plan by the end of 2009, subject to approval by the Board of Supervisors, meaning that any reliance on the ballot initiative would be staked out before knowing what voters will do.

"Words are nice. But action is required," says David Hogan, conservation manager at the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group. "What we've seen with these regional plans over the years is that promises for conservation and management are often hollow."

San Diego County officials disagree, pointing to the \$40 million investment they have made to develop the habitat plans and acquire and manage land. But that is a fraction of what is needed countywide. While acknowledging there is more work to do, county officials say a variety of sources will help pay for acquiring and maintaining the land. The ballot initiative would contribute, says Tom Oberbauer, chief of the county's Multiple Species Planning Division, but not be the sole source.

While environmentalists criticize the unfulfilled funding promise, developers say the money has not been needed in the existing plans' earliest phases, which have focused on acquiring habitat -- not managing it.

Jim Whalen, chairman of the Alliance for Habitat Conservation, a developers group, says land preserved particularly in the East County plan will need less monitoring and management because it doesn't face the same development pressure.

Whalen points to funding from the 2004 TransNet initiative to help meet the goals of earlier plans. The ballot initiative, which extended a half-cent sales tax increase to fund road improvements, included \$200 million for funding habitat conservation.

Environmentalists say more is needed to allow the plans to achieve their fundamental goal: Helping endangered species recover from the brink while allowing development to continue.

"These are plans that purport to protect these species to prevent extinction and conserve them for the long term," Hogan says. "It follows that they should include details and assurances for how they're going to fulfill those promises."

The incomplete plans hold tremendous implications for the county's development and conservation. They're the final pieces of a massive countywide effort to establish contiguous preserves for wildlife.

The East County plan, which the county expects to complete in 2010, will target ways to provide habitat for species such as the endangered arroyo toad, Peninsular bighorn sheep, southwestern willow flycatcher and Stephen's kangaroo rat.

Much of the land in East County is already preserved, from Rancho Cuyamaca State Park to the Cleveland National Forest to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. But the county wants to identify a blueprint for broadening and cementing the linkages between those existing preserves.

The North County plan, expected to be finished in 2009, aims to protect the endangered coastal California gnatcatcher as well as several species found in vernal pools, a rare habitat that fills with water and teems with life only during the rainy season.

Once they are finished, the plans represent "a vision that 75 years from now San Diego County will still be a global point of biodiversity, and that these species will still be around here," says Michael Beck, San Diego director of the Endangered Habitats League, an environmental group.

But to achieve that, Beck says monitoring of species -- ensuring they are recovering -- should have already begun in earnest. And it has not. Nor has the extensive management of protected land.

"It's incredibly audacious that you're going to cover a county the size of the state of Connecticut and manage species at the level of detail required," Beck says. "We were pretty flatfooted for dealing with that."

But plans should be in place, he says, to fight back against invasive weeds and address the impacts from wildfires.

"There's no excuse that we're this far down the road," he says, "and we don't have that in place."