

High Country News

JUNE 24, 2008

Opinion

Tejon Ranch conservation deal

CON: A housing development that's a tragedy for condors

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In recent weeks, several high-profile environmental organizations have been celebrating a deal they call “perhaps the greatest victory for conservation that many of us will see in our lifetime.” If only this were true. Sadly, it is not; the deal in question represents a major setback for conservation.

The “deal” does result in permanent preservation of substantial amounts of open space on California's Tejon Ranch, but it also involves the creation of a major housing development of thousands of dwellings in the heart of critical habitat for the endangered California condor.

If built, Tejon Mountain Village will pose a significant threat to the recovery of this highly revered species. That any environmental organization might agree to such consequences is alarming and raises troubling questions about how the agreement was reached.

Critical habitat is the highest level of federal protection given to areas that are indispensable for endangered species. It is designed to prevent significant degradation of these areas. Critical habitat for condors was established on the Tejon Ranch in 1976, because the lands in question were crucial for foraging and roosting.

After a close brush with extinction, the recovering condor population is once again using this critical habitat on Tejon, but it's doubtful that full recovery of the species can be achieved in its historic range if significant degradation of the Tejon lands is allowed. This conclusion is not new: It has been stated in innumerable documents and official remarks of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Game over the years.

Condors are sensitive to both direct and indirect threats from

human activities. Historically the huge birds have avoided urban and suburban areas. A major housing development in the remote heart of one of their most important use areas is exactly the sort of degradation that critical habitat was designed to prevent. It simply should not be permitted under any circumstances.

Incredibly, private environmental organizations with no authority over -- and little experience in -- condor management issues have now endorsed a deal that would allow the residential development of condor critical habitat on Tejon. The Tejon deal was based on negotiations openly described as secret, from which virtually all experienced condor experts were excluded. Further, the deal's negative impacts for condors have not yet been disclosed to the public. This is the worst sort of deal-making imaginable, particularly for an extremely rare

species that has become a public trust.

Many of the lands sacrificed in this agreement are of irreplaceable value to condor conservation, while many of the lands slated for protection have not normally been used by condors and likely will never be of importance to condors. Furthermore, many of the protected lands would likely never be developed for housing because of steep terrain and other practical problems.

Unfortunately, in their eagerness to protect open space, a few well-meaning organizations have become parties to a major threat to the future of the condor. In effect, the condor is being asked to pay for protection of undeveloped lands of much less critical importance

than the lands being sacrificed. This represents a huge net loss for conservation, not a benefit, and is no cause for celebration. Nothing in the announced agreement comes close to compensating for the losses involved.

Critical habitat designation has the force of law and deserves the respect and support of all, including landowners, governmental agencies and environmental organizations. If these plans are implemented, they would set a precedent for disregarding critical habitat protection for other endangered species, a precedent with far-reaching and potentially disastrous consequences.

Allowing Tejon Mountain Village to be built in critical habitat for condors represents a victory only

for trophy-home development. As former participants in the condor-conservation program, we know of no evidence to support claims that these plans are generally endorsed by "condor experts." Aside from a few individuals paid by Tejon, not one experienced condor biologist of our acquaintance believes that these plans are anything other than a major mistake. Our opposition here represents the consensus of a dozen condor biologists with long-term experience in the condor conservation program. We believe that preservation of critical habitat on the Tejon Ranch is essential for conservation of the condor, and that recovery of the species would be jeopardized by the proposed housing development.



PRO: The Tejon agreement is a true conservation victory

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Anyone reading about the Tejon Ranch -- California's largest contiguous private property - has probably heard about the three controversial development projects: Tejon Industrial Park, the Tejon Mountain Village and the Centennial Planned Community.

But have you heard about the Tejon Golf and Hunting Resort, or maybe the Whitewolf Village and Shopping Center? People haven't heard about them because they're not going to be built, and thanks to a sweeping

conservation agreement between several environmental groups and the Tejon Ranch Co., they never will be.

At stake are hundreds of thousands of acres in Kern and Los Angeles counties, filled with oaks, white fir, Joshua trees and grasslands -- all of it native habitat for the California condor and many other rare species.

For a time, our best hope to save this land was to do what we conservationists always do: Battle

it out in the courts and in the media, knowing full well that while we might win some battles, we would also lose others. However, even if we were successful in tying up the developments in court, the ranch could simply have responded by selling off its nearly 1,000 legal parcels. The resulting checkerboard landscape of development and open space would do little to help birds, wildlife and habitat.

Fortunately, all parties were willing to sit down and reason out

a solution that made more sense for the future of this remarkable landscape.

The agreement, negotiated by Audubon California, the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Endangered Habitats League and the Planning and Conservation League, secures permanent protection of 375 square miles -- eight times the size of San Francisco and about 90 percent of the Tejon Ranch. The settlement also provides funding for an independent science-driven conservancy to restore the land and ensure public access. Thirty-seven miles of the Pacific Crest Trail will be re-routed through the property, and the creation of a major state park will allow the public to enjoy this incredible place.

In exchange, we have agreed not to oppose three developments on the remaining 10 percent of the ranch. These developments -- none of which have been approved yet by regulatory agencies -- will undergo full public review and be subject to all environmental protection laws.

Of course, no development at all would have been preferable. But one has only to look around

Kern and Los Angeles counties and see what is happening on privately held land to understand that this outcome is just wishful thinking. To commit ourselves to years of fighting for a pipe dream would have been irresponsible. It would have meant gambling with California's most biologically diverse property, particularly in light of the opportunity this agreement presents right now.

Since the agreement was announced, concerns have been raised about whether this agreement protects the California condor. Ever since I saw my first California condor, just west of the Tejon Ranch in August 1983, I have understood the magic of this bird. Speaking on behalf of Audubon, an organization that has been out front since the 1930s in the battle to save the condor, I can say that this endangered species was our foremost concern.

We reviewed condor flight data and consulted with eminent condor scientists, including Pete Bloom, Lloyd Kiff and Bob Risebrough. Bloom is a hero in the fight to save the condor, and the stories of him lying in holes to catch and protect the last wild condors in the '80s are still told and re-told with a sense of awe.

Without people like him, there likely would be no condors left.

Bloom, Kiff and Risebrough had total freedom to analyze the plans and agree or disagree, and to do so publicly. They made a number of strong recommendations, and each was incorporated into the plan. The agreement provides for the protection of the overwhelming majority of the ranch's vast backcountry condor habitat and also gives long-term funding for condor conservation.

We recognize that scientists often disagree. Nothing in our agreement precludes such critics or any other members of the public from participating in the review process conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or any of the many other review processes related to the area's developments. Those review processes will have the ultimate say as to whether the proposal meets the condor's needs.

If the Fish and Wildlife Service believes that additional steps are warranted, it will require them, and in so doing will build on the clear and certain conservation outcomes achieved by the Tejon Ranch Agreement.