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Conserving Tejon Ranch: A fight worth waging

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IN SUMMARY

The Tejon Ranch dispute threatens funding for cutting-edge science and innovative field applications to prevent ecosystem decline.

By Jane Braxton Little, Special to CalMatters

When then Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger visited Tejon Ranch in 2008 to honor a new concept in conservation, he minced no words: "Let's

face it: environmentalists and land developers usually don't get along very well. They do a lot of arguing and fighting."

The [Tejon Ranchwide Agreement](#) promised something different. Hailed as the [conservation deal of the century](#), it was signed by the owners of the 270,000-acre private ranch and representatives of several of the nation's leading environmental organizations. It protects 240,000 acres teeming with richly diverse species; no development is permitted on these lands.

Tejon is a wild place where mountain lions prey on unsuspecting fawns and storm-twisted trees cling to remote ridges. California condors soar over bald peaks and Tehachapi slender salamanders hide in the damp leaf litter of secluded canyons. Tejon is also a private working ranch, where cowboys run cattle across an area bigger than Rocky Mountain National Park. Los Angeles is 70 miles to the south.

In exchange for conserving 90% of the ranch, the five conservation organizations involved – Natural Resources Defense Council, Audubon California, Sierra Club, Endangered Habitats League, Planning and Conservation League – agreed not to oppose development on the remaining 10%. The Tejon accord was widely lauded for the scope of its environmental protections and its recognition that conservation is also good for business.

Today those who signed the agreement are embroiled in the very fighting Schwarzenegger praised them for overcoming. Twelve years after striking the deal, the conservation groups are suing Tejon Ranch Co. claiming a breach of contract. They accuse it of withholding \$800,000 a year in funding to the [Tejon Ranch Conservancy](#), a coalition created to oversee conservation of the protected areas.

The [litigation](#), filed Dec. 2 in Kern County Superior Court, was a last resort, said Joel Reynolds, senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council and chairman of the conservancy board. Failing to provide funding to the conservancy is a direct violation of the agreement the company signed. Abandoning its financial commitment is an assault on conserving Tejon's natural wealth. "These payments are the conservancy's lifeblood," Reynolds said.

Barry Zoeller, a spokesman for [Tejon Ranch Co.](#), defended the company's action, claiming it is withholding funds to the conservancy because the environmental groups broke their commitment not to oppose the company's development projects. The company cited their participation in 2017 in developing the [Antelope Regional Conservation Investment Strategy](#).

Reynolds said the agreement "explicitly allows" activities such as supporting or opposing regional plans, including the one for Antelope Valley. The company has deposited the money in a third-party account pending resolution of the dispute.

For all its innovative potential, the Tejon Ranch agreement has been controversial from the start. Critics argue the environmental groups gave up too much in a Faustian bargain that allows high-end second homes in condor habitat and residential development in high fire-danger zones. The Center for Biological Diversity, which refused to sign the accord, has been [battling development](#) on the unprotected land in a series of state and federal lawsuits.

The Natural Resources Defense Council and the other environmental signees have upheld their commitment, remaining quiet in the face of development plans that involve at least 32,700 houses on 30,000 acres.

But they have no obligation to be silent as the financial footing of the conservancy is undermined.

This is a fight worth waging. The promise of Tejon has always been about more than sheer acreage and wealth of natural diversity. It is a vision for protecting this abundance in a management plan for a working ranch – a place where cattle share the ground and grasses with rare and endangered native species. The Tejon Conservancy was designed to do that work using cutting-edge science and innovative field applications.

Withholding the funding makes all but the most rudimentary conservation impossible. It is symptomatic of another loss hampering fulfillment of the Tejon vision: cooperation. The environmental groups signed the agreement with forward-looking developers who understood that good conservation is equally good for shareholders. Those visionaries are long gone, replaced by new players who show little of their foresight.

Tejon's vast landscapes and iconic species are not doomed by lack of funding to the conservancy. The 240,000 acres protected from development will continue to be protected. The conservancy will continue to monitor these lands. What's threatened is the robust scientific approach that goes beyond preventing ecosystem decline. Preserving the deep isolation of mid-elevation pine forests, for example, might encourage sooty grouse to nest where the habitat is suitable but none have so far been found. Removing feral pigs and rotating cattle grazing might invite kit foxes to return to Tejon's chaparral.

The cooperative partnership may have dissipated, but the concept of nurturing natural resources on a working ranch will live as long as there is a will to do the work and funding to pay for it. Conservation is a long game. It requires concerted attention over decades. For Reynolds, who has been working to conserve Tejon Ranch since 2003, the current litigation is part of the journey into uncharted territory. "Nobody's giving up."



Jane Braxton Little, based in the northern Sierra Nevada, is an independent journalist covering science and natural resource issues for publications that include the Atlantic, Audubon, Discover, National Geographic and Scientific American, jblittle@dyeypress.com. She has also written about [reclaimed homelands of Northern California tribes](#) fulfilling a prophecy of renewal and how COVID-19 [ended the 153-year-old Feather River Bulletin](#) – a communal lifeline.