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Tejon Ranch Co. seeks to release secret California condor documents

By Louis Sahagun

The Tejon Ranch Co. wants to release secret documents detailing its settlement negotiations with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over plans to build a master-planned resort complex in federally designated critical habitat for the California condor.

The ranch this week asked Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Justice Department to back its efforts to have a U.S. District Court vacate a controversial protective order issued in 2002 to seal the documents related to a lawsuit it had filed against the agency five years earlier.

In a statement, Robert A. Stine, company president and chief executive, said the protection was no longer needed because the negotiations had culminated in a proposed multispecies habitat conservation plan. It aims to strike a balance between protection of the condor and development of Tejon Mountain Village, a complex of luxury homes, hotels and golf courses on ranch property in the Tehachapi Mountains about 60 miles north of Los Angeles.

The plan would allow the ranch to receive a special permit to protect it from legal liability if any one of 26 sensitive species was injured or

killed because of business activities on the property. However, the ranch would be criminally liable if a condor was killed because of those activities.

A year ago, a landmark agreement was struck by the ranch and environmental groups including the Sierra Club, Audubon California and the Natural Resources Defense Council to permanently conserve 90% of the 270,000-acre ranch.

Stine said those groups recently expressed concerns that continuing to keep the lawsuit records secret “could create the appearance of nondisclosure, something contrary to the very comprehensive science-based negotiations that had led to the historic agreement.”

Stine’s announcement comes less than a month after the Center for Biological Diversity said it planned to file a lawsuit against Fish and Wildlife on grounds that withholding the settlement documents from public view was a violation of the Endangered Species Act.

Today, Adam Keats, a spokesman for the center, criticized the ranch for seeking to release the documents nearly a month after Fish and Wildlife stopped taking public comments on the proposed multispecies habitat conservation plan.

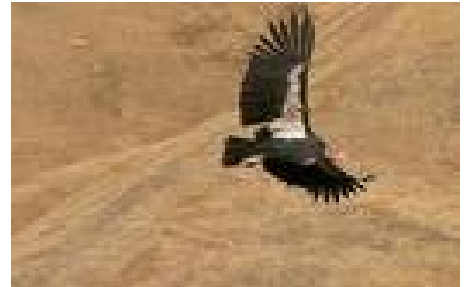


Photo: A California condor in flight. Credit: Ana Fuentes/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

“Tejon Ranch’s timing is remarkably convenient,” Keats said. “For seven years straight, the corporation has prevented these documents from seeing the light of day. Only now, after the door has been slammed shut on the public process, does it seek to release them to the public.”

“But the lawsuit Tejon filed to prevent the successful reintroduction of the California condor remains active,” he said, “poised like a gun to the head of the agency that is reviewing the company’s application.”