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MURRIETA: Land deal benefits habitat, transportation

Most of the 960 acres purchased near Murrieta will become a preserve. Traffic also will improve

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Regional conservation officials Tuesday announced the purchase of 960 acres just northeast of Murrieta that's expected to provide a big boost to habitat preservation and transportation.

The land, known as Warm Springs Ranch, is where the Anheuser-Busch Co. has bred Budweiser Clydesdale horses.

Habitat property

Now, most of it will become a wildlife reserve and part of a habitat network being assembled between the Cleveland National Forest and the San Bernardino Mountains for 146 species of protected plants and animals.

People frustrated with traffic gridlock also will benefit, because the land includes about three-fourths of a mile of right of way that Riverside County needs to link Clinton Keith Road between Interstate 215 and Winchester Road.

"It is the most important land acquisition that we have done so far," said Charlie Landry, executive director of the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority, which spearheaded the acquisition from the Anheuser-Busch.

This Clinton Keith extension will "bring welcome traffic relief to French Valley commuters trying to reach 1-215," county Supervisor Jeff Stone said in a statement. Stone served last year as board chairman of the regional conservation authority.

The complex land deal will cost the public between \$42million and \$50.1 million, depending on how quickly Anheuser-Busch is paid off within an eight-year period.

The funds will come from the conservation authority, the county and the county's transportation commission, through a series of deals among the entities.

The lowest the price will be achieved if the authority can secure funding through a federal habitat loan program that would be created under legislation being sponsored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California, in the Senate, and Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Corona, Landry said.

Escrow on the first 250 acres, which includes the Clinton Keith Road right of way, will close in the coming the days, Landry said.

The land has coastal sage scrub, streamside and grassland habitats vital for native plants and animals. It also includes part of Warm Springs Creek, an important wildlife corridor that connects to other preserve areas.

The area is especially important habitat to two species at risk of extinction: the endangered Quino checkerspot butterfly and the coastal California gnatcatcher, a threatened songbird.

Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said in an email that the acquisition will help vulnerable rare species in area being constrained by development. But she added, "Putting a road through that open space defeats the purpose of habitat acquisition in many ways."

The conservation authority is trying to create a reserve system spanning 500,000 acres in western Riverside County. To date, 347,000 acres of public land already has been conserved in public parks and other government-owned open space, and the conservation agency has acquired another 44,000 acres to set aside as habitat.

The habitat conservation plan for western Riverside County has been especially controversial in Murrieta, where landowners have formed a lobbying group to fight it. They say they are being forced to give up the rights to their land without just compensation.

Murrieta Community Development Director Mary Lanier said the land deal isn't going to lessen the city's obligation to contribute to the reserve system. Murrieta contains land considered vital for the effort, she said.

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