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STEPHEN OSMAN *Los Angeles Times*

**ROOM TO ROAM:** A 25-mile-long section of the Tehachapis will be preserved as a wildlife corridor.

## Developer Creates an Opening

Tejon Ranch agrees to sell 100,000 acres for a wildlife corridor. Some see the move as a gambit for housing projects.

By DARYL KELLEY  
*Times Staff Writer*

Developers of the vast Tejon Ranch north of Los Angeles have agreed to sell more than one-third of their 270,000 acres to a land trust, in an effort to establish a wildlife corridor of public land stretching from the Sierra to the sea.

The Tejon Ranch Co. plans to

announce today an agreement with the Trust for Public Land California for the potential sale of a 25-mile-long section of the Tehachapi Mountains that links the Sierra Nevada range with the Los Padres and Angeles national forests and the Pacific Ocean.

The developers are entering into the agreement as they lay the groundwork for building a small city along the flanks of the Tehachapis on open land that has been devoted largely to raising cattle since 1843.

The wildlife corridor would preserve a core of open space across the crown of the mountains. But it would still require migrating wildlife to cross Interstate 5, the state's major north-

south freeway, via existing bridges and underpasses, a perilous journey that some animals already undertake.

"We think this is a unique and historic opportunity to create the missing link between the coast and the Sequoias," said Reed Holderman, regional director of the national trust's western division. "It's one of the most biologically important properties in the state. It's the size of Yosemite Valley, and it's just 60 miles from Los Angeles. . . . This place is like a museum in the wild."

Important details have yet to be worked out. Which 100,000 acres will be sold, how much they [See Tejon, Page A23]

### Ranch facts

Potential corridor .....



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- Property: 270,000 acres
- For sale: 100,000 acres
- Owner: Tejon Ranch Co.
- Buyer: Trust for Public Land California
- Funds: state, federal and private

# Tejon Ranch to Sell 100,000 Acres to Trust

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will sell for, and the source of the money are to be determined in the next year or so, after the trust completes a conservation plan and after state, federal and private funds are secured for the purchase, said Tejon Ranch President Robert A. Stine.

"We're talking about a fantastic piece of property that's been preserved for 160 years," Stine said. "And we're going to ensure that a significant part of the ranch is going to stay that way forever."

Though environmentalists concur that the Tejon Ranch property has enormous ecological value, many are reserving judgment about the planned wildlife corridor until they see its final outline.

Some critics say the potential deal is a political gambit intended to gain support from government agencies and working capital from taxpayers so the land-rich but cash-poor developer can move forward on three large housing or commercial projects on other parts of the ranch.

During the next decade or two, Tejon plans to build a community of 70,000 residents near Gorman in northern Los Angeles County, dozens of huge warehouses at the base of the Grapevine mountain pass and a resort community near Lake Tejon, both in southern Kern County.

Combined, those developments would be far larger than the newly approved 20,885-home Newhall Ranch project near Santa Clarita, the biggest residential complex yet approved in Los Angeles County. Moreover, the Tejon projects would effectively link urban Southern California with the rural Central Valley, filling parts of a 75-mile expanse between Santa Clarita and Bakersfield that is now nearly all open space.

Though environmental groups generally consider Tejon Ranch a crucial wildlife habitat that must be preserved, several criticized Tejon for what they see as the company's secretive ways and refusal to allow them onto the ranch to conduct wildlife studies.

They also said the Trust for Public Land, often using public money, pays too much for undevelopable lands, driving up the price that other conservation groups have to pay for properties.

The trust usually serves as a broker that evaluates sites and arranges conservation deals between private land owners and government agencies.

"We're all in the dark on this," said David Myers, executive director of the Wildlands Conservancy, owner of the 97,000-acre Wild Wolves Preserve just west of the Tejon Ranch. "But we've been very concerned in the past because [the trust] pays so much. And there's a big concern that conservation dollars are going to be used to fund the development of [Tejon's] remaining 170,000 acres."

Kristeen Penrod, executive director of the South Coast Wildlands Project, said she considers Tejon Ranch the most important wildlife corridor in Southern California because four ecological regions come together there.

"Of all 15 of the connections that we're studying right now, Tejon Ranch is the one true wildlife linkage," said Penrod, in Sacramento on Wednesday to meet with state officials on preserving Tejon Ranch.

But Penrod said her efforts to work with Tejon have been rejected.

"The conservation community wouldn't be so up in arms [about Tejon] if they would share information with us and not do everything under the table," she said. "One hundred thousand acres sounds like good news, but the configuration of the 100,000 acres makes all the difference."

Penrod said all three Tejon development plans infringe on key wildlife corridors.

Stine, Tejon's chief executive, said he welcomes information from any group for analysis by the Trust for Public Land. But he said that some environmentalists who supported a lawsuit to block Tejon's warehouse project now want to offer his company advice.

"Our answer is that as soon as we finish with the litigation, we'll be glad to talk to you," he said.

Holderman said his group has cut deals for 30 years, regularly paying below market value for land while saving 1.5 million acres nationwide. Public agencies are very careful to get their own appraisals, he said.

"If they don't concur on the land value," he said, "they don't do the deal."

Holderman said the work of

experts such as Penrod will be gathered during the next several months to determine precisely which of Tejon's lands should be purchased.

"I can understand their frustration, but we're just at the beginning of the process," he said.

Not that Tejon's resources have not been studied repeatedly by state agencies, all of which have declared it an environmental jewel, Holderman said. A top Audubon Society official described the ranch last year as "an ecological gold mine."

The ranch's backbone extends across a mountain range that peaks at nearly 7,000 feet and is covered with tens of thousands of acres of mixed woodlands — 200-foot pines and 450-year-old oaks. This area, called the Highlands, would be the heart of the wildlife preserve, Stine said.

And at least two long, wide fingers of public lands would reach out westward from this core. One corridor would run 17 miles along the grassy foothills to Interstate 5. The San Joaquin kit fox, an endangered species, occupies this area, as does the rare blunt-nosed leopard lizard and the California burrowing owl.

The second corridor would center in Bear Trap Canyon and allow mule deer, badgers, mountain lions, bears and elk to move west toward bridges and underpasses near Gorman.

Tejon wildlife studies haven't detected much crossover from the ranch west across the freeway: one badger and a few mule deer in two years of monitoring. But Myers of the Wildlands Conservancy said he sees deer crossing the freeway near Grapevine regularly.

"You see deer on the center divider of I-5 all the time in the evening," he said.

Even if wildlife were not to cross the freeway, Stine said the 100,000 public acres — much of it wild and virtually inaccessible — is enough wilderness to sustain existing wildlife.

"You have enough bulk in this one area," he said Wednesday, pointing from a helicopter to mountainous woodlands and hill-sides covered with vibrant yellow wildflowers, "that these species can survive and thrive from now on."