

NONPROFIT AGENCY SEEKS A.V. LAND PRESERVATION.

Byline: CHARLES F. BOSTWICK Staff Writer
Los Angeles Daily News May 12, 2006

LANCASTER -- A 9-month-old nonprofit organization is working with local government officials to acquire undeveloped Antelope Valley desert for preservation.

As more and more homes and businesses go up on what had been old farmland or untouched desert, Antelope Valley Conservancy leaders hope to use fees paid by developers and money from other sources to acquire land for preservation in its natural state.

"Habitat preservation is the basis for species preservation. The Antelope Valley has a long history of preserving natural lands," said Wendy Reed, the conservancy's executive director.

The conservancy fills the local need for an agency that can take care of land acquired through "mitigation" fees -- \$770 per acre in Lancaster, or more depending on the condition of the land -- paid by developers for building on what had been wildlife habitat, officials said.

"That has been the missing link we've needed," Lancaster City Councilman Ron Smith said.

Conservancy leaders are examining what areas are best for preservation, consulting federal and local habitat designation plans and analyzing which areas are viable to keep undeveloped into the future and which would provide corridors for wildlife to travel from spot to spot.

Among the first acquisition projects in which the conservancy may be involved is a proposal by Lancaster officials to set aside some 500 acres near the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve as a preserve for the burrowing owl, whose numbers and habitat are dwindling in California although it is not designated an endangered species.

Created in August, the conservancy is run by a board that also includes Callyn York, an Antelope Valley College zoology professor, and Johnny Munger, a Bank of the West information technology security official.

About 200 local land trusts exist elsewhere in California, Reed said.

Smith and other local government officials praised the conservancy Wednesday at a news conference honoring Endangered Species Day at one of the valley's existing preserves, the 102-acre Prime Desert Woodland Preserve that Lancaster created beginning in the 1980s.



Wendy Reed, head of the Antelope Valley Conservancy, attends a news conference on land acquisition. Jeff Goldwater/Staff Photographer

“I like the conservancy (approach). They are the quiet people. They spend their money on real things,” said Larry Grooms, an aide to Assemblywoman Sharon Runner, R-Lancaster, who said he first worked with habitat conservancies on the central California coast.

Besides the Prime Desert Woodland Preserve, which is nearly surrounded by west Lancaster tract homes, the valley has the 1,745-acre state poppy reserve and the 566-acre Ripley Desert Woodland State Park west of there.

Los Angeles County also has 2,200 acres in 12 wildflower and wildlife preserves scattered from Quail Lake near Gorman to the San Bernardino County line, home to protected desert tortoises and Mohave ground squirrels as well as more than 130 species of birds, including prairie falcons.

Most of the county preserves are small -- the largest is 320 acres -- and county officials would like to acquire more land, especially adjoining the preserves or connecting one to another.

“No endangered species does well in a captive environment,” said Mickey Long, natural areas administrator for the Los Angeles County parks department.

While new homes are spreading quickly across the Antelope Valley, the area retains an advantage over other urbanized areas in that it still has large expanses available for acquisition as nature preserves, Reed said.

That includes undeveloped land within the built-up sections of Palmdale and Lancaster, she said.

“Hopefully some of these can be within our urban borders and they're not all going to be 50 miles away,” Reed said.

San Fernando Valley Audobon <sic> Society executive officer Jim Moore, among the speakers, said one of his favorite spots to look for birds like the secretive Le Conte's thrasher and the ladder-backed woodpecker is the Joshua tree woodlands west of Air Force Plant 42 in Palmdale.

Covering more than 1,300 acres, the area is bordered by Sierra Highway and 10th Street West and adjoined by new housing tracts and businesses along Avenue O. It is plagued by illegal dumping, which employees from the nearby Lockheed Martin plant last month went out and cleaned up.

“If there ever was a place ripe for protection, it's that area,” Moore said.

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