



PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

September 10, 2009

CONTACT:

Mati Waiya, 805-794-1248
Jason Weiner, 805-823-3301

Proposed Tejon Ranch Development will Displace and Jeopardize Native American Sacred Sites and Cultural Resources Including the California Condor

The Wishtoyo Foundation and its Ventura Coastkeeper Program, have submitted joint public comments with the Center for Biological Diversity voicing concerns about the proposed Tejon Ranch Development's cultural and environmental impacts, some of which are set forth below, and oppose the development as proposed.

Kern County, California

Southern California's Chumash, Kitanemuk, and Yowlumne Native Americans are concerned about the impact of the proposed Tejon Ranch development on their culture, the land on which they lived and physically and spiritually depended upon for over 10,000 years. As proposed, the massive development will displace and destroy their settlements, sacred sites, and burial grounds, and will jeopardize the existence of the California Condor. The Condor is a sacred Chumash cultural resource whose continued existence is not only critical to Chumash cultural preservation, but also critical to region's ecological integrity.

Inadequate Protection of Chumash, Kitanemuk and Yowlumne Indian settlements, sacred sites, and burial grounds on the Tejon Ranch property

The Cultural Resources sections of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement ("DEIS") produced for the proposed development's Draft Habitat Conservation Plan ("DHCP") and the Draft Environmental Impact Report ("DEIR") produced for the proposed development's Tejon Mountain Village Specific and Community Plan ("TMV") does not identify, adequately describe, or protect the Chumash, Kitanemuk and Yowlumne Indian settlements, sacred sites or burial grounds on the Tejon Ranch property. This a moral and ethical deficiency, and a blatant violation of the National Historic Preservation Act, ("NHPA"), 16 U.S.C. § 470f (NHPA § 106), the National Environmental Protection Act ("NEPA"), and the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA). Not only has the development been proposed and the DEIS and DEIR planning and review process well underway without identification of Native American settlements, sacred sites, and burial grounds, but the Fish and Wildlife Service ("FWS"), Kern County, and the Tejon Ranch Corporation have not made reasonable or good faith efforts to identify these Native American cultural resources.

The fact that 1.) a lengthy 2004 archaeological survey of the Tejon Mountain Village area was not considered in the DEIS or the DEIR and that 2.) the TMV DEIR, released after the DEIS, features an Archaeological Study prepared by Tejon Ranch that purports to identify 58 sites within the Tejon Mountain Village “study area,” highlights the capricious and bad faith effort by the FWS to identify Chumash sites. Not surprisingly, even a cursory review of Tejon Ranch history would have led to the identification of Native American villages, sacred sites, burial ground, trails, and other footprints within the proposed DHCP boundaries, both around Castac Lake and in the area above the canyons continuing northward to the Ranch’s Old Headquarters on Paso Creek. The NEPA, CEQA, and the NHPA both require more from the FWS, and significant impacts to Native American cultural resources will not be adequately mitigated by subsequent compliance with other regulations.

“The cultural impact of this proposed development and accompanying proposed desecration of Chumash cultural resources, not only is sad for the Chumash, but it takes away from the trust that Native Peoples have been trying to gain in the System and in Western society”, says Mati Waiya, Chumash Ceremonial Elder and Executive Director of the Wishtoyo Foundation and its Ventura Coastkeeper Program. More than disgusted by the lack of measures to preserve and protect Chumash cultural resources and burial site, Mati also states that:

“Removing Chumash burial sites as this project proposes disrupts all the prayers of the people who laid their loved ones to rest. This calls into the question the priorities and morality of the people who engage in and allow the tearing apart of our burial sites, and the crushing and rolling of our ancestors skulls with bulldozers. It also brings the social irresponsibility and greed behind these massive developments into the spotlight. No one should turn a blind eye to this social atrocity.”

Jeopardizing the California Condor in Violation of the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA)

“The massive development will also jeopardize the existence of the California Condor, a sacred Chumash cultural resource whose continued existence is not only critical to Chumash cultural preservation, but also critical to the ecological integrity of the region,” states Jason Weiner, Ventura Coastkeeper’s Associate Director and Staff Attorney. Today, there are only 138 free flying California Condors, whose nine and a half foot long wingspan make them the largest land bird in California. In recent years, the Tejon Mountain Village area has been one of the most heavily used portions of condor critical habitat, with the Southern California population heavily using Tejon in 2008 and 2009 for foraging.

Listed as endangered under the ESA, the successful recovery of the California condor, especially its recovery in its historical habitat, depends on the future of Tejon Ranch. The ranch, a large portion of which has been designated as Critical Condor Habitat by the Federal Government, is the linchpin of the species’ historical habitat, as the Tehachapi Mountains provide crucial connectivity for condors between habitat in the southern coast ranges and the southern Sierra Nevada. The area has long been regarded as essential foraging grounds for the species, providing an abundant food supply, healthy populations of other scavengers that help condors locate food, isolation from anthropogenic impacts, and numerous suitable overnight roosting locations.

As noted by a group of esteemed condor biologists, including former leaders and members of the FWS’ condor research team and federal condor recovery team, the Tejon development over condor habitat and its accompanying traffic, noise, electrical wires, light, and urban pollutants

“represent a major threat to the recovery of the species” and will “appreciably reduce the likelihood of recovery of the California condor and adversely modify its critical habitat.” Specifically, the proposed development will: 1.) significantly reduce the amount of high-quality Condor foraging and hunting habitat; 2.) will inhibit condor use of the area; 3.) will lead to direct Condor kills; and 4.) could possibly alter condor movement patterns.

The adverse modification of most of the Condor Critical Habitat in Tejon Ranch as proposed in the development without protecting, conserving, or aiding in the recovery of the Condor is a blatant violation of the ESA.

Importance of the Condor as a Native American Resource

The Chumash people have a strong cultural interest in the preservation and recovery of the California Condor, that for over 10,000 years played a significant role in spiritually and physically supporting the Chumash communities, and the ecosystems they depended upon.

To many Native Americans, the Condor is a symbol of creation and healing. As depicted in Chumash condor pictographs, religious ceremonies, dances, and songs, to the Chumash the Condor plays the important role of cleaning the land and carrying away man’s ugliness, pain, and hatred.

In modern times, the Condor continues to be a resource whose continued thriving existence remains vital to the preservation and revitalization of Chumash culture. Living, praying, and burying their dead in the Tejon Ranch region for 10,000 years, the Chumash people have a cultural and sovereign right to coexist with and observe the condors in the wild that they sing about, pray about, and honor in their art and ceremonies, so that they can best connect with their ancestral roots and culture. “Experiencing the California Condor and being able just to honor the Condor allows our people to reconnect with our culture and ancestors in ways that will not be possible without their continued existence,” said Mati Waiya, a Chumash Ceremonial Elder and the Executive Director of the Wishtoyo Foundation and its Ventura Coastkeeper Program.

As the Condor “carries the power of the wind and catches currents in the sky, they also carry the honor and spirit of the Chumash people.” The Condor and the efforts to protect and revitalize it, parallels the movement to restore and protect Chumash, and all Native American cultures. As Mati Waiya states, that for the Chumash, “when you think of Condor, and how its been here as long as the Chumash people, we think how us as modern day Chumash People need to re-identify ourselves. So to see the condor soar again, adapting and fighting to survive, it gives us hope and inspiration.”

About The Wishtoyo Foundation and its Ventura Coastkeeper Program:

Founded in 1997, Wishtoyo is a 501(c)(3) non profit grassroots organization with over 700 members consisting of Ventura County’s diverse residents and Chumash Native Americans. Wishtoyo’s mission is to preserve and protect Chumash culture, the culture of all of Ventura County’s diverse communities, and the environment that our current and future generations depend upon. Wishtoyo shares traditional Chumash Native American beliefs, cultural practices, songs, dances, stories, and values with the public in its Chumash Discovery Village and through educational programs in schools to promote environmental awareness and natural resources stewardship. In 2000, Wishtoyo founded its Ventura Coastkeeper Program (“VCK”). VCK’s mission is to protect, preserve, and restore the ecological integrity and water quality of Ventura County's inland and coastal waterbodies for all beings in the County’s diverse community through outreach and education, restoration projects, advocacy, litigation, and community organizing and empowerment.