

**FYI- Jim Matthews is a locally syndicated outdoor columnist in Southern California.**

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## **Tejon Ranch plans ruinous in nature**

Jim Matthews

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LEBEC - The Tejon Ranch Company and a vast coalition of environmental groups and state government announced a plan on Thursday to destroy the historic ranch, its vast open spaces, and keep vast tracts of the land closed to the public.

The onerous of back-room deal is reminiscent of the land grab and subsequent creation of the Los Angeles aqueduct that dewatered every stream in the Owens Valley and led to the drying up of Owens Lake.

Of course, that's not the impression you'd get in reports by Los Angeles media outlets.

In return for allowing the Tejon Ranch Company to plop 26,400 homes, sprawling golf courses, boutiques, health spas and resort hotels on 32,000 acres of the 272,000-acre ranch in southern Kern County and northern Los Angeles county, the rest of the historic ranch would be "preserved" in a natural state for wildlife and public enjoyment.

Well, sort of.

First off, the two developments are proposed in some of the most environmentally important and sensitive lands on the Tejon. Centennial, the 26,000-house plan, is adjacent to Quail Lake on the western edge of the Antelope Valley. Where those houses would be built is the home to the last population of pronghorn antelope in Southern California and at least two threatened or endangered species.

Yet, the more onerous development is the Tejon Mountain Village, a sprawling upscale community of 3,400 multi-million dollar homes plastered across some of the last undeveloped oak grassland in California.

The homes would be spaced across mountain ridges and meadows effectively wiping out one of the best California mule deer herds left in the state, and the trickle-down impacts on everything from condors to badgers to mountain lions would be disastrous.

But the environmental groups who are signing off on this deal say the public is getting a vast natural area preserved forever. For the public.

Is it? Under the deal, 178,000 acres will be set aside and run by a newly created Tejon Ranch Conservancy. This conservancy will be managed by 12 members "appointed by the company and its environmental partners," according to the Los Angeles Times.

In addition, the Tejon Ranch Company will fund the conservancy to the tune of \$800,000 a year for seven years and then through payouts from home sales once development starts. This will let them run the bulk of the ranch, with no guarantees of general public access, public oversight, or sound management. The public will be as locked out as they are today.

Another 49,000 acres will be offered to California for a state park and another 10,000 offered so the Pacific Crest Trail can be rerouted through ranch. With the state's budget, those 49,000 acres will likely be kept closed and managed as part of the conservancy. Wilderness hikers will

get to stroll through once the trail is finish - probably by the turn of the next century.

There's another 3,000 acres to be offered for state purchase, but I haven't been able to figure out where or who will get charge of that land.

This little boondoggle is going to cost taxpayers in California a pretty chunk of change.

Oh, we'll all be told it's the right thing to do and all of the slick magazines these environmental groups send out will have big stories with lots of beautiful pictures of the Tejon and its wildlife and how it's been preserved for future generations.

I'm here to tell you that's rubbish. They've been bought off and we've been sold out.

The Tejon Ranch is too precious and too important environmentally to be developed any more than it has already. Not another acre should be sold off. It's also too beautiful not to be in the public trust. Not a private conservancy. Not a mismanaged, underfunded state park. It needs to belong to the public.

I'm not one of those who believe it should be a National Park (or even a National Preserve so hunting could be allowed). I think the Tejon Ranch should become the nation's benchmark National Wildlife Refuge.

Why a refuge over a preserve or park? Management options. The Tejon, especially if combined with the 97,000-acre Windwolves Preserve (also run by a conservancy with limited public access) on adjacent land on the west side of Interstate 5, would create one of the largest and most diverse wildlife refuges in the nation at nearly 370,000 acres.

But most of all, it would be open to the public and managed for wildlife and natural resources. National Wildlife Refuges do that more effectively than any of our underfunded resource agencies - state or federal.

Most of all, none of the Tejon should be sold off to the highest bidder or mismanaged by environmental elitists. Yet, sadly, that would be the result of the proposal that was advanced as the ranch's salvation on Thursday.