

CENTENNIAL'S BIOLOGY EXPERTS DESCRIBE LOW LEVEL OF IMPACTS ON L.A. COUNTY'S SIGNIFICANT ECOLOGICAL AREAS

-- Experts say wildlife movement negligible across site due to existing barriers --

Centennial and Los Angeles County's Significant Ecological Area Technical Advisory Committee (SEATAC), biologists that review proposed developments as being aligned with the county's Significant Ecological Area (SEA) designation, met for a fifth time on September 9 in official session. Additionally, many unofficial meetings and site visits with SEATAC and county biologists were held. Acknowledging that each meeting had delivered changes to the Centennial plan that made it more sensitive to biological resources and reduced its impacts, SEATAC noted that the proposed community had come a long way toward being compatible with the SEAs. Indeed, some SEATAC members found Centennial very close to being fully compatible while others disagreed, contending wildlife movement is impacted. Centennial and SEATAC agreed to disagree over this issue.

Some background on SEAs is in order at this point. In 1976 the County of Los Angeles designated 176,174 acres as SEA, which are characterized as containing unique, dwindling, or other rare plant and animal resources that need to be preserved for the purpose of public education, research, and other non-disruptive outdoor uses. SEATAC does not approve or reject projects. Its mandate is to recommend to the Board of Supervisors whether or not it thinks a project is sustaining resources within a designated SEA according to specified design compatibility criteria. These criteria apply only to areas within an SEA.

Centennial has been carefully planned to avoid impacting the majority of the 1,520 acres of SEAs (58 and 59) that lie within its site; SEA 59 will be entirely avoided and just one percent, or 400 acres, of lower quality biological resources will be affected. Further, Centennial will preserve 1,120 acres of SEA on site including all 20 acres of SEA 59 and approximately 1,100 acres of SEA 58 and will preserve another 2,330 acres of SEA 58 within the Centennial Off-site Open Space Preserve. Thus, a total of 3,450 acres of SEA designated land will be preserved by Centennial. Centennial has set aside an additional 5,217 acres of its own site as permanent open space, creating a total Centennial preserve of 8,667 acres. Coupled with the 3,197 acres within SEA 58 that have been dedicated as part of the Tejon Ranch-Wide Conservation Agreement, a total of 6,647 acres of SEA designated land will be preserved in all.

SEA 59, “Tehachapi Foothills”

“Tehachapi Foothills,” SEA 59, is so named because of its extensive grasslands and unique wildflower display along the Tehachapi Foothills. Encompassing 4,540 acres primarily to the west of Centennial, this SEA’s southeastern tip overlaps the southwestern edge of the site by approximately 20 acres. Centennial will preserve and manage as open space in perpetuity the grasslands and associated wildflowers on that portion of SEA 59 that is on its site, ensuring that they will not be impacted by development. These 20 acres on the Centennial site represent a small portion of the grasslands and wildflower fields that extend for miles along the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains, from US 5 to the Mojave Desert. Thousands of similar acres are part of the recently announced conservation commitment of more than 240,000 wildland acres on Tejon Ranch.

SEA 58, “PortalRidge/Liebre Mountains”

SEA 58 is located on the southeast edge of the Centennial site. It extends from the southern side of Highway 138 southward to the Angeles National Forest boundary. SEA 58 contains a unique and varied mosaic of vegetation representing the transitional zones between the Mojave Desert, the coastal ranges, and the Tehachapi Mountains.

Less than five percent or approximately 1,500 acres of the 31,063 acres in SEA 58 is within the Centennial site. It contains grassland and great basin scrub vegetation, as well as mixed oak woodland/scrub oak chaparral. The woodland/chaparral vegetation is undisturbed and occurs on the steeper sections of the north-facing slopes. The more disturbed grassland and great basin scrub vegetation occurs at the base of these slopes adjacent to Highway 138, which apparently was selected as the boundary of this SEA based more on the convenience of mapping and less on biological resources. This SEA designation seems intended to capture the high-biological-value upland slopes and not the much lower value disturbed grass and scrublands along Highway 138.

The biological value of the mixed oak woodland/scrub oak chaparral is high because it is relatively untouched and provides connectivity to the Angeles National Forest. Recognizing the importance of this, Centennial has designated almost all of the oak woodland/chaparral as permanent open space. The SEA will remain largely intact with less than 3 percent of the high value vegetation on the site being impacted by the plan.

Although some grassland and great basin scrub that serves as a buffer to the mountainous portions of SEA 58 will be lost, Centennial's proposed areas of development will border Highway 138 and have little effect on high value biological resources.

Centennial's biologist explained to SEATAC that, with the community's avoidance of nearly all the high sensitivity areas, preservation and management of approximately 3,430 acres of SEA designated lands, and implementation of a suite of measures that would substantially reduce indirect impacts to biological resources, it is highly unlikely that the overall biological value and integrity of SEA 58 or 59 would be substantially affected by Centennial. Indeed, the proposed activities occurring within both SEAs meet the compatibility criteria and exceed the county's goals by largely avoiding the primary resources those SEAs were created to protect.

Wildlife Movement

The issue of wildlife movement is a complicated subject. Leading experts agree that retaining the existing linkage for wildlife movement between the Sierra Nevada Range and the Coastal Ranges is crucial to sustaining regional wildlife populations. But, contrary to recent studies, some SEATAC members contend that providing corridors for wildlife to traverse through the Centennial site is beneficial. The leading organizations that have studied wildlife movement in the region in recent years have concluded that the primary linkage occurs largely to the west and north of the Centennial site. Evidence of wildlife use in underpasses along the I-5 corridor has corroborated the results of these studies. Analyses by Centennial biologists indicate that wildlife movement across the site is negligible due to existing impediments such as the California Aqueduct, minimal availability of cover over substantial distances, the lack of north-south trending natural topographic features such as canyon bottoms, and the lack of open space to the east of the project. Centennial's impacts on the primary linkage would be indirect and would be minimized with a full suite of mitigation measures as well as preservation of extensive open space that will act as a buffer along the western edge of the site.

Pronghorn Antelope

The issue of potential impacts to the pronghorn antelope, the namesake of the Antelope Valley of northern Los Angeles County, was raised by SEATAC. The last *natural* population of pronghorn antelope

disappeared from Los Angeles County and the Antelope Valley at least a century ago. The small experimental herd that occupies the area today was introduced by Tejon Ranch wildlands management and the California Department of Fish & Game. The pronghorn are frequent visitors to the southern slopes of the Tehachapi Mountains on Tejon Ranch, but the fenced and fortified California Aqueduct is a formidable barrier to their ability to cross much of the Centennial land. While the pronghorn may lose a small portion of their foraging grounds as a result of Centennial, the thousands of acres of rangeland on the Tejon Ranch along the southern slopes of the Tehachapi Mountains will remain fully accessible to them. The recently signed Tejon Ranch-Wide Conservation Agreement provides additional assurance for the regional pronghorn population's long-term stability. The agreement sets aside up to 240,000 acres of the ranch for preservation – land that will be managed to sustain a wide range of biological resources including the pronghorn.

Grasslands

Grasslands is another biological resource that has been extensively studied by Centennial's biological experts.

The grasslands of the Centennial site have been grazed by cattle for more than 125 years. As a result, wildlife habitat quality has been reduced and, in some cases, the grassland has been overgrazed. Centennial has conducted a number of focused studies on the site, including one of the most detailed and extensive grasslands studies ever carried out in Southern California. It was performed by a team of leading experts who worked for more than three months in 2006 and again in 2007 to gather detailed ecological information. To ensure the scientific accuracy of the study, two nationally recognized biologists with expertise in the ecology of California grasslands participated in the formulation of the study and contributed to the final report.

The team collected field data from 400 sample points. This was analyzed using a geographic information system to create a predictive model that generated a detailed map depicting the location of all native and non-native grassland areas on the Centennial site. This sophisticated combination of "ground-truthing," as it's called, and computer modeling, allowed the scientists to pinpoint where the highest-quality native grasslands were located on the Centennial property. They also were able to provide an in-depth understanding of the ecological value of those acres, and how any loss of grassland can be mitigated.

Supplemental field data will be used to determine restoration strategies and policies for long-term management of native grasslands within extensive Centennial open space areas.

The grasslands study is one of scores of environmental studies that will be included in the Draft Environmental Impact Report for Centennial expected to be circulated publicly next spring.

Mitigation Plan

One additional point raised by SEATAC during the meetings was the lack of a full Open Space Preserve Management Plan for Centennial. In line with the typical timeframe, Centennial will submit this plan with the final vesting map and it must be approved by the County before any construction begins.