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Caught in the bottleneck

Commuters who pour back and forth through the Santa Ana River Canyon on Highway 91 may not think much about it, but they aren't the only ones caught in a bottleneck. For earthbound wildlife, the freeway all but segregates the hilly country to the northwest (Chino Hills State Park) from the mountainous Cleveland National Forest, running off to the southeast. As development encroaches, the survival of wildlife on stranded preserves like Chino Hills becomes increasingly problematic.

Last week state officials announced that they were in the bidding for a sensitive property at Coal Canyon. There are 1,550 homes tentatively planned there, and their construction could well close this wildlife bottleneck for good. It's welcome news, then, that the state should be preparing to step in. It's also somewhat discordant, since neither the property's owner nor conservationists knew the state was ready to declare a certain interest. In such a case, reassurances are needed that a short-order deal isn't going to leave the public with regrets.

There are a lot of complications here. Chino Hills is a state operation; the Cleveland National Forest, obviously, is federal. A baseball throw east of Coal Canyon is where three counties' jurisdictions come together — Riverside, Orange and San Bernardino; the development plans are to be submitted in Orange County next month. All the players have to deal with the conservation re-

mule deer and more now shuttle between the separated areas by means of a couple of culverts and an underpass.

And then there's this: This initiative comes from Pete Wilson as his days as governor dwindle down to a precious few. Mr. Wilson called on his Transportation Commission to pony up \$6 million for Coal Canyon (plus a sensitive wetlands parcel in San Francisco Bay), and the commission, chaired by Moreno Valley developer Bob Wolf, approved the money Thursday, almost before the proposal drew public notice.

Now, it doesn't take a lover of wildlife to like this proposal. Any veteran Highway 91 commuter ought to prefer preserved lands at Coal Canyon to another 1,550 homes. Think of all the additional cars that would come creeping down to the freeway each morning to thicken the traffic sludge. But if part of the state's Coal Canyon offer involves green-lighting another proposed development in the bottleneck — just to the west, at Gypsum Canyon — then maybe this deal needs a closer examination under less breathless conditions. Maybe there's a better way, one the incoming Gray Davis administration may be persuaded to pursue, and in a still-timely manner.

Preserving the passage between these two wild areas makes sense, it's important. Experts suggest that without it, wildlife confined to the 12,000-acre state park will wither away. But the deal ought to be done