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Marylee Shrider: Tejon Ranch knows what's best for land

BY MARYLEE SHRIDER, contributing columnist | Friday, Dec 1 2006 10:30 PM

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Every now and then my columns are rewarded with feedback so virulent I'm compelled to share some of the more colorful comments.

My recent column on Tejon Ranch Co.'s right to develop its land in any environmentally sound way it sees fit resulted in a number of such responses. A favorite came from a San Fernando Valley resident who declared me "clueless, short-sighted and dangerous," and noted that I apparently "enjoy living in the unwashed crotch of the southern San Joaquin Valley."

Ewww.

Similar e-mails, several of which came from self-described environmental activists living in the Frazier Mountain area, suggested that I'm irrational, unethical and have been "bought off" by the corrupt land barons who run Tejon Ranch.

Oh, and I don't give a rat's hiney about American Indian cultural sites, pristine wild oaks and the California condor, either.

The letter writers are mistaken. Like many rational residents of Kern County, including those who oversee the 270,000-acre Tejon Ranch, I want the land and its natural wonders, particularly the condor, to be protected. And there is every indication that those who run the ranch are doing just that.

As most everyone knows by now, Tejon Ranch is the largest private landholding in California, primarily devoted to ranching and agriculture. In recent years, the company announced plans to develop houses and resorts on 5 percent of its property, while partnering with a nonprofit land conservation group to sell a whopping third of the ranch -- 100,000 acres -- for use as a nature preserve.

Oh, the howls. The gnashing of teeth by a dozen or so environmental groups that are demanding the ranch owners fork over 245,000 acres toward a preserve. They are vowing to fight the development "tooth and nail." That was the threat from several letter writers, who, like many activists opposed to the ranch's plan, tend to speak with great authority on what the company is

and is not doing in preparation for development.

A few writers, for example, blasted Tejon Ranch for what they say is the company's failure to study the impact development will have on the Cuddy Canyon area of the ranch, where "slim" water resources will be "irreparably damaged" by golf courses, hotels and "other commercial, water-guzzling parts of the project."

The State Water Resources Control Board agrees with that assessment, claimed one Frazier Park activist. When I contacted the board, and the Department of Water Resources in case he'd confused the two, both agencies said they'd not done any analysis on the Tejon project or its impact on Cuddy Canyon, nor had they ever made statements on the issue "one way or the other."

Tejon Ranch officials say they have spent \$45 million on technical experts who are currently studying how the development will impact the ranch's natural resources, including water supplies, wildlife habitat and endangered species. No one, not even the most ardent conservationist, will know for sure what the project's impact will be until environmental impact reports are completed and presented sometime in late 2007.

But that's a mere technicality to activists who claim Tejon "purposefully" ignores impact analysis mandated by the California Environmental Quality Act. That very argument was the basis of a lawsuit filed a few years ago by the conservation group the Center for Biological Diversity against Tejon and its 1,500-acre industrial site on Highway 99. In March, Kern County Superior Court Judge Kenneth Twisselman ruled the ranch's EIR complete. Naturally, the diversity folks are appealing.

And so it will go, with lawsuits, delays and extremist claims that the development will result in the utter destruction of a pristine national treasure. All of which will only delay, but fail to defeat, the Tejon Ranch Co.'s smart and sound development of its own land.

Marylee Shrider's column appears Tuesdays and Saturdays. For comments or questions please contact her at mshrider@bakersfield.com or leave a voicemail at 395-7474.

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