

CALIFORNIA TRANSPORTATION

Journal

April-June 2003 Volume 3 Issue 4

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THE WILDLIFE CONNECTION

COAL CANYON PRESERVE PROJECT

To a Northern Californian used to looking at green grasses, pine trees and the rushing waters of mountain streams, the Santa Ana Mountains' Coal Canyon, with its woolly scrub brush, cactus and denuded rocks, doesn't look like it amounts to much.

But it amounts to plenty: a priceless land bridge between the Tecate Cypress Reserve, the Cleveland National Forest and the Irvine Company's Gypsum Canyon Preserve. Linked together by Coal Canyon, they make up a 200 000 ha stewpot of biodiversity that supports hundreds of common and rare species. Without the Coal Canyon linkage, these reserves represent just another piece of a rapidly shrinking southern California ecosystem.

"'Echo system' might be a better term for it," says Sylvia Vega, Caltrans District 12 Environmental Branch Chief and for the past 15 years a key player in the effort to preserve Coal Canyon.

Today, a highly unorthodox \$440 000 District 12 project to take the Coal Canyon Interchange with State Route 91 out of use is a manifestation of Vega's work with a number of Southern California resource agencies to do just that.

Vega first became aware of the value and potential of Coal Canyon when she was a practicing wildlife biologist who was given the responsibility for obtaining permits to clean out an artificial basin that trapped silt and sediment washed down the canyon from upstream disturbances.

At that time, Vega met with Geary Hund, a biologist with the California Department of Parks and Recreation to get permission to enter the park and remove the debris. Hund

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ECO-FRIENDLY



The Coal Canyon Interchange sits in the midst of an invaluable land bridge that allows wildlife to migrate between Chino Hills and the Cleveland National Forest.

raised the idea that the land occupied by the State Route 91/Coal Canyon interchange was an invaluable centerpiece that, if turned to different uses, could become a land bridge between Chino Hills and the Cleveland National Forest.

"We were also being made aware that a number of mountain lions were being killed as they attempted to cross the 91, a major, eight lane, interregional route between Orange and Riverside Counties that was further expanded with the addition of toll lanes in 1995 and now carries more than 200 000 vehicles daily.

"Geary Hund expressed the notion that the Coal Canyon Interchange was kind of an interchange to nowhere and that it would be nice if it could be closed to provide animal passage between the two major habitats."

Hund, citing a number of studies, maintained that the eco-region contained a greater diversity of vegetation types than any other area of comparable size in the United States and was one the "hot spots" of biodiversity on earth. Maintenance of the Coal Canyon linkage was critical, he said, to the future ecological health of the Puente-Chino Hills and the Santa Ana Mountains. He quoted from a study that documented the use of the corridor by

six different mountain lions, concluding that the area occupied by the Coal Canyon Interchange was an indispensable link remaining between the Santa Ana Mountains and the Puente-Chino.

"'Nice,' we thought, 'but it isn't gonna happen,'" Vega says. "Both the Yorba Linda and Anaheim general plans designated that location for development. A developer had already purchased the property on the north side of the highway and was planning to construct more than 600 homes near the interchange. The location was a highly desirable area for exclusive, upscale homes, with a spectacular view of the Santa Ana River watershed and a golf course nearby.

But then, in the 1990s, things began to change. Several papers were written by eminent biologists who stressed the connectivity between wildlife areas for maintaining biodiversity, and, concomitantly, the preservation of species.

Then, in the mid-1990s, plans for the homes near the Coal Canyon Interchange fell through—and there was a groundswell to preserve habitat and open space in Southern California. Another influence was that other Caltrans districts were beginning to establish mitigation banks, and Vega began to see the possibility of preserving the area as open space.



COAL CANYON PRESERVE PROJECT

Then along came the Transportation Enhancement Act of 2000, making funds available for environmental enhancement activities. All of these forces together ended in a proposal to use \$15 million in TEA funds to acquire 264 ha of property on the south side of Route 91 to protect a “wildlife corridor of statewide significance.” The Wildlife Conservation Board provided a \$648 000 match. This funding served as the final funding piece to augment \$12 million in conservation lands funds previously allocated to Coal Canyon along with matching funds. Ultimately, more than \$40 million was raised through a combination of public and private funds to purchase land from the St. Clair Company of Newport Beach, which had been ready to go ahead with development of the property. St. Clair, whose property had been appraised at \$50 million after it had been zoned for development, agreed to lower its price by \$10 million.

“This acquisition will secure a critical connection between protected public lands including the Cleveland National Forest, the California Department of Fish and Game Tecate Cypress Reserve, designated lands to the south and Chino Hills State Park, the Prado Basin and other reserve lands,” the TEA application read. “Acquisition of this land will also

protect federally listed species, rare plant communities, a scenic highway corridor and an interregional recreational trail connection.”

All the while, informal discussions continued between Sylvia Vega and Geary Hund.

One remaining piece of the puzzle was the interchange to nowhere: Coal Canyon Interchange, used by fewer than 150 motorists daily and with no connection to any city streets. Even so, what was being proposed was virtually unthinkable: take the interchange out of service. “We just don’t do that,” says Jim Beil, District 12’s Deputy Director for Programming and Project Management. “We are an agency that is used to building new facilities, not closing them down.”

Nevertheless, Beil and others saw the wisdom of decommissioning the interchange. The question was, what would that involve?

“We had old freeway agreements with the County of Orange that were handed down to the City of Yorba Linda and the City of Anaheim,” Beil says. “Did we need to rescind those? The General Plans of Yorba Linda, Anaheim

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and the County of Orange all included the interchange. And in this case, while the City of Anaheim was in favor of providing the animal passage at Coal Canyon, the City of Yorba Linda was not particularly receptive. Development of the property on the north side of the highway would have provided tax revenues to that city. Closing the interchange could be seen as causing them a loss of revenue. There was a lot of confusion about local agency jurisdiction over the land recently purchased by State Parks.”

The Orange County Transportation Authority would have to revise its Master Plan of Arterial Highways to remove the interchange. A freeway is a controlled access facility—and that applies not only to vehicles entering and leaving the roadway, but to anyone wishing to encroach on the right of way. Several utilities were accessed from the interchange, requiring the district to write locked gate access permits so the utilities companies could continue to perform maintenance on them.

A Caltrans-owned and maintained bicycle trail, the only one in Orange County connecting through the Santa Ana Canyon and part of the Santa Ana Regional Bicycle Trail, also ran through the interchange.

And even though the interchange provided very little traffic service, it did serve one important purpose: it afforded a turnaround for emergency service vehicles, especially those of the California Highway Patrol, which used it frequently.

“Here’s another interesting thing not really thought about,” Beil says. “There were more than 40 signs that either provided information at the interchange itself or in advance of it. These had to be changed or removed.”

Ultimately, a legal analysis indicated that the California Department of Parks and Recreation’s actions in acquiring

land on either side of the highway had obviated any necessity for rescinding the freeway agreement because all the obligations of the prior agreement had been met and the adjoining land was now under State jurisdiction.

In January of this year, Caltrans was thus ready to do what it had never done before: close a perfectly good, operating interchange. The \$440 000 Minor “A” project removes pavements from the on- and off-ramps to the Coal Canyon Road and the roadway under the freeway. It provides maintenance and emergency services access through a gated fence for fire departments, State Parks, utility companies and Caltrans as well as a turnaround for the California Highway patrol. And new fencing directs the wildlife under the freeway instead of through a dark, 80 m-long box culvert mostly shunned by animals that were potential prey for the mountain lions.

The California Department of Parks and Recreation is also considering a follow-on project that would channel water from the Coal Canyon watershed through the closed interchange and produce an inviting thoroughfare for all of the wildlife that ranges between Chino Hills and the Cleveland National Forest.

“This project showcases the sensitivity of Caltrans to environmental preservation, while developing and maintaining the freeway system to satisfy customer needs,” Governor Gray Davis stated in a press release heralding the start of work on the interchange modification.

That’s just fine with Sylvia Vega. “This project protects the environment and reduces Caltrans’ maintenance cost,” she says. “And we have helped to preserve a precious piece of Southern California.”—*Gene Berthelsen*

STATE ROUTE 91

