

“Regional habitat conservation plan taking shape”

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A regional habitat conservation plan is beginning to take shape and, while a number of details remain fuzzy, one part of the picture is very clear: a significant chunk of Southwest County is going to be needed for a system of reserves for endangered species.

Efforts to carve a new reserve system out of the landscape are being driven primarily by pressure from a federal agency to preserve the Stephens kangaroo rat, Quino checkerspot butterfly and coastal California gnatcatcher bird, said Richard Lashbrook, director of the county's Transportation and Land Management Agency.

Kangaroo rat reserves, begun more than a decade ago, are nearly completed, Lashbrook said. But large amounts of territory are needed for the butterfly and the bird, and much of those animals' prime habitat is in the southwestern corner of the county.

Consequently, each of three options being considered by a citizens' committee assembling a habitat conservation plan for western Riverside County would take in pieces of French Valley, the hills north of Murrieta, the highlands east of Lake Elsinore and the Vail Lake area east of Temecula.

Choosing the best

The 28-member multiple species habitat conservation committee, composed of environmentalists, builders, farmers, landowners and government officials, is trying to choose among a 153,000-acre alternative, another option that would entail buying 119,000 acres of private land and still another that would target 93,000 acres.

Lashbrook said the panel is going to recommend one alternative, as well as a set of funding options, to the county Board of Supervisors on either Dec. 12 or 19.

It could cost the county anywhere from \$800 million to \$1.5 billion to acquire the land, depending on which alternative is selected and how much the land ultimately costs, Lashbrook said. He said county officials and committee members expect property to be priced at between \$8,500 and \$10,000 per acre, on average.

Although precise boundaries have yet to be determined, just the thought that areas such as French Valley will have to be a part of the ultimate reserve configuration already has angered some landowners.

One of those is Temecula developer Bill Johnson, who owns 9,000 acres around Vail Lake.

"It's awful easy for environmentalists and government to target property," Johnson said. "You just draw a circle around it. I have filed a land plan to develop a golf course and Wine Country resort at Vail Lake and I intend to follow through with that plan. Vail Lake is a coveted property, it is one of the most beautiful properties in the area."

Habitat conservation committee member Bob Perkins, executive manager for the Riverside County Farm Bureau, said Johnson should not have to worry because the panel is crafting a purely voluntary plan.

"We (at the Farm Bureau) are absolutely, unwaveringly opposed to any policy that takes or extracts property from a property owner without his willing participation," Perkins said.

The unfolding policy, which will be discussed in committee meetings Nov. 9 and 16 in Riverside, would entail the purchase of land only from willing sellers, he said.

Not to develop

Members are discussing the idea of creating incentives for property owners to sell, or alternately to sign agreements not to develop.

One idea would be to immediately reassess property values after signing pacts, to reduce property taxes cooperating landowners pay. Perkins said another idea is lobbying legislators to write bills that create state and federal income-tax credits for those owners who sell.

Perkins said still another possibility is a so-called density transfer, which would secure land for reserves but not take away someone's right to build. For example, if someone owned 10 acres and had zoning to build 30 houses on that land, the person could be given the opportunity to build the same number units on, say, two acres ---- if he or she sold the remaining land for reserves.

Committee member Bob Wheeler, president of the Elsinore-Murrieta-Anza Resource Conservation District, said, "We certainly would like to minimize regulations. I don't think anybody particularly likes the regulatory process."

But Wheeler said voluntary policies will go only so far, and the county needs to prepare for exceptions.

"What do you do with the guy who says, 'To hell with you. I don't want to sell under any circumstance?'" Wheeler said he believes that at that point the county should condemn property for the reserve system, just like the state does when it needs land for a freeway.

Lashbrook, however, said county officials do not intend to invoke their eminent domain powers under any circumstance.

Committee members are examining a wide range of options for compensating landowners

Solving the funding problem

Panel member Jane Block, a prominent environmentalist from Riverside, said she wishes the solution to the funding problem was as easy to pinpoint as the source of the problem of declining species in western Riverside County.

"Many of the pressures that are being brought on us to preserve endangered species are a result of the destruction in Los Angeles and Orange counties. Maybe we should levy a tax on Los Angeles residents to help us pay for all of this," Block said, chuckling.

While such a tax obviously would not work, she said, there is a need to distribute the cost so that the burden does not fall entirely on Riverside County residents.

There has been talk of a new fee builders would pay when they take out permits to construct homes. In fact, the Building Industry Association of Southern California has proposed an interim fee of \$452 per unit to begin building up a pool of money for land purchases while county officials put the finishing touches on the conservation plan. (A permanent fee likely would be substantially larger, members said).

But panel members said that substantial chunks of cash should come from other sources so that out-of-county residents ---- who have contributed to the need to focus species preservation efforts in Riverside County so animals don't disappear from Southern California altogether ---- contribute to the effort.

Lashbrook said the county is trying to secure federal and state funding to cover a quarter or more of the total cost of the reserve system.

"That's less than most of us would like, but it's reasonable and we can build on that," he said.

Lashbrook said money likely will be available from Propositions 12 and 13, the state park and water bonds approved by voters in the March primary. He also said the county intends to divert half of proceeds from its El Sobrante Landfill tipping fees, which amount to \$3 a ton, to the ambitious western Riverside County conservation effort that could result in acquiring an area half the size of Los Angeles. Tipping fees are projected to bring in about \$90 million, he said, and he added that many of the users are from the more heavily populated coastal areas.

Looking to the future

Some committee members are skeptical there are enough sources out there to cover the land purchase costs that could run as high as \$1.5 billion, while others are optimistic. The environmentalists on the panel, most notably Dan Silver of the Endangered Habitats League, suggests that the ultimate cost will be significantly less because some land will be set aside for endangered critters through existing land-use regulations.

For instance, the county and cities restrict development on steep hillsides, in waterways and in earthquake fault areas, Wheeler said, and some of those can be used to assemble the reserves.

Block said the county can find the resources to build the largest of the three reserve options ---- the one covering 153,000 acres.

"I think that would be the best investment for the county," Block said. "If we choose either of the other alternatives, it would be very shortsighted."

The 153,000-acre option, in the opinion of biologists and county officials, covers not only animals and plants currently protected because they are dwindling in number, but also those that conceivably could be added to the endangered species list in the future.

Under the 119,000-acre model, the safety net would fold up for such animals as the prairie falcon, golden eagle, mountain lion and bobcat. The 93,000-acre option would leave still more species unprotected, including the coastal rosy boa snake, the legless lizard, burrowing owl and tricolored blackbird.

Not only will the plan ensure survival for rare animals and plants, it will provide relief from unrestrained urban growth in areas such as Southwest County, Block said.

"That's one of the areas where we will see slow-growth or no-growth propositions on the ballot soon if we don't succeed," she said.