



5. **ENDANGERED SPECIES:** Habitat plan for Calif. ranch could undermine condor recovery, critics say (01/29/2009)

April Reese, E&E Western reporter

A habitat conservation plan issued this week for a proposed subdivision on the massive Tejon Ranch property north of Los Angeles could throw a monkey wrench into recovery efforts for the endangered California condor, critics contend.

The **draft plan**, formally known as the Tehachapi Uplands Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan, or MSHCP, will allow Tejon Ranch Co. to build the 5,533-acre development by excusing unintentional harm to the 27 species covered under the plan. In return, the company will set aside lands for conservation and open space to offset the habitat loss caused by the development.



Courtesy of FWS.

The 270,000-acre ranch -- at the crossroads of the Sierra Nevada, the South Coast mountain ranges, the San Joaquin Valley and the high desert -- is a biodiversity hot spot. It is especially known for its California condors, which feed in the ranch's vast grasslands -- part of the designated critical habitat for the bird. The HCP covers about half of the ranch, and about 70 percent of the bird's critical habitat lies within the HCP area.

California condors, whose population dwindled to just nine birds in 1985, have slowly begun to rebound under an ambitious captive breeding program. There are now about 167 in the wild, with another 160 in captivity. About 36 of the wild birds inhabit Southern California and have the potential to forage on the ranch, according to the HCP.

Even though the proposed HCP does not allow for lethal take of California condors -- partly because it is against state law -- Ilene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said she is concerned that the plan could result in major harm to the birds that feed at the ranch.

"We think it's inappropriate for this species that the public has spent millions of dollars on bringing back from the brink of extinction," she explained. "The condors have a long way to go."

Anderson said one of the potential threats the center is worried about is pesticides. Hantavirus has been found on the property, and she is concerned that the landowners will spray rodenticide to control rodents that may be carrying the virus. Birds that eat the poisoned rodents could perish themselves, she said.

A balancing act between development and conservation

Rick Farris, a biologist in the Fish and Wildlife Service's Ventura, Calif., office, said the agency has discussed the issue with the company, which has agreed to avoid areas where condors occur.

Farris noted that the proposed HCP is a draft document and that the agency could make changes based on the comments it receives over the next three months.

"If any new data are provided, we'll take that into account," Farris said. "It's premature to say we've already made our decision."

Damon Nagami, a staff attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council in Santa Monica, said his group has not had a chance to review the HCP in full yet but that at first glance it appears to be an acceptable balance between development and conservation.

NRDC, the Sierra Club, Audubon California and several other environmental groups signed an agreement with Tejon Ranch last spring that calls for permanently protecting 240,000 acres in exchange for a guarantee that the groups would not challenge the company's development plans. The preserved lands will be protected under conservation easements, open space designations or acquisitions by the state of California.

"We fully expect this plan will maintain the conservation benefits laid out in the agreement we reached," Nagami said, adding that the 2008 conservation agreement is included in the HCP as part of the company's mitigation for the development.

The draft EIS is open for public comment until April 22.

[Click here](#) to read the HCP.

April Reese writes from Santa Fe, N.M.



The California condor has been protected as an endangered species by federal law since 1967 and by California state law since 1971. Courtesy of the state of California.



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