
Los Angeles Times

MAY 14, 2008

• Editorial •

Tejon Ranch sprawl?

Environmentalists accepted development in exchange for land. But their work isn't done.

How heartening it is, the sound of environmentalists and developers harmoniously agreeing on new construction. That's what first came to mind when the Tejon Ranch Co. and such environmental heavyweights as the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defense Council jointly announced plans to both build on and preserve swaths of the 270,000-acre ranch that straddles Los Angeles and Kern counties. If all goes as intended, more than 200,000 acres would be preserved, with some as a state park and most under private conservancy.

In an increasingly built-out state where there's always a fight about a "last coastal canyon" or a "disappearing critical habitat," Tejon is nonetheless environmentally unique. It forms the bottom of the giant U that connects the Sierra Nevada with the coastal mountains, enabling wildlife to cross from one to the other. It includes favored soaring ground for the endangered California condor. And it's the last big undeveloped link between the Los Angeles metropolitan area and the San Joaquin Valley.

Considering that public officials in both counties are likely to approve some development, the preservationists cannily chose pragmatism, gaining what land they could. In doing so, however, they have cornered themselves: They now cannot officially oppose a project that they openly find objectionable. Adding nearly 80,000 new residents to the far reaches of the Los Angeles region, the Tejon Ranch plan exemplifies sprawl, with all the attendant concerns about water, traffic, air quality and fire risks. These potential problems cannot be overlooked, no matter how much land is conserved.

One of the three Tejon projects makes sense. The industrial zone at the base of the Grapevine would be located near the junction of Interstate 5 and state Highway 99, already major thoroughfares for trucking. A second project, an upscale resort-type development of 3,000 homes scattered through a canyon area in southern Kern County, should have minimal impact on water and traffic. It is well within condor territory, however, and its remote location makes it a wildfire disaster waiting to happen. Of primary concern, though, is the Centennial project: 23,000 homes plus commercial development at the northern end of L.A. County.

With a projected 70,000 residents, Centennial plunks a moderately-sized city in the hinterlands. Residents will work where they live, the developer says; the State Water Project will cover much of their thirst; and the county and state can handle the fires. But what happens when companies change their plans? (Remember Dreamworks and Playa Vista?) Typically, residents join the freeway creep to the nearest job center, about 50 miles away in this case. Water supplies already are being cut back, and last fall, the region was overwhelmed by multiple simultaneous fires.

If Centennial should be built at all, first there needs to be serious discussion about xeriscaped yards and golf links, alternative-fuel mass transit to Los Angeles, solar-powered homes and a well-equipped fire district funded by the new residents. As much as we applaud diligent work by the Sierra Club and its colleagues to preserve land, we hope there are other activists around to make those discussions happen.