

ORANGE COUNTY PERSPECTIVE



Coal Canyon Needed for Wildlife

Acre upon acre of orange groves and bean fields has been transformed into tract housing in Orange County in past decades. Efforts to preserve open space and havens for wildlife were spotty. That thankfully is changing.

The latest encouraging development was this month's approval by a state panel of spending \$6 million toward the purchase of much or all of Coal Canyon, in northern Orange County next to the Riverside Freeway.

There still are numerous hurdles to clear before the land becomes off-limits to developers. There are no guarantees that enough money can be raised for a purchase price that could reach \$14 million or \$15 million.

But the goal is in sight, and that is heartening.

Coal Canyon's importance lies in its geography, between the Cleveland National Forest on the southern side of the freeway and the Chino Hills on the northern side.

That makes the canyon a natural corridor for wildlife. Mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes all use the canyon to get from one vast expanse of open space to the other. When the animals miss the crossings beneath the freeway and try to beat the traffic via the overland route, they wind up as road kill.

A developer owns Coal Canyon and has the right to build on it. How many houses will be there and in what configuration remain subject to negotiation with the city of Anaheim.

But putting houses between the Chino Hills

and the Santa Ana Mountains will make islands of the open space. Without a corridor, life will become tougher for animals, hemmed in, inbred, probably doomed.

The state Transportation Commission voted to put up the \$6 million to purchase at least 300 Coal Canyon acres. Other sources are thought to be able to provide another \$6 million or more. That still leaves a gap of \$1.5 million or more, but the progress in putting the package together has been encouraging.

Several years ago, the state paid \$4 million for a large parcel of canyon land and designated it a reserve. That piece of land contains one of the last Tecate cypress forests in the western United States. The canyon also contains the largest remaining stand of Southern California black walnut trees. Brilliant wildflowers are another special treat.

Six years ago a developer won approval from Anaheim to build more than 1,500 homes in Coal Canyon. Another developer subsequently bought the land and is readying specific plans for houses, which are subject to further city approval.

Finding the money to buy the property from the developer and maintain it as open space would be a good ending to years of uncertainty about the ultimate use of so much of Coal Canyon. Some homes may be built there even if most of the land is kept as a reserve, but maintaining the wildlife corridor would be an asset.