

Arizona, Marana, Oro Valley won't join county's conservation plan

Lack of participation by state governments could make it difficult for the land-use blueprint to effectively protect sensitive desert habitat.

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County hopes to gain backing for plan with 'land bank'

A turf war is threatening the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. The plan's goal is to restore vitality to crucial desert habitats by steering Tucson's growth into the new century away from prime desert habitat. But as Pima County and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service prepare to seek public comment on parts of the plan, the key land stewards in the region have not bought into it.

That's the threat to the land-use proposal, which is designed to conserve ranching, restore riparian areas and provide habitat for 56 endangered species while also providing protection from environmental restrictions for developers who build in the habitat.

The state, Oro Valley and Marana are not involved in the plan, and what their lack of participation means for the plan is debatable. The state, the largest land owner in Pima County, contends the county has not treated it like a full partner in the development of the plan. "The people most affected by the plan don't have a seat at the table," said State Land Commissioner Mike Anable. His department controls 800,000 acres in Pima County. "That was our complaint and it's the complaint we've heard from all the stakeholders."

County leaders contend Gov. Jane Hull has refused numerous invitations to discuss the plan but has written Interior Secretary Gale Norton to get the federal government to stop the plan until her administration gets more say-so in what comes of it.

Oro Valley and Marana officials also have reservations about the plan. So do home builders who are taking pot shots at the land-use proposal. The end result is that the plan, which has been in the works for more than three years and is expected to be completed next summer, is in a state of confusion. Nevertheless, county officials are trying to put the best possible face on the status of the plan.

Although the state has the sheer mass of land, Marana - and to a lesser extent Oro Valley - control the quality habitat. Marana contains the majority of private land the county has identified as important to protect as part of the biological reserve. Marana is half-surrounded by critical habitat that would be off-limits to most development under the plan.

"Biologically, without Marana in the plan, we are losing corridors and critical habitat for the pygmy owl," said Carolyn Campbell, director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection. Officials in Marana - the fastest-growing town in Arizona - say they won't join the plan until they are assured freedom from tough restrictions the plan promises to include. Marana and Oro Valley are both trying to hammer out an agreement that would lead to their participation in the plan.

"We need to be able to make the appropriate decisions for property within the jurisdiction of Marana," said Marana Assistant Town Manager Mike Reuwsaat. "We have our own citizens and voters and we need to represent them."

The county hasn't opened up the planning process. "We haven't been involved at all," Reuwsaat said, "except to offer written comments to work already done." Oro Valley Town Council member Dick Johnson said Oro Valley would like to join under the right circumstances. Pima County is playing down these jurisdictions' skittishness over the plan and is working behind the scenes to get them on board. "The cooperation and assistance of other jurisdictions is welcome but it's not necessary to the success of the plan," said Board of Supervisors Chairman Raul Grijalva.

County Manager Chuck Huckelberry contends the state's lack of participation won't affect the plan's fortunes. Voices on both sides of the growth debate say the plan may, in the end, resemble a slice of swiss cheese rather than a blanket of protection for endangered species. They say if that happens, the flora, fauna and financial stability of the region are what will suffer. "The only way wildlife conservation will succeed is with a regional plan," said David Hogan, of the Center for Biological Diversity, the environmental group whose string of lawsuits forced the county to embark on the plan in 1998. "Piecemealing the process would lead to fragmented reserves cut off from each other," he said.

Real estate broker Bill Arnold, a strong voice for real estate interests, who sits on the committee watching the crafting the conservation plan, said the plan "adds to everyone's uncertainty and continued destabilization of our economy." "You don't know what's happening day-to-day because the rules are changing," he said. But unless all sides come together, the proposed plan will end up a hodgepodge of rules and minimal environmental protections that satisfy no one, said Luther Propst, director of the Sonoran Institute. "If this plan doesn't work, we're back to the lowest common denominator and neither the environment nor the land owners will be well served," Propst said. "It's time to talk turkey."

Pima County expects to focus its conservation efforts on - and steer growth away from - 1.1 million acres identified as vital to the survival of 56 species vulnerable to extinction. But the plan won't cover most of that land because it's owned by the state. "If you look at the (proposed) biological reserve, about 80 percent of it is state trust land," Campbell said. She said state participation is critical.

Huckelberry said state lands located near the urban core can be developed. He said the state land that the county wants to conserve can't be developed anyway, because it is tied up in 50-year grazing leases. Environmentalists and scientists working on the plan say they want to provide habitat protection, not just open spaces. Lax state grazing policies, they say, are a threat to habitat. "The state (grazing) land is all beat to hell" said Arizona State University biology professor Bob Ohmart, a leading expert on the effects of ranching.

The Center for Biological Diversity said it is ready to sue the state over its management practices. Hogan said the center will take the state to court "as soon as possible" to force it to better manage its ranch land. Meanwhile, the plan's uncertainty continues.