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Federal report backs Tejon Ranch conservation plan

by Louis Sahagun
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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Friday released a long-awaited environmental impact statement that gives high marks to Tejon Ranch Co.'s controversial habitat conservation plan for building a master-planned resort complex in federally designated critical habitat for the endangered California condor.

The federal evaluation of the plan was required because the ranch is seeking a special permit to protect it from legal liability if any one of 26 sensitive species are injured or killed because of its business activities on the property. Under the plan, however, the ranch would be criminally liable if a condor is killed because of those activities.

The ranch's plan 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 142,000 acres of pristine landscape in the Tehachapi Mountains about 60 miles north of Los Angeles.

Critics, however, believe the plan

would harm condors by allowing development in their historic foraging grounds, and weaken the concept of federally designated critical habitat for endangered species.

"This plan is a disaster," said Adam Keats, director of the urban wildlands program of the Center for Biological Diversity. "If it gets approved as written, I guarantee a lawsuit."

"Contrary to Tejon's assertions, this is not a conservation plan," he said. "This is a permit to harm, displace, disturb, and in some cases, kill 27 endangered, threatened, or rare species that call Tejon home."

The release of the 106-page statement late Friday afternoon surprised opponents and ranch officials alike. Keats, for example, said his group had been led to believe that the Obama administration wanted more time to review high-profile Fish and Wildlife Service reviews that had been shepherded by Bush officials.

"Something very strange happened today with the release of this document," Keats said. "The signals we were getting from the Obama administration indicated that it had been put on hold. Then, to everyone's

surprise, there it was at 4 p.m."

"It's possible," he added, "that the folks at USFWS are so embarrassed by the document, they decided to simply turn it loose without fanfare."

Ranch officials, however, were pleased with the statement.

"We think the Fish and Wildlife Service evaluation of the effectiveness of our habitat plan is accurate," said ranch spokesman Barry Zoeller. "We look forward to additional public comment."

In the statement, federal authorities pointed out that most of the Village development "would be completed below ridgelines" frequented by condors, and condor feeding stations would be established in locations isolated from human activity. Overall, the Village complex, in addition to activities including mining and creation of a new national veterans cemetery, would impact about 8% of the federally designated critical condor habitat in the 142,000-acre area covered by the plan.

As a result, the statement determined that the Village "will not result in the

destruction or adverse modification of designated condor habitat,” and “no nesting, roosting or airspace habitats will be directly affected.”

In May, the ranch and a coalition of environmental groups agreed on a landmark strategy to preserve 90% of the entire 270,000-acre privately held spread encompassing four ecosystems: forests, desert, Sierra Nevada mountains and the Central Valley.

In exchange, environmental groups including the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club and Audubon California will not oppose the company’s overall plans to build three major developments, including more than 26,000 homes at the western and southwestern edges of the ranch.

“As the condor goes, so goes what makes California special,” said Keats, whose group wants to see the Tejon Ranch preserved as a new national or state park. “We sincerely hope that the Fish and Wildlife Service comes to its senses and rejects this permit.”