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Zoning Changes Prompt Lawsuit

Riverside County failed to study environmental effects in altering 648 parcels, group charges. Planners say mapping errors were corrected.

by Susannah Rosenblatt
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An environmental group sued Riverside County on Thursday, accusing it of violating state law by rezoning more than 10,000 undeveloped acres to residential and other less-restrictive uses without adequately assessing potential environmental impacts.

Amendments to the county's general plan address 648 rezoned parcels in such areas as the eastern Coachella Valley, Reche Canyon and the Badlands area, Lake Mathews and Har-vest Valley.

The Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity argued that for the county to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act, it must evaluate the effect that development in each parcel would have on local air and water quality, traffic, growth and wildlife habitats.

"This is one of the most brazen and shocking end runs around CEQA and ... land use law that we've ever seen," said Adam Keats, a staff attorney with the organization.

Riverside County spokesman Ray Smith said county attorneys would have to review the suit before deciding a response.

County planners described the zoning changes as corrections to mapping "errors" in an amendment to the general plan that was submitted to the Board of Supervisors in November 2004.

Several environmental groups contested parts of some changes in March.

Calimesa officials objected to rezoning 214 acres of open-space conservation habitat near a campground between Beaumont and Redlands to rural residential, which is one house every 5 acres.

The county reversed that change.

After the Center for Biological Diversity opposed rezoning the ecologically sensitive Badlands area, the county reduced the designated residential portion from 610 to 87 acres.

But those two concessions are not enough in a county that is home to a number of endangered species, including the San Bernardino kangaroo rat and the California gnatcatcher, Keats said.

"The scale of this thing cannot be understated," the lawyer said.