

Plan for builders, species backed

■ S.B. County board OKs funds to study land use.

By Ann Griffith
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SAN BERNARDINO — Developers and conservationists don't often see eye to eye, but a process begun Tuesday may help unite groups on either side of the typical battle lines.

The San Bernardino Valley Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan, considered Tuesday by the county Board of Supervisors, would set aside large preserves for species considered endangered.

Supervisors voted to go forward with drafting the plan, which also would protect wildlife that in the future may be listed as endangered by federal or state governments.

"This is the centerpiece of a program to preserve biodiversity in this county," said Lindell Marsh, an Irvine attorney who worked on the first habitat conservation plan in San Bruno in the 1980s.

Today there are 200 such plans, including some in Orange County and San Diego. One is planned for Riverside County.

Right now, developers in San Bernardino County must get their own plans approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when they build on land where there are endangered species. The "slow, expensive" process usually requires that developers set aside some of their property. When a builder buys land, he doesn't know if he will be able to use all of it.

"We like certainty. We like to know the rules," said Frank Williams, executive officer of the Building Industry Association, Baldy View Chapter. "Uncertainty of an issue is time and money."

Under the habitat conservation plan, developers would simply pay a fee to contribute to the larger preserve.

Environmental groups such as the Sierra Club support habitat conservation plans because they result in larger preserves that are more effective at saving species.

"We'd really rather proceed with a good habitat plan which protects species rather than battle over perfection," said Peter Kiriakos, conservation committee chairman of the San Geronio Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Other groups such as the Spirit of the Sage Council in Pasadena are opposed to the programs because they allow killing of endangered species outside the preserve.

"Political compromises in land use most often result in the killing of rare, threatened or endangered plants, fish and wildlife," Conservation Programs Director Leeona Klippstein said.

The Inland Valley plan was on hold while county government studied whether it would be worthwhile to invest the millions of dollars needed.

The county will spend \$250,000, to be matched with \$850,000 from cities and the federal government. That money will pay for studying land in western San Bernardino County to see where animals, plants and bugs live. It also would study how many of each species live in the county.

Acquiring land to complete the project will cost millions more.

Supervisor Jerry Eaves originally lobbied to kill the proposal because of the cost and because he was frustrated by past attempts to deal with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which must sign off on the plan.

"They're the only game in town," he said, explaining his shift.

Even more important, Eaves got monetary commitments from some of the 14 Inland Valley cities also participating in the plan.

Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Pat Falk said the agency has proved it can successfully work with governments and has approved 200 other plans.

She said the habitat preserves will help save species from landowners who illegally kill animals to avoid the cost and delay of complying with current methods.

"It happens all the time. We know about that," said Falk. "Very few people are prosecuted on endangered species law because it's very difficult to prove."

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