

USFWS Approves Southern Subregion Habitat Conservation Plan

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (January 11, 2006) – In what is being heralded as a major decision in comprehensive open space and habitat protection, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approved today a new plan which will preserve 32,818 acres of open space in South Orange County.

Specifically, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service approved the Southern Subregion Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), a voluntary program which now establishes a permanent habitat reserve and perpetual land management program in South Orange County for the protection of 32 different animal species and 10 vegetation communities. In the planning stages for more than 15 years, the HCP encompasses large swaths of adjoining property owned by family-held Rancho Mission Viejo and the County of Orange.

“Our action today demonstrates the ability of public and private interests to come together to create responsible open space protection and long-term land use decisions which will benefit both sensitive species and the people of Orange County, today and in the future,” said Jim Bartel, Field Supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Carlsbad Field Office. “Thank you to the County of Orange, Santa Margarita Water District, Tony Moiso and the Rancho Mission Viejo team for their unwavering commitment to the HCP process over the past 15 years. This truly was a cooperative effort between all parties.”

Under the new plan, a total of 32,818 acres in South Orange County will be designated as a habitat reserve to protect such listed and unlisted animal species as the California gnatcatcher, the arroyo toad and the San Diego fairy shrimp, such vegetation as coastal sage scrub, grasslands and oak woodlands, as well as major portions of the San Juan Creek and San Mateo Creek watersheds. Rancho Mission Viejo will dedicate 16,536 acres to the future Habitat Reserve, in addition to existing Rancho Mission Viejo land conservancies; and the County will dedicate 11,950 acres of County parklands.

In return, participating landowners will be allowed to proceed with key development and operational activities, including improvements to the County’s 1,530-acre Prima Deshecha Landfill, necessary water and wastewater treatment services by

Santa Margarita Water District, ongoing cattle ranching and farming operations by the Rancho Mission Viejo family, as well as the Ranch family's 20- to 25-year phased development planned for 25% of its remaining 23,000-acre Rancho Mission Viejo property.

“One of the most important components to the HCP is the formulation of a Habitat Reserve Management Program (HRMP) to ensure the long-term monitoring and management of the biological resources within the Reserve,” said Bartel. “In addition to County funding, in-lieu mitigation fees, and contribution of \$3.7 million by Santa Margarita Water District, the HRMP will be funded through a benefit fee program paid by new development on Rancho Mission Viejo. The total interest and investment income generated by these different funding sources is projected to be about \$325.7 million over the next 75 years.”

Four entities will work in partnership to manage the new habitat reserve. These entities include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the County of Orange (under a new County Administrative Coordinator), a Science Advisory Panel (whose members have yet to be determined), and Rancho Mission Viejo.

The Southern Subregion HCP is the second large scale plan approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the County of Orange. The Coastal/Central HCP was approved in 1996 by the Board of Supervisors.