

Trust May Buy Tejon Land

Preservation of 100,000 acres of 'biologically rich' property could be ensured in a region where three urban projects are planned.

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Developers of the vast Tejon Ranch north of Los Angeles and a national land trust have identified a 100,000-acre swath of mountains and grasslands that would be preserved even if three large urban projects are built nearby.

After two years of study, the Tejon Ranch Co. and the Trust for Public Land will announce today an agreement that sets in motion the trust's purchase of more than one-third of the ranch a 25-mile-long section of the Tehachapi Mountains that helps link the Sierra Nevada range with two national forests and the Pacific Ocean.

"If we're successful, this will be the largest and most significant conservation project this decade in the West," said Reed Holderman, regional director of the trust's western division.

A sale price would be determined through appraisals over the next year by the land trust and by public or nonprofit agencies interested in underwriting the purchase. It has not been decided whether Tejon Ranch will sell the preserve, which is about the size of Yosemite Valley, or simply sell its rights to develop the land.

State officials wouldn't discuss a purchase price. But in a deal similar in scope, the state this year paid \$95 million in cash and tax credits for a stretch of Central California coastline and development rights on much of 80,000 acres of the historic Hearst Ranch near San Simeon.

"Tejon Ranch is a spectacular property," said Al Wright, executive director of the purchasing arm of the state Resources Agency. "It's extremely biologically rich. But we've only had a glimpse of what they're talking about and there's no money for it right now."

About \$6 billion in state bonds approved in 2002 to buy wetlands, parkland and wildlife habitat has been spent or is committed to other projects, he said.

Environmentalists generally agree that Tejon Ranch, the largest contiguous private land holding in California, has enormous ecological value because it connects four distinct plant and animal habitats the Central Valley, the Mojave Desert and the Sierra Nevada and Coastal mountain ranges.

But some critics say the potential deal is a political gambit intended to gain support from government agencies and working capital from taxpayers so the land-rich but cash-poor developer can move forward with large projects elsewhere on the ranch.

Tejon Ranch is proceeding with the sale as it pursues construction on 5% of the 270,000-acre ranch. That includes three projects near Interstate 5: a city of 23,000 homes along the southern flank of the Tehachapis, a huge industrial park on the northern flank of the mountain range and an upscale resort in the mountains in between.

Together, the Tejon projects would effectively link urban Southern California with the rural Central Valley, filling parts of a 75-mile expanse between Santa Clarita and Bakersfield.

"This is truly one of the most important pieces of private property in the state, but it is not threatened right now, except by the development planned by its owners," said Michael White, senior ecologist at the Conservation Biology Institute, which has done two lengthy studies of the ranch. "What you're potentially doing [with the sale] is putting money in their pocket for the next round of development."

The biggest concern, White said, is what he considers the ranch's "piecemeal" conservation and development plans.

"They say they intend to develop only 5%," he said. "In that case, let's put the rest in a conservation easement, and then maybe people could get on board on this."

Kristeen Penrod, executive director of the South Coast Wildlands Project, said she considers Tejon Ranch the most important wildlife corridor in Southern California.

But she said the 100,000 acres offered for sale falls short, partly because it does not include Bear Trap Canyon.

That five-mile-long canyon, not far from Tejon Lake and I-5, is extremely important because of the number of birds and animals including cougars, the California spotted owl and the rare salamander ensatina that live there or pass through, experts have said.

"It's much less than we'd hoped for really disheartening," she said of the proposed Tejon Ranch Preserve.

Adam Keats, staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, criticized the potential deal as an unnecessary give-away. Tejon Ranch should dedicate large portions of its property as a condition for approval of development of small parts of it, he said.

The ranch has already pledged to create a 37,000-acre preserve for the endangered California condor, he said, and now it's trying to sell the same acreage.

"Why are we shifting all this public money to developers?" Keats asked. He said he sees the same potential problems in this deal as critics

have found with the Hearst agreement: too little land, too high a price and not enough public access.

Robert A. Stine, president of Tejon Ranch Co., sees the proposed preserve as a good start to a broader effort to shield most of the ranch from development.

"This is the first step," Stine said. "If you wait until you have every answer for every question you never get anywhere."

Under development proposals, he said, about 23,000 acres of the ranch's 28,000-acre mountain resort in Kern County would be dedicated as permanent open space, as would 5,700 acres of the 12,000-acre "new town," Centennial.

In addition, Stine said, the ranch is negotiating the preservation of between 10,000 and 20,000 acres of San Joaquin Valley grasslands under a federal habitat conservation plan. So perhaps 150,000 acres of the ranch could be permanently preserved under current plans, he said.

Of the remaining 120,000 acres, about 12,500 would be developed over the next 25 years, and the rest would remain in traditional ranching and farming activities indefinitely, he said.

Stine downplayed concerns about development in the 5,000-acre Bear Trap Canyon, where he said about 200 homes are planned. "The rest will remain natural open space," he said.

Stine said all three urban projects planned at the ranch are fully financed.

"This is not a capital strategy," he said. "We think it is the right thing to do, and we hope the environmental community will support it."

In a news release, the Trust for Public Land lists support from environmental scientists and activists, including a director of the Pacific Crest Trail, which would be realigned through the rugged backcountry of the ranch.

"The reroute of the [trail] would allow public access and a much-improved user experience in this wonderful region of California," trust Executive Director Liz Bergeron said.

In an interview, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Alexandra Pitts also praised the plan as "an excellent model for science-based conservation planning."

Founded in 1972, the Trust for Public Land has functioned as a broker in evaluating sites and arranging conservation deals between private landowners and government agencies.

Holderman said the Trust determined which 100,000 acres to buy "the best of the best" based on the research of biologist Michael Josselyn.

Josselyn led a team of experts who used overlays of more than 50 sets of data to determine which lands would provide the best habitat for

rare species of plant and animals, maintain watersheds and provide connections from one habitat to another.

Included in the preserve is the ranch's wildest backcountry, miles of steep canyons and rugged ridgelines soaring nearly 7,000 feet home of California's largest unspoiled oak woodland and the traditional playground of the California condor.

The wildlife preserve would also include a wide, long finger of land that reaches out westward from the highlands core along the grassy foothills to I-5.

The San Joaquin kit fox, an endangered species, occupies this area, as does the rare blunt-nosed leopard lizard and the California burrowing owl.

"Conservation biologists wax poetic about this area," Josselyn said. "It can be managed for a suite of species."