

“County enlists federal help in planning for the future”

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-It seeks to protect the environment and allow for growth.

Riverside County is asking the federal government to help it find ways for its endangered birds, butterflies and shrimp to live alongside cars, houses and strip malls.

So this week, county officials met with a group of high-level administration officials and enlisted their help in putting together a blueprint for the future.

When its population predicted to double to 3 million in the next 20 years, the living space for 164 kinds of plants and animals facing extinction. It is also trying to figure out where developers can build, and to find new transportation corridors.

Involvement from Washington is key to ensure federal funds and required approval for the plans.

Without good planning, the western parts of the county could see haphazard development continue and drawn-out court battles over federally protected endangered species.

Riverside County's juggling act is just the kind of project the Clinton administration had been looking for, said David Hayes, deputy secretary of Interior, who has espoused the county's cause. The White House wants to prove that is it possible to protect the environment and allow for growth, he said.

“This is on our radar screen in a special way because the county is doing it right,” said Hayes, No. 2 in the federal department that oversees enforcement of the Endangered Species Act and management of much public land.

Southern California, with its combination of endangered species and growing population, has become an important proving ground, Hayes said, pointing to efforts to set aside habitat for endangered species in San Diego.

But Riverside County's integrated planning effort takes it a step further.

“This one is unique in that you have the transportation piece added as well,” he said. “We have a vested interest in success with the county.”

Top-level administration representatives agreed Wednesday to sign an agreement formalizing their advisory role and to meet regularly to consider county funding requests.

Staff members from area lawmakers' offices also took part in the meeting along with the White House, the departments of Interior and Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Where the critters and plants will live determines where people may settle, what roads they will travel and what kinds of jobs will be created for decades to come, said Riverside County supervisor Tom Mullen, who has pushed for the process for two years.

“We’ve got to move people around,” Mullen said. “We’ve got to house people and commerce. And we can’t do that unless we settle these environmental issues.”

Planners expect to have to set aside nearly half a million acres at a cost of up to \$500 million, he said.

Wesley Warren, head of the White House Task Force on Livable Communities, was impressed with Riverside County’s proposal.

“This is one of the most ambitious I’ve seen to date,” he said.

Ultimately, the plans will require approval from federal regulators overseeing endangered species, transportation spending, clean air rules and wetlands management.

Government involvement will give the county clout as it goes about seeking the millions of dollars the process will cost, Mullen said.

The three-year planning effort, expected to finish sometime in 2002, will cost \$23 million. The Riverside County Board of Supervisors has put up half the money, but is seeking federal and state grants to make up the difference. Congress has allocated \$1.5 million for the project this fiscal year.

Without coordination with the departments that set the policies, the process can bog down, Mullen said.

“It’s actually taking a lesson from the Pentagon and what they did in integrating their force structure,” said Mullen. The military has refined battle planning so that all services work together, supporting each other.

“It’s like the Army fighting a battle without the Air Force,” said Mullen.

But this battle is being played out in the environmentally sensitive regions of Riverside County, where developers want to build on inhabited by species protected by federal and state laws.

The County’s approach builds on earlier planning processes. In San Diego and Orange counties, endangered species were accommodated through cooperation among local, state and federal officials, environmental advocates, builders and business owners, said environmental lawyer Marc Ebbin.

“We’re seeing the next generation of regional plans,” said Ebbin, who has worked as Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt’s personal representative to California.

Now Ebbin is advising Placer and Merced counties on similar efforts, all of which integrate local discussions about how land is used with plans to protect animals and plants from extinction.

“In San Diego and Orange County, these were ecosystem plans that were intended to protect local bio-diversity,” he said. “But they were not intended to integrate other local planning issues into that planning process, as is now occurring in Riverside County.”

The Riverside County effort is part of a growing tide of coordinated planning around the country, said Harvard professor Mary Graham.

“We’re not, as Americans, a nation of planners,” said Graham. “We do plan, but then ignore our own plans.”

Graham’s book, “The Morning After Earth Day,” describes how former adversaries – activists, business owners and bureaucrats – have come together to forge new ways to preserve the environment.