

“Protection must pace growth”

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The Press Enterprise

-Saturday, January 29, 2000

-A state agency chief says solutions must allow the environment and the economy to coexist.

As California's population grows, so does the role of biologists in finding ways to allow houses and strip malls to exist beside butterflies, rats and insects, the state's top wildlife official said Friday after touring Riverside County's effort to accomplish just that. "California is going to expand to the tune of one million people per year for the next 10 years for sure," Robert Hight, director of the California Department of Fish and Game, told biologists attending The Wildlife Society's conference at the Riverside Convention Center.

Such a spurt in population, he said, will require hundreds of thousands of houses to be built.

"Nobody has the staff to take on this kind of monumental task. It's going to be incumbent upon all of you to work and find solutions so the environment and the economy can live together," Hight said as he looked over the audience,

Many of the biologists in the audience were from Hight's agency and its federal counterpart, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The biologists are responsible for studying endangered species and determining what lands must be banned from development so the plants and animals can thrive.

Before this afternoon speech, Hight toured western Riverside County by helicopter to get an overview of the county's plans for transportation and housing projects that will accommodate a population expected to double to 3 million in 20 years.

At the same time, the county must find room for the 164 kinds of protected plants and animals. Planners expect to have set aside up to 120,000 acres at a cost of about \$500 million, Supervisor Tom Mullen said.

Mullen and Supervisor Jim Venable updated Hight and Mike Spear, manager of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services' operations in California and Nevada, on the county's plans.

"We want to make sure everyone understands where we are moving because we are going to need some funding," Venable said.

The county would like the state and federal governments to pitch for the three-year planning effort, expected to cost \$23 million and finish in May, 2002.

If the process is not coordinated with agencies that uphold policies on endangered species, it could hit potholes, Mullen said.

At the conference, Hight and Spear held up the county's efforts as unique as cutting edge in the West, where many growing areas are finding themselves in the same position as Riverside County.

"They're to be commended for all their hard work," Hight said. "They've got every agency with any jurisdiction early on in the process."

While San Diego and Orange counties, Tucson, Ariz., suburbs of Sacramento, and Austin, Texas, have developed such plans, Riverside County's "is by far the largest of its kind," Spear said.

Both officials also pointed to Prop.12 and 13, the parks bond and the water bond measures, respectively, on the March 7 ballot that, if passed by voters, would give funds to California cities and counties to help by land earmarked for species habitat.

Spear said the trend toward developing plans for species is forcing politicians to better understand the importance of biologists.

"They too hear from their constituents about growth and sprawl and community, livability," he told the audience. "And the things we worry about – fish and wildlife conservation and survival, so to speak – somehow all of a sudden starts to make sense because when you begin to try to look at a world that will preserve fish and wildlife, somehow it also makes it more livable for people."