

FYI- This is a small paper located near Tejon Ranch.

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Secret Negotiation between Tejon Developers and 'Big Green' Groups Sprouts Deal

By Patric Hedlund

As we are going to press this week, a coalition of 'Big Green' environmental groups is joining Tejon Ranch Company (TRC) and its development partners May 8 to announce an agreement which will provide a green light for Tejon Mountain Village and the Centennial project to move forward with substantially fewer legal hurdles.

In a series of interviews with individuals across the country, The Mountain Enterprise confirmed last week (and put on its website www.MountainEnterprise.com) that secret negotiations have been conducted for over a year that are likely to entail developers pledging to preserve additional wildlife habitat.

In exchange, large environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Audubon California, the Planning and Conservation League and the Endangered Habitats League are expected to agree not to oppose Tejon's major projects, which could accelerate the developers' ability to move more swiftly through entitlement and on to building and profitability.

Some groups and individuals have stepped away from the negotiations. They express concern that, without consulting their members, staff of the nation's largest environmental groups secretly agreed not to participate in the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) process.

The Center for Biological Diversity refused to sign a second round of confidentiality agreements after concluding that their primary concerns regarding conflict between California condor habitat and plans for Tejon Mountain Village "were not being dealt with in a serious way," sources said.

A tug-of-war has been waged over the habitat of 35 endangered animal and plant species—including the California condor—that have been identified as seriously threatened by the company's plans. Tejon's 270,000 acres contain the primary wildlife corridors between California's coastal ranges, the Mojave and the Rocky Mountains.

TRC's prior development plans carve endangered species into "genetic islands" too isolated from each other to survive, scientists say.

While the nation's environmental groups have expressed urgency about avoiding what many see as an environmental tragedy, the developers announced Wednesday, May 7 that, "the size, location and rich natural heritage of Tejon Ranch have made it the most sought-after conservation property in the state of California."

To many observers, that language—on the eve of the announcement of a deal—translates into a major push to obtain public money, perhaps over \$200 million dollars, to ensure habitat preservation from the developers.

State sources point out that as a result of such initiatives as the Prop. 84 "Rebuilding California State Parks Program," public money may still be available for acquisition of critical natural habitat, even while Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is threatening existing state parks with closure because there is inadequate operational and maintenance funds available due to the current budget crisis.

Schwarzenegger announced late Wednesday that he would attend the Thursday morning announcement. The conference will be streamed live at www.gov.ca.gov.

It is expected that an intense political lobbying campaign will be launched statewide to secure funding to implement the plan.

Both developers and environmental groups have said they entered this kind of negotiation because of 'blackmail'—but of different kinds.

Behind the scenes, developers say they are being threatened with prolonged and costly legal harassment by environmental groups trying to "tell us what we can do with our own private property."

Environmental groups say developers are holding endangered species hostage, forcing the public to pay a costly ransom so endangered wildlife has a chance to survive.

Two years ago the Wildlands Conservancy (which created the Wind Wolves preserve) may have blazed the trail toward this week's announcement by putting together a coalition of 12 conservation groups to propose a 245,000-acre "Tejon Natural Heritage Park."

That coalition included the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity and several other conservation groups.

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