



Wednesday, December 5, 2012

Viewpoints: Collaboration Helps Tejon Ranch Reach Conservation Milestone

By Joel Reynolds and Robert Stine
Special to The Bee



Joel Reynolds is board chairman of the Tejon Ranch Conservancy and western director of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Robert Stine is president and CEO of Tejon Ranch Co.

Early Native American communities prospered here. Kit Carson and John Fremont scouted here, where California condors soar today over a unique crossroads of natural habitats and rare species. Giant oaks, towering incense cedar, ancient Joshua trees, and sprawling California sycamores, along seasonal streams, still thrive here, and each spring the foothills and desert lowlands are submerged in a sea of wildflowers.

Tejon Ranch, the largest private landholding in

California, is a vast undeveloped, unfragmented, and – to the general public – virtually unknown Southern California landscape on the central spine of the state. It's been called the state's "holy grail of conservation," and in 2008, it became the focus of one of the largest conservation deals in state history. Tejon Ranch Co. and five environmental organizations negotiated an unprecedented agreement to preserve 90 percent of the 270,000-acre property; to create a new land conservancy to manage the protected acres; and, subject to local, state and federal permitting requirements, allow for reasonable development of the remaining 10 percent of the ranch.

This week, four years after it was founded, the nonprofit Tejon Ranch Conservancy reached 100,000 acres of the ranch under permanent protection, secured by conservation easements, making the conservancy one of the largest land trusts in the state of California. En route to an eventual quarter of a million

protected acres, this is a major milestone that could have been achieved only by a commitment to collaboration among traditional adversaries that is rarely seen in today's polarized society.

In May 2008, the Tejon Ranch Conservation and Land Use Agreement was announced as an experiment in dispute resolution - the product of a negotiation alternative to serial litigation that typically accompanies development plans on the scale anticipated here. Rather than hunkering down for battle in well-worn trenches, Tejon Ranch Co. and its partner, DMB Pacific Ventures, invited environmental leaders to the bargaining table, offering as an inducement the entirety of the massive property for examination and discussion. And the invitation was accepted.

Over two years of structured but contentious negotiations, the stakeholders identified conservation targets on the ranch – the conifer forests of the Sierra Nevada, the oak woodlands of the

California Coastal Range, the Joshua tree forests of the Mojave Desert, and the native grasslands of the southern San Joaquin Valley, which together form a mixing zone for a wide range of species and habitats, a hot spot of biological diversity second to none in California.

Tejon Ranch Co. mapped almost 100,000 acres of future development areas, including its Tejon Mountain Village, Centennial and Tejon Ranch Commerce Center projects. The parties then exchanged proposals, seeking to secure this extraordinary working landscape while allowing focused development sufficient to support both increased value for the company's shareholders and the significant conservation goals.

Ultimately, the parties agreed to conserve all but 30,000 acres, which would remain available for potential development on the western edge of the ranch near the Interstate 5 corridor, with conservation easements to be acquired or dedicated over the next several decades on everything else. Public access was guaranteed, including rerouting of the Pacific Crest Trail from the desert flatlands east of the ranch up into the ranch highlands and, if feasible, eventually a new California state park.

The conservancy was charged with preserving and enhancing the land, promoting scientific research and managing public access, overseen by a 12-member board, an unlikely alliance comprising ranch and

environmental representatives in equal number and an additional four independent members appointed by consensus. Its mission is not to dictate ongoing Tejon Ranch operations, but to ensure that, as long as they continue, they will be conducted in a manner consistent with the 2008 agreement's stewardship goals and, over the long term, with restoration.

In its first four years, the conservancy has already initiated important scientific studies, working with leading academic and research institutions, and has led hundreds of guided hikes around the ranch. Last year, the state appropriated \$15.7 million to purchase conservation easements on 62,500 acres previously slated for future development. And this week, with the dedication of more than 37,000 additional acres protecting essential habitat of the endangered California condor, the acreage protected by easement under the conservancy's control reached 100,000.

At a time when gridlock has become an overused cliché – applied to our governance, politics, freeways or anything else that seems not to move – it's important to be reminded that progress is still possible, despite differing goals or ideological perspectives, even on complex or seemingly intractable challenges. Conservation at Tejon Ranch, unimpeded even by the economic crash of 2008, is one such reminder.