

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

APRIL 9, 2010

Environmentalist sue Riverside to retain k-rat protection

By DAVID DANELSKI

Three environmental groups this week sued the city of Riverside over its recent approval of an 80-acre industrial project, saying the land next to Sycamore Canyon Wilderness Park was supposed to be preserved permanently as habitat for the endangered Stephens' kangaroo rat.

The suit filed in Riverside County Superior Court on Thursday is part of a larger effort by environmentalists to retain habitat protections for the rodent on lands west of Interstate 215 that they contend were protected in the 1990s.

"It is really troubling how they are erasing habitat protections to accommodate these projects," Jonathan Evans, an attorney with the center, said Friday.

The Riverside City Council approved an 80-acre warehouse and office project on March 9, saying it will bring jobs. The developer, Newport Beach-based Western Realco LLC, will donate 36 acres of the site to be incorporated into the wilderness park.

The Center for Biological Diversity, San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society and Sierra Club claim that the city is breaking an old promise. The land was protected in a 1996 kangaroo rat conservation plan approved by local officials and state and federal wildlife agencies, they contend.

Councilman Andy Melendrez said he asked for the project to be tabled in 2005 when it first came to the council to resolve questions about whether the site was part of a kangaroo rat preserve.

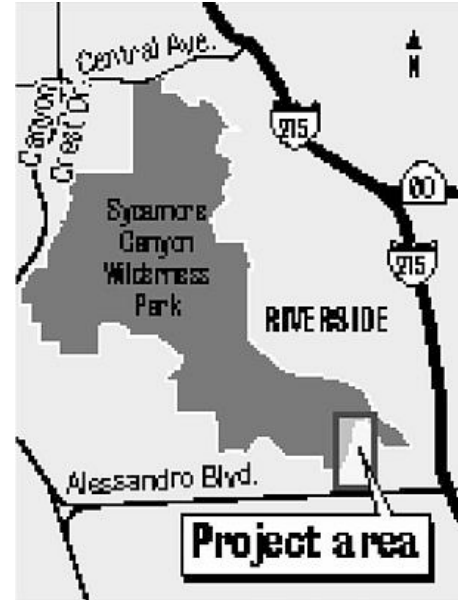
Local conservation officials subsequently determined that the land had been considered for a preserve, but ultimately not included in what became the Sycamore Canyon Stephens' Kangaroo Rat Preserve, said Melendrez, who represents the project area.

A 2006 letter to the city from the Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency, which oversees local kangaroo rat habitat conservation efforts, said the apparent inclusion of the project property in the preserve "appears to be a mapping error."

Evans disputed that an error had occurred and said changes in the preserve map boundaries required local and federal environmental reviews that are subject to public scrutiny.

Two of the environmental groups are also in federal court to preserve 1,008 acres of kangaroo rat habitat just south of project.

In August, the center and Audubon Society sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, claiming the agency violated the Endangered



THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

DISPUTED DEVELOPMENT: Environmental groups have sued Riverside for approving plans for an industrial project they claim is in an area set aside for the endangered Stephens' kangaroo rat.

Species Act by agreeing to allow development on March Air Reserve Base land south of Alessandro Boulevard that had been included in the preserve in the 1990s.

The service had agreed to allow the March land be taken out of the preserve because replacement habitat had been preserved in the Potrero Canyon south of Beaumont through a 2003 state purchase of the canyon area.

But environmentalists say March land is needed for the animal's survival, and the habitat swap was done without the proper environmental reviews.