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Shrider column: Tejon development involves one dish, many chefs

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A coalition of California's leading environmentalists has come up with an ambitious plan to turn sprawling Tejon Ranch into a vast natural preserve and is ready to do whatever it takes to make it happen.

This is merely a minor detail to the environmentalists, who say Tejon Ranch Co. must develop, or not develop, the land according to their plan or it's off to court they'll go.

The saber rattling started several years ago when Tejon Ranch -- the largest private landholding in California -- announced it was going to start developing about 5 percent of its 270,000 acres, starting with its 1,500-acre industrial site at Interstate 5 and Highway 99.

Now the company wants to continue the development of its own property with two environmentally sound residential projects -- Tejon Mountain Village in Kern County and a second, larger community in northern Los Angeles County.

Environmental impact reports should be complete by next year. Despite years of planning that included input from an environmental advisory group, a partnership with the nonprofit land conservation group the Trust for Public Land and a pledge to set aside 100,000 acres of backcountry as a natural preserve, the environmental coalition says "Sorry, not good enough."

Is it ever?

A 100,000-acre preserve -- equal in size to the Yosemite Valley -- isn't good enough for environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the Center for Biological Diversity, whose members say they'll accept nothing less than 245,000 acres.

Oh, and the land they will graciously permit the company to develop? They want fewer houses built there, thank you very much.

They want, they want, they want. Mystified by this unwarranted sense of entitlement, I asked Lorraine Unger, chair of the Sierra Club's Kern-Kaweah chapter, at what point private property rights finally prevail.

"Private property rights come in most anywhere, but you have to look at public good," she says. "If someone was going to put a garbage dump on private property, those rights evaporate. You don't have the right to do things on your property that negatively affect the community at large."

Fortunately for the community at large, Tejon Co. isn't planning on adding garbage dumps to its property any time soon. It is, however, going "way beyond the call of duty" to develop its land in a way that makes everyone happy, says Terrie Stoller, founder of Smart Growth Coalition of Kern County and a member of Tejon's environmental advisory group.

"I was just blown away with the brain power poured into the research behind these projects," Stoller says. "(Tejon Co.) hired experts on condors, oak trees, plants, critter movement and how to retain the wildness of the ranch. I think they're being as environmentally sensitive as possible."

Tejon Co. is, by every reasonable standard, doing it right. The 100,000 acres of promised preserve land is just the beginning -- another 30,000 or so in the developed areas will be forever designated protected open space.

Reed Holderman, regional director of the Trust for Public Land, says the development also means the realignment of the Pacific Crest Trail along the spine of the Tehachapi mountains, straight through the ranch.

"This project will put the trail back where it belongs," Holderman says. "People hiking the trail will be looking at 39 miles of the most spectacular land anywhere and the most publicly available for anybody to hike."

Publicly available. Accessible to all. Words to make a good environmental activist cringe.

Tejon Ranch is biologically unique, a haven for rare and endangered species, a precious natural resource and a treasure to be protected in perpetuity. We know it. The environmentalists know it.

Is it so hard to believe that its owners know it, too?

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