

# THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

MAY 2, 2010

## Court settlement stymies development in K-rat reserve

**BY DAVID DANIELSKI**  
The Press-Enterprise

More than 1,000 acres near March Air Reserve Base has been caught in a 16-year tug-of-war between Riverside County leaders who see it as prime for development and conservationists who say it is needed to help ensure the survival of the endangered Stephens' kangaroo rat.

The federal government has agreed in a court settlement to rescind its 2003 decision to allow development on the 1,178 acres, which was designated a reserve for the 2-ounce, nocturnal rodent, found only in western Riverside County and isolated spots in San Diego County.

The settlement, still awaiting a judge's approval, is between the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The environmental group filed a lawsuit last year, contending that Fish and Wildlife did not follow federal environmental and endangered species laws in making its decision seven years ago.

Jonathan Evans, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the property still could be developed but only after stringent environmental reviews and scientific evidence show that the robust kangaroo rat population there is not needed for survival and recovery of the species.

The settlement, filed April 22, is a disappointment for current and former elected officials, who have been trying since the mid-1990s to see

business and industrial development on the land.

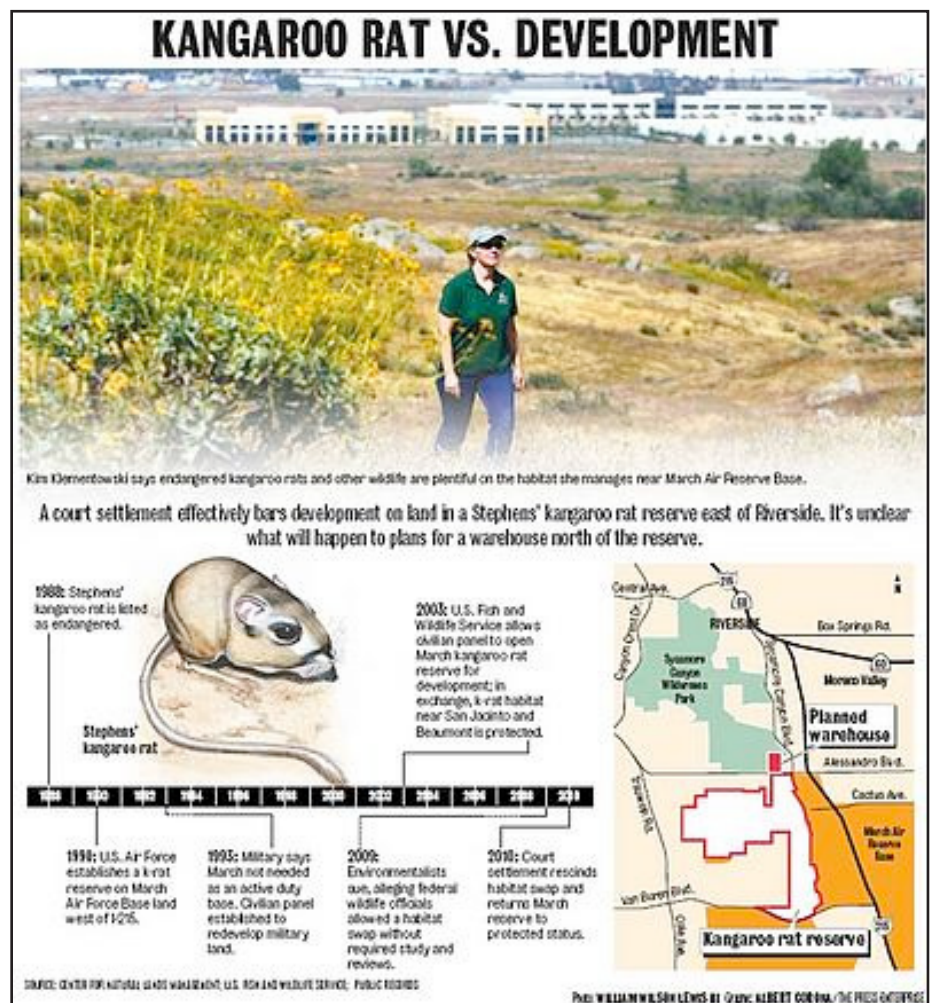
"This puts us back to zero, when we have been working hard not only to provide jobs but also find the best use for the land," said Richard Stewart, a Moreno Valley councilman and chairman of the March Joint Powers Authority, which owns the property. The JPA was established in 1993 to redevelop the former Air Force base.

The kangaroo rat's defenders said there is more at stake than a single reserve.

UC Riverside biologist Len Nunney said preserving the March habitat will increase the value of habitat to the north, in Riverside's Sycamore Canyon Wilderness Park. The park would be less isolated, and rats in both areas could breed with each other, bolstering their genetic health, he said.

It's vital now to protect open land between the reserve and the park, allowing wildlife to move back and forth, he said.

Nunney is secretary of the Friends



of Riverside's Hills, which is suing Riverside to keep that wildlife corridor from being blocked by a planned warehouse off Alessandro Boulevard.

Stewart said the March authority will press ahead. The agency wants business parks, an ample buffer space between nearby neighborhoods, and a 60-acre regional park that would include recreational playing fields, he said.

Developing the area easily could support more than 1,000 jobs, Stewart said. "We will fight that battle. We won't give up."

The settlement has no effect on the agency's ability to develop a major regional health-care center planned on the east side of Interstate 215.

### **Habitat trade**

Tom Mullen, a former Riverside County supervisor, served on the March JPA in the 1990s. He said he was shocked by the lawsuit settlement.

Fish and Wildlife agreed to allow development on the former Air Force land only after local, state and federal officials had successfully acquired replacement kangaroo rat habitat near Beaumont and San Jacinto, Mullen said.

In 2003, Lockheed Martin Corp. sold 9,094 acres -- once used for rocket testing -- for \$25.5 million, including \$5.5 million contributed by the county. The land, to be set aside for conservation, included about 2,000 acres of Stephens' kangaroo rat habitat, records show. In the same week, Fish and Wildlife approved the tradeoff.

"The whole idea was, if we got the Potrero property, they would release

the March land, and that was what was supposed to happen," Mullen said.

### **Environmentalists objected.**

"Permanent protections should remain permanent and should not be changed at the whim of development interests," Evans said. "They just can't be traded away."

The government was "double dipping," because the Potrero land was included in a separate habitat-protection plan approved by state and federal officials in 2004, environmentalists said. It amounts to counting the land twice, Evans said.

The 1988 endangered listing of the animal has long frustrated developers and property owners, because the protected rat lives in the same areas of western Riverside County that are ideal for housing and commercial centers.

The Air Force designated the kangaroo rat reserve in 1990 to make up for habitat lost to construction at March and to the widening and realignment of Interstate 215 between Highway 60 and Van Buren Boulevard, records show.

In 1993, after the military announced March would no longer be an active-duty base, local officials targeted the land for development to make up for lost military jobs. Swapping the more valuable March land near a freeway with a larger patch of kangaroo rat habitat elsewhere would be a "win-win," said Stephen Albright, then March JPA executive director, in 1994.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials initially balked. They said in a letter that coupling the March kangaroo rat reserve with the Sycamore Canyon

park also was a "win-win" because it would achieve significant conservation using public lands.

### **Core reserve**

In 1996, the March-Sycamore Canyon combination became one of seven core reserves established in a regional habitat conservation plan for the animal, though local officials made it clear then that they intended later to swap the land for habitat elsewhere.

Although Fish and Wildlife approved the tradeoff seven years ago, the land remains undeveloped. A \$1.5 million endowment, created with Caltrans funds nearly 20 years ago, pays for management costs. The reserve is overseen by the nonprofit Center for Natural Lands Conservancy.

Though surrounded by business parks, tract homes and a large church complex, the habitat's gentle hills and granite boulders are rich with wildlife, reserve manager Kim Klementowski said.

The least Bell's vireo, an endangered songbird, lives there, along with bobcats, golden eagles, bush rabbits, jackrabbits and various other animals, she said.

Last week, Klementowski pointed out a red-tailed hawk nest made of sticks in a dead tree. Through binoculars, two chicks covered in white down were visible.

On a grassy hillside, she stooped and pointed out one of many golf-ball-size holes. Seed litter and distinctive droppings just outside a hole told her it was an entrance to a kangaroo rat burrow. Nearby was a small patch of dirt cleared of rocks and debris.

"That's where they take a little dust bath," she said.