



CALIFORNIA: Groups sue to stop massive L.A. County development

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Colin Sullivan, E&E reporter

SAN FRANCISCO -- Environmental groups yesterday sued a California agency to stop the development of 21,000 new homes on a sprawling tract north of Los Angeles.

Led by the Center for Biological Diversity, the coalition filed suit against the California Department of Fish and Game in a state superior court here alleging the agency failed to fully consider the project's full environmental impact when it issued permits in December.

The proposed development, "Newhall Ranch," would be built on about 12,000 acres in the coastal mountains of northwest Los Angeles County. The area represents the county's largest undeveloped tract, according to the suit.

The groups say the project would fill in big sections of the 116-mile Santa Clara River, lining nearly 20 miles of tributary streams with concrete. The suit also suggests the development would desecrate American Indian burial sites and upset habitat for the endangered San Fernando Valley spineflower.

The suit was filed under the California Environmental Quality Act, California Endangered Species Act and several provisions of the California Fish and Game Code by the

center, Friends of the Santa Clara River, Santa Clarita Organization for Planning the Environment, Wishtoyo Foundation/Ventura Coastkeeper and California Native Plant Society.

"We believe the Department of Fish and Game has much better alternatives for permitting stream alterations for Newhall Ranch," said Ron Bottorff, chairman of Friends of the Santa Clara River. "The department's approvals would result in unacceptable impacts to some of the finest riparian areas to be found anywhere in Southern California -- a region which has lost all but 3 percent of its historic river woodlands."

The project was first approved by Los Angeles County in 2003 before the original developer, LandSource Communities Development, went bankrupt. The suit notes that California's public employee pension fund, CalPERS, lost \$970 million of Newhall Ranch investments when the bankruptcy went through.

But Fish and Game has defended the permit, saying the proposal would preserve 70 percent of the area (which it pegs at 14,000 acres) as open space. Protected areas would include the Santa Clara River, Newhall Ranch High Coun-

try, Salt Creek Corridor, Spineflower Preserves and other areas, the agency said in a background briefing on the case.

The briefing also notes that 169 mitigation measures affecting biological resources in the area were attached to its permit. John McCamman, director of Fish and Game, said the approval should be held up as an example of how to balance development with environmental impacts.

"This process and the resulting [environmental reports] should serve as a model for cooperative efforts among federal, state and local regulatory agencies, and other interested parties," he said.

In a statement, the South Coast regional manager for Fish and Game, Ed Pert, added that the permit was the result of an extensive collaboration.

"Hundreds of people, including biologists, botanists, hydrologists and other scientists, worked together to shape this biologically innovative project, and the end result ensures the protection of this site's unique natural resources," Pert said.