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## Pact with Tejon Ranch Co. splits environmentalists

**Those involved in the deal to protect some land while allowing development elsewhere say it's a good deal. Others say condor habitat is at risk.**

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By Louis Sahagun  
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Environmentalists who brokered a landmark agreement with a developer to set aside 240,000 acres of California wilderness are facing the ire of colleagues within the conservation community who contend that they, as one detractor put it, "sold out to the forces of destruction."

The pact's potential effect on the California condor has prompted the harshest criticism, and has brought personal attacks as well.

Under the accord unveiled in May after two years of confidential negotiations, Tejon Ranch Co. will preserve 90% of its holdings in the Tehachapi Mountains, about 60 miles north of Los Angeles.

In exchange, a coalition of environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, Audubon California and Natural Resources Defense Council, will not challenge massive development projects on the remaining 10% of the Tejon property.



(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)

A mule deer on the 270,000 acre ranch.

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Coalition leaders acknowledged that the proposed Tejon Mountain Village's luxury homes, spas and boutique hotels would consume about 8% of the condor habitat on the ranch. But they also said the agreement aims to protect a much larger region -- eight times the size of San Francisco -- that is still very much as 19th century frontiersman Kit Carson experienced it.

Its emerald hills and lush valleys remain unblemished by buildings and utility lines. Gray foxes and bobcats still prowl secluded meadows edged with elderberry bushes and fragrant buckeye trees; great horned owls still roost in the boughs of 11 species of oak. The region's prehistoric scavengers, the condors, are still here too, patrolling the skies above wind-



(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)  
Barry Zoeller, director of communications for the Tejon Ranch Co. stands on a ridge during a recent tour.

swept ridgelines studded with incense cedars.

“I truly believe that because of this agreement, California condors will one day be as common here as red-tailed hawks are in Orange County,” said raptor specialist Pete Bloom, who works for the company as its lead condor consultant. “But people in the condor community aren’t getting it. They are my friends, and it disturbs me to be on the other side of them.”

Bloom has been studying and trapping birds of prey for more than three decades, earning a high-profile reputation for having helped implement a captive breeding program in the 1980s that is credited with saving the California condor from extinction. On Easter Sunday in 1987 he detonated a cannon net from under a camouflaged pit to capture the last wild California condor.

But Bloom’s contractual relationship with Tejon Ranch Co. is drawing scorn from critics, including 11 condor scientists led by his mentor, biologist Noel Snyder.

In a letter to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the scientists argued that Tejon Mountain Village “would result in substantial harm to condors, posing a significant threat to

the recovery of this well-known and highly revered species.” They also suggested “that any environmental organization might agree to such consequences is alarming and raises troubling questions about how the agreement was reached.”

In an interview, Snyder said the coalition “bought into the developer’s propaganda, and that antagonizes people. They are selling the condor down the river, and knifing the whole concept of critical habitat. You can’t build a whole city on critical habitat.”

As for Bloom, Snyder said, “He played a small role in condor conservation work. He was a condor trapper, that’s all.”

Adam Keats, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, which is considering suing over the Tejon projects, was equally blunt about what he called an “awful” plan.

“Pete’s participation with Tejon and his analysis of the supposed



(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)  
Pete Bloom calls for a spotted owl near Lopez Flats on Tejon Ranch.

protections for the condor on the ranch are totally disappointing,” Keats said. “We’ve rolled up our sleeves and we’re fighting the hell out of it.”

Like Snyder, Keats criticized Bloom and two other raptor experts for becoming paid consultants for the company. Keats acknowledged, however, that “Pete’s last big gig was as a paid consultant and star witness” on behalf of his own Center for Biological Diversity in a court battle to stop a separate developer’s proposal to build a marina near bald eagle habitat at Big Bear Lake. The center eventually prevailed.



(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)

A valley oak stands on a ridge as a biologist and ranch employees take in a view of the Tejon Ranch.





(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)

Graham Chisholm, director of conservation for Audubon California, looks at a Bullock's oriole nest during a tour of the ranch.

Even so, "Pete's a hot potato now," said David Clendenen, a condor researcher and critic of the agreement. "For someone who has started a consulting business, Pete's got to be worried about being involved in this controversy. It could affect his business in the future."

For Bloom, the criticism stings.

"I anticipated a lot of heat for my work at Tejon Ranch," said Bloom, who since 1977 has operated a consultant business that specializes in threatened species and biological surveys. "But I didn't expect it to come so fast so viciously from colleagues I've worked with over the years."

"For Noel to say I'm just a condor trapper is hurtful. I don't understand why he would try and belittle me like that," Bloom said. "I'm going to weather these attacks."

Disputes among environmentalists are nothing new. But some worry that the emotionally charged internecine warfare could undermine efforts to protect the sweeping Tejon Ranch landscape, which embraces four ecosystems and supports wildlife ranging from Tehachapi salamanders to golden eagles.

"It is important for everyone to read the agreement and focus on the facts," said Bill Corcoran, senior regional representative for the Sierra Club, "rather than engage in personal attacks and question the integrity of people who have dedicated their lives to protecting the natural heritage of the state."

Also under attack is Graham Chisolm, director of conservation for Audubon California and the first chairman of a newly created "independent Tejon Ranch Conservancy," which is composed of 12 members appointed by the company and its environmental partners to manage the preserved land in perpetuity.

"The alternative to this agreement," said Chisolm, who denied opponents' allegations that he has accepted money from the developer, "was fighting the development in court for 50 years, project by project."

As part of an effort to smooth ruffled feathers, he said, "I'll be meeting soon with the Center for Biological Diversity to walk them through the agreement. I also plan to meet with six Audubon chapters over the next few months to explain exactly what's going on."

Critics find fault with the company's plans to provide \$800,000 a year for



(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)

Ranch employee Rob Peterson with a desert night lizard found on the property.



(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)

Wildlife researcher Scott Thomas sets a net to capture screech owls so they could be tagged for future study.



(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)

Wildlife researchers Chris Neimela, left, and Scott Thomas untangle a captured screech owl on Tejon Ranch.



(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)

Researcher Chris Neimela extends the wing of a screech owl.

seven years to get the conservancy off the ground. Additional funds will be donated by the Lucille and David Packard Foundation, but later the conservancy will be funded through transfer fees from the sale of residential properties.

"Economically, that means the conservancy is dependent upon the development projects being built," Keats said, "which is at cross-purposes with everything we stand for."



(Spencer Weiner / Los Angeles Times)

An Injured red-tailed hawk is rescued by biologist Pete Bloom during a ranch tour.

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Still, coalition members cite the company's efforts on behalf of

wildlife. For example, the company has banned hunters from using lead ammunition, which poisons the remains of game animals frequently devoured by the condors.

Last week, Tejon Ranch set up condor feeding stations, which will be stocked daily with still-born calf carcasses donated by local dairies.

The company's proposals have yet to undergo state and federal reviews. An environmental impact report is expected to be completed this summer on the company's development proposals near Interstate 5: Tejon Mountain Village in Kern County, and Centennial,

a planned community of 23,000 residential units in northern Los Angeles County.

Bloom and coalition leaders hope that the agreement will expedite the permitting process.

Peering through binoculars at four golden eagles circling over a single ridgeline, Bloom said, "I used to tell people that the peak of my career was capturing that last wild condor. But helping to reach this agreement is mountains above condors."