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Tejon Conservancy Is Launched as Debate On Condors Heats Up

By Patric Hedlund and Gary Meyer

A first step to implement the creation of an independent Tejon Ranch Conservancy began this week as the board of directors for the new organization was announced. The new board's task will be to put systems in place to manage the 240,000 acres (375 square miles) of preserved habitat agreed upon during two years of secret negotiations between five environmental groups and the Tejon Ranch Company.

The deal was announced on May 8. It was received with hyperbole on both ends of the spectrum, with breathless praise from Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and heated criticism from the Center for Biological Diversity and others concerned about Tejon Ranch Company's development plans.

The Sierra Club, Audubon California, Natural Resources Defense Council, Endangered Habitats League and the Planning and Conservation League are parties to the agreement.

Fenton Communications, which spokesman Eric Antebi describes as "a public interest public relations firm" in San Francisco,

issued a press release Tuesday, June 24. Antebi said it is a joint statement from the new board of directors. The conservancy's inaugural chairman Graham Chisholm (director of conservation for Audubon California) is quoted: "The challenge of crafting an agreement to protect 375 square miles of the Tejon Ranch was no small task, but now the real work begins. This will be conservation on an unprecedented scale, and it's important that we hit the ground running."

The conservancy is structured as an independent nonprofit organization governed by a twelve-member board consisting of four members appointed by the five environmental organizations that were parties to the agreement and by four members appointed by Tejon Ranch Company. In addition, there will be four independent members, jointly appointed by the environmental groups and the company during the first three years and, after that by the conservancy board.

The conservancy will be hiring staff and "beginning efforts to establish a State Park." It will also devise a

plan "for making the majority of Tejon Ranch available for public enjoyment through educational programs and public access, including opportunities for docent-led tours, hiking, camping, wildlife watching, fishing and hunting. Among the Conservancy's top priorities in the first year will be the realignment of 37 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail on the ranch."

The critics continue to raise two primary concerns. First, they say that the endangered California condor is at risk from the developer's plan to build Tejon Mountain Village (3,400 homes, several hotels and commercial areas) within the 'core habitat' necessary for the survival of the condor.

Second, they say that Tejon Ranch Company has methodically designed agreements to keep knowledgeable scientists and organizations from speaking out during the public proceedings provided by the California Environmental Quality Act. Such proceedings are intended to provide a fair and thorough inquiry into the impact of development plans on the environment.

Associated Press and The Mountain Enterprise reported about condor scientists who said they were offered relatively large ‘consulting fees’ for signing an agreement containing elements that some lawyers interpreted as ‘gag’ clauses, to keep them from participating in public forums about the consequences of the company’s development plans.

As a condition of setting up the Tejon Ranch Conservancy, the five

environmental groups that will have primary custodial involvement—while not endorsing the development plans—agreed to stay mute during public proceedings.

Tejon Ranch Company agreed to provide several million dollars in operating funds to support the launch of the conservancy.

The press release says the Tejon Ranch Conservancy will be

“responsible for monitoring and enforcing a conservation easement across 178,000 acres of Tejon Ranch and working with the state of California and others to acquire an additional 62,000 acres.” That additional land will need to be purchased from the developer.

The 267 page agreement is available online at [Tejon Ranch Conservation and Land Use Agreement](#).