

Developers seek to appease opposition

Tejon Ranch offers plan for village, habitat

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Though developers of Tejon Ranch believe a newly released habitat conservation plan will bring them one step closer to their goal of creating village-like settings on a portion of virgin land, they face opposition from some environmentalists.

Officials from Tejon Ranch Co., owners of 270,000 acres in the mountains at the western end of the Antelope Valley, have pinned their hopes on the environmental impact statement that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service just released for public review and comment.

That document evaluates Tejon Ranch's proposed Tehachapi Uplands Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan - covering nearly 142,000 acres and intended to protect 27 sensitive species, including the rare California condor.

The 90-day public comment period ends April 22. The document is available for inspection on the Fish and Wildlife Web site at www.fws.gov/ventura. Tejon Ranch officials feel confident the statements' findings will quell any doubts or concerns voiced by people who have opposed development in that area. The developer needs an approved environmental impact statement for the permit to proceed with construction plans.

"The Tehachapi Uplands Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan is another hallmark in Tejon Ranch's 150-year legacy of conservation and good stewardship," said Robert Stine, president and chief executive officer of Tejon Ranch Co.

The habitat conservation plan covers only Tejon's Kern County land, where Kern County officials have approved a maximum of 3,450 homes in the proposed Tehachapi Mountain Village. On its Los Angeles County property along Highway 138, Tejon Ranch has proposed the 23,000-home Centennial master-plan community.

The habitat conservation plan evolved as a result of the Tejon Ranch Conservation and Land Use Agreement reached in May 2008 - an accord struck between the land developers and five environmental organizations: the Sierra Club, Audubon California, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Planning and Conservation League and the Endangered Habitats League.

In keeping with that agreement, the developers pledged to use not more than 30,000 acres for the residential/commercial communities they build in southeastern Kern County and northern Los Angeles County, within the Antelope Valley. That leaves 240,000 for wildlife habitat, open space and parkland.

"Building on last year's Land Use and Conservation Agreement, this plan will provide greater certainty to our efforts to protect and advance the recovery of 27 different plant and animal species, including the California condor," Stine said.

"It will also provide more certainty to our plans for the environmentally sensitive development of a small portion of the ranch," Stine said.

The Center for Biological Diversity, which has filed numerous lawsuits over endangered and threatened species, has been outspoken about its opposition to any kind of construction at Tejon Ranch.

Adam Keats, director of the Urban Wildlands Program for the center, said the permit the developer seeks amounts to a license to kill condors.

That permit would allow the developer "to harm and harass the iconic and extremely endangered California condor," Keats said in a statement. "The condor's last bastion of wild habitat is threatened by mega-developments in northern Los Angeles and southern Kern counties."

"The countdown has begun on Tejon's plan to destroy the condor's Garden of Eden - the core of its existence. Contrary to Tejon's assertions, this is not a conservation plan," Keats stated. "This is a permit to harm, displace, disturb and, in some cases, kill 27 endangered, threatened or rare species that call Tejon home."

"Don't be fooled," Keats wrote. "Each of these species would be far better off if this permit is never issued."

"Barely 100 condors fly free in California, and only about 50 near Tejon, the historical heart of their range," said Ileene Anderson, staff biologist at the center. "They simply cannot withstand a single death, nor can they withstand the loss of habitat that this permit would enable."

Barry Zoeller, vice president of Corporate Communications for Tejon Ranch, disputed the assertions made by Keats and Anderson.

"The Center for Biological Diversity greatly exaggerates the impact on the condor and its habitat, considering condors don't nest or breed on Tejon Ranch," Zoeller said. Tejon Mountain Village, the housing and commercial development plan, "will only impact one-half of 1% of all condor habitat in the state," Zoeller said. "And even in the extremely small area that would be impacted, the habitat conservation plan protects the condor."

"According to the latest surveys, about 85 condors fly wild in California," Zoeller said. "From 2000 to 2008, a total of 13 condors have stopped at Tejon Ranch.

"They're tagged and they have GPS (devices)," Zoeller said. "That's how you're able to determine their locations.

"No condors nest at Tejon Ranch. They don't breed here. They essentially use Tejon Ranch as a feeding site and occasionally as a roosting site when feeding.

"If they've located a carcass in the late afternoon, they stay overnight and feed in the morning.

"They fly over the ranch, going from the coastal mountains toward the southern Sierras." Zoeller said condors use the ranch as a rest spot "when flying from one location to another."

Core elements of the habitat conservation plan "designed to ensure the California condor's ongoing recovery," according to Zoeller, include:

Preserving 94% of high-quality condor foraging area within its boundaries.

Burying new utility lines underground.

Land-planning considerations that take into account the existing natural setting and historic condor activity, ensuring that planned development is located away from potential condor foraging areas.

Eliminating use of ammunition containing lead in the ranch's hunting program.

Providing supplemental condor feeding stations.

Providing GPS tracking devices that can help officials identify when birds are in trouble and where to find them.

Establishing a 37,000-acre Fish and Wildlife Service condor study area.

Employing a full-time, on-site biologist and establishing a condor education program for residents and guests.

"Perhaps, most importantly, under no circumstances does the plan permit the lethal take of condors," Zoeller said.

Aside from condors, the environmental impact statement identifies other protected creatures like the Tehachapi slender salamander, the yellow-blotched salamander, the western spadefoot toad, the golden eagle, the burrowing owl, the western yellow-billed cuckoo and the American peregrine falcon.

The document said the area stretches from the Valley floors upward to an elevation as high as 7,000 feet in the Tehachapi Mountains.

The statement identified what it called short-term impacts, "construction-related impacts with potential non-permanent effects on amphibians, including impacts to water quality and dust."

"Artificial light can affect physiology and behavior of animals, leading to ecological consequences at the population, community and ecosystem levels," the document stated. "Aquatic ecosystems may be particularly vulnerable to such effects, and nocturnally breeding animals such as frogs and other amphibians may be especially affected."

However, developers said the construction will be kept a significant distance from the areas that attract wildlife.

"This is the next step in an open and public process led by (Fish and Wildlife), with whom we have worked over the last decade to develop the plan," Stine said. "We're pleased the public will have the opportunity to add its input, as our aim is to develop the most effective plan possible."