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2. ENDANGERED SPECIES

Tucson area nears completion of ambitious conservation plan

April Reese, *Land Letter* Southwest reporter

SANTA FE, N.M. -- When local officials, environmentalists, developers, scientists and concerned citizens sat down eight years ago to figure out how to protect an endangered bird while also giving the Tucson, Ariz., area plenty of growing room, few of those involved thought any lasting solution would come of it. But that skepticism has turned to hope through the crafting of an ambitious, multi-species conservation plan that is awaiting approval from the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The plan, now in its second draft and open for public comment, was sparked by the 1997 listing of the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl as an endangered species. When the bird came under the federal government's protective wing, Tucson developers warned of housing restrictions and skyrocketing housing prices.

But with the plan nearing completion, developers, local officials and environmentalists alike are touting the document as a welcome solution to conflicts over the owl and other endangered species in Tucson and surrounding Pima County.

If approved by FWS, Pima County's [Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan](#) and related, smaller plans targeting Tucson and nearby Marana will set aside environmentally sensitive areas while allowing for growth on less ecologically important lands. The Sonoran Desert plan, which has already been approved by the county, is designed to protect lands important to 55 different types of flora and fauna, including several endangered species as well as others considered at risk.

But instead of simply carving out blocks of land and setting them aside, the plan also uses incentives that plan author Maeveen Bhan says sets it apart from similar conservation plans. For example, it calls for reduced fees to nudge development into desired areas.

"The idea is to make life easier for developers outside the preserve, to guide development into those areas," she said.

The plan provides the Tucson area with plenty of room to build new housing for the 1 million new residents that are expected within the next few decades, while also providing significant conservation benefits -- even protecting habitat for



species that are not listed, Behan said. "We're talking about 2.5 million acres, with 80 percent of that committed to some level of conservation," she said.



The listing of the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl provoked the ire of Tucson developers. Photo courtesy of the Fish and Wildlife Service/Glenn Proudfoot.

The species that will be protected by the plan include the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl, lesser long-nosed bat, southwestern willow flycatcher, desert pupfish, Pima pineapple cactus, Huachuca water umbel and Chiricahua leopard frog.

While the protection of endangered species -- particularly the pygmy owl, which was the subject of several lawsuits from developers -- provided the impetus for the plan, the community also recognized the opportunity to plan for growth within the restrictions of its limited water supplies, Behan said. The population of Pima County, currently at about 900,000, is growing at an annual rate of 15,000 to 30,000 people and consumes approximately seven to 10 square miles of the desert each year, according to county officials.

Another thing that sets the plan apart is its funding support: Last year, voters overwhelmingly approved spending \$174 million in bonds for land acquisitions under the plan. It was one of the largest bond measures ever passed in the United States, Behan said.

Bill Arnold, who owns a real estate company in Tucson and participated in the planning process, was initially opposed to the plan but grew to support it as he learned more about the needs of species in the area and how thoughtful planning could balance the needs of both wildlife and people.

"I know much more now than I did then," he said. "It's been a huge learning experience, and frankly, a positive one."

While the plan appears to be a win-win for all interests, it will place a heavier burden on homeowners as property taxes rise along with the value of homes near protected lands and may place home ownership out of reach for people with limited financial resources, Arnold added. "It's going to shrink the footprint of development by 75 percent," he said.

Some environmental and neighborhood groups, meanwhile, are concerned developers will not consistently adhere to the plan's conservation goals because there are no county regulations in place to ensure they do so. And even if they do, there might not be adequate protection for some of the species included in the plan, according to a study conducted for Pima County.

"We are pretty happy with the plan, but there are a lot of details that have not yet been finalized that are very, very significant," said Susan Shobe, assistant director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection. The coalition, which consists of 39 neighborhood and environmental organizations including the Sierra Club, Defenders of Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity, is hopeful that those details will be successfully worked out, she added.

The final plan will need to undergo an environmental impact statement, which is likely to be completed next year, according to FWS officials.

Sherry Barrett, assistant supervisor for the service's Tucson Field Office, said it is too

early to say whether the agency will approve the new draft of the plan, which was revised in response to recommendations from the agency, or require additional changes. But she commended local officials for taking a collaborative approach and for soliciting extensive public involvement -- an approach she believes should be replicated in other planning processes.

As more urban areas grapple with both growth and endangered species issues, multi-species plans like the one adopted by Pima County are becoming more common, Barrett said, noting that San Diego, Las Vegas and Austin, Texas, either have plans or are developing them. San Diego, which was largely built out when it began its plan, was left with far fewer options than Tucson, which is growing but is still surrounded by a lot of undeveloped land, Barrett noted.

"The sooner a community does this, the better," she said.

[Click here](#) to read a copy of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.



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