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Biologists frown on master-planned community in Tejon Ranch

BY JENNY SHEARER
Californian staff writer

A committee of biologists has reservations about a proposed Tejon Ranch Co. master-planned community and advised Los Angeles County leaders not to approve it.

The Significant Ecological Area Technical Advisory Committee, or SEATAC, determined there weren't enough wildlife corridors in the plan, said Shirley Imsand, senior biologist for the L.A. County Department of Regional Planning. The corridors appeared to dead-end at the edge of Centennial. Without sufficient territory in which to hunt and roam, species may decline.

"My feeling was that the committee felt there was potential for the development, but in its design, it wasn't quite enough," Imsand said Thursday.

The seven-member group cited the lack of a detailed management plan for the open spaces and natural areas in the project, she added.

Centennial would add 23,000 apartments, condos and single-family homes, public facilities and commercial options to land Tejon

owns in northern Los Angeles County.

Barry Zoeller, Tejon Ranch's vice president for corporate communications, said the company was disappointed by the committee's decision but not surprised.

"SEATAC, to our knowledge, has never recommended a development project," he said. "All the biological information becomes part of the environmental report, which is reviewed by the planning commission and the supervisors. We're confident that they will believe, as we do, that Centennial is an environmentally sensitive community planned in the right way and in the right place."

Land management plans will be explained in forthcoming reports, he noted.

In May, Tejon and environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, announced an agreement that would set aside up to 90 percent of ranch-owned lands for conservation.

In exchange, the participating groups agreed to not oppose Centennial and Tejon Mountain Village, a planned resort community in southern Kern.

A representative with the Center for Biological Diversity thinks the L.A. biological committee's decision could make it problematic for Tejon to advance Centennial through the land-use approval process.

"It indicates that the Centennial project, one, is not compatible with the county (regulations) and two, it's recognition that this is a huge impact to the natural resources of Los Angeles County," said biologist Ileene Anderson.

The center was among the groups negotiating with Tejon but backed out over differences about agreement elements.