

Added Steps Sought to Safeguard Lands From Development

■ **Preservation:** L.A. County Supervisor Ed Edelman says the present program has failed to protect 61 significant ecological areas.

By AMY PYLE
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A program designed to preserve 61 areas designated the most ecologically valuable land in Los Angeles County failed to protect them from development and needs strengthening, Supervisor Ed Edelman said Tuesday.

Edelman recommended to the Board of Supervisors that prospective developers be required to provide additional environmental and biological studies of the zones, which are officially designated as Significant Ecological Areas. He also proposed that the county be allowed to choose the biologists who do the studies, rather than the developer, as is now allowed.

"This would give some teeth to our SEAs. Otherwise, they don't mean anything," Edelman said.

The ecological areas were chosen in 1980 by county planners as containing important populations of Southern California plants and animals. Some development is allowed in the areas, but an investigation by The Times last year revealed that more of the land had been lost to development than was anticipated.

Of the 61 ecological areas identified in 1980, only about half remain under county control because the rest are in areas that have become incorporated cities. Almost half of the ecological areas are in the San Fernando, Santa Clarita or Antelope Valley areas.

Edelman, uncertain of support from other supervisors, agreed to postpone a vote on his plan for 45 days while county planners take a closer look at what it will cost the county and developers. Supervisor Mike Antonovich, who has defended the county's ecological zones in the past, had asked for a 60-day delay because of the unknown expenses.

Environmentalists who attended Tuesday's board meeting hailed Edelman's plan as evidence that the county was finally taking them seriously, but they said they feared that the delay will lead to a watered-down proposal. In the past, critics of the ecological area review process have been particularly critical of the objectivity of the developer-hired biologists, calling them "biostitutes."

Asenath Rasmussen, a biologist who studied the ecological areas for the Nature Conservancy, an environmental group that buys and conserves land, said she was surprised to learn that "despite the best intentions of people in decision-making positions, the areas were being managed and developed in a manner that certainly was not conducive to their long-term survival."

Representatives of developers who spoke to the board said they also have problems with the review process, chiefly that it is too lengthy. They said they were concerned that the changes Edelman proposed would merely mean more meetings and more paperwork.

"It's already a very lengthy, lengthy process," said Richard Wirth, head of the governmental affairs committee for the Building Industry Assn.

Edelman was optimistic that the proposal would eventually meet with board approval. In the past, he and Supervisor Kenneth Hahn often found their liberal ideas were blocked by the board's previous conservative majority. But they are expected to be more influential in a liberal majority bloc formed with the board's newest member, Gloria Molina, who took office March 8.

After Tuesday's meeting, Molina said she was glad to have the extra 45 days to research the ecological area situation. But Molina said that in general she supports tougher environmental controls because once land is developed, "it's gone forever."

Hahn could not be reached for comment.

Edelman's changes would require money to pay the salary of a biologist he wants added to the county planning staff. The changes would also require funds to pay the cost of using more newspaper advertising to woo people to meetings of the SEA Technical Advisory Committee, a panel that performs the initial review on development within ecological areas.

Some of the cost would be borne by developers in the form of higher permit fees.

Eventually, most of the county's share of the bill would be covered by fees to be paid by Browning-Ferris Industries, the private operator of the Sunshine Canyon Landfill. The company agreed to pay the county more than \$1 million as a condition of expanding the dump above Granada Hills, and the supervisors have already earmarked that money for studying the status of ecological areas because the dump will cut into one of them.

Pamela Holt, assistant administrator of the Current Planning Branch of the county Department of Regional Planning, said that to cover the costs of Edelman's proposals, developers would have to pay up to \$5,200 per development application until the Sunshine Canyon money is received.