

Activists seek park status for Tejon Ranch

BY SARAH RUBY, Californian staff writer
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With a little hard work and a prayer, environmentalists hope to convince state and federal leaders to make Tejon Ranch a public park.

Graphics:



In view of Tejon Ranch Co.'s plans for the property -- industrial development at the base of the Grapevine, a mountain resort community and a 70,000-resident subdivision -- a coalition of environmental groups sent letters this week asking influential Californians to permanently protect 90 percent of the historic tract.

A coalition of six environmental groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club and the Planning and Conservation League, want a long-term plan for the ranch that will put land permanently outside development's reach. Tejon Ranch Co. has plans to put more than a third of the 270,000-acre ranch into a preserve, but these groups worry what's left will be eventually built upon.

"If it wasn't set aside, they must have other plans for it," said Ilene Anderson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Tejon Ranch Co. doesn't need government to help it preserve the ranch, said Barry Zoeller, a spokesman for the company. Its 25-year vision for the property would disturb 13,500 acres, leaving 95 percent of the ranch untouched or in agriculture, he said. The company's vision also includes a 100,000-acre permanent preserve.

"We believe anyone who takes an honest and objective look at (the company's plans) will find they are well balanced," Zoeller said.

The coalition sent its request to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, state Senate leader Don Perata, state Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez, state Secretary for Resources Mike Chrisman, Senator Dianne Feinstein and Senator Barbara Boxer. None of them or their press officers took the opportunity to comment for this story.

Unless one of these leaders takes up the coalition's cause, it's likely just another volley in the bitter match between Tejon Ranch Co. and those that oppose its development.

"When you're dealing with private land it's really hard (to convert land to public parks)," said Douglas Dodd, assistant professor of History at Cal State Bakersfield. "Tejon Ranch is a big corporation that has far different plans for the land."

Even so, there have been a few cases in which public agencies persuaded private landholders to relinquish control of their land, he said. One example is northern California's Point Reyes National Seashore, he said, which was established in 1962 after agencies persuaded property owners -- mostly dairy farmers -- to sell their land in exchange for long-term leases. Another example is Channel Islands National Park near Los Angeles, parts of which were once private ranchland.