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LATEST NEWS

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Conaway Ranch owners say talks with Yolo County at impasse

The owners of [Conaway Ranch](#) in Yolo County say negotiations with county officials over control of the resource-rich land have broken down and that they will take their case to the voters or the courts.

The county wants ownership of the property, which has abundant water rights, to preserve it as open land for the public benefit. To this end, it launched eminent domain proceedings last year to force a sale.

The 17,500-acre ranch is owned by [Conaway Preservation Group LLC](#), which includes some of the region's most prominent developers. They're fighting the sale, and have been trying to negotiate an alternative with county officials.

In a letter Wednesday to Assemblyman Doug LaMalfa, a Republican whose district includes much of unincorporated Yolo County, the group says that these talks have broken down, and that it now intends to "take its message to the voters in Yolo County and the halls of the United States Supreme Court, if necessary, to protect and preserve the Conaway Ranch."

Much of the letter details the group's concern over the involvement of the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians in the proceedings. The tribe, which owns the [Cache Creek Casino Resort](#) in Yolo County, has offered to help finance the county's eminent domain action, which could cost millions.

The ranch owners say they are troubled by the prospect of the tribe, a major Yolo County developer that periodically has business before county officials, helping the county condemn the property of another private party.

This arrangement, the group argues in its letter, would establish "an extremely dangerous precedent that blurs the distinction between public and private and waters down the protections in the U.S. Constitution against abuses of eminent domain.

"If Yolo County and a local developer in Northern California can effectively condemn property with valuable water rights, what will stop other jurisdictions in California from applying similar strategies and tactics?"

Conaway Ranch is just northwest of Sacramento, inside a triangle made up by the cities of Woodland, Davis and West Sacramento. The land has access to 50,000 acre-feet of surface water from the Sacramento River, 45,000 acre-feet of ground water and 30,000 acre-feet of rights to water from Cache Creek. The ranch can generate more than \$2 million in natural gas and mineral rights, in addition to more than \$1 million in agricultural rent.

Its owners argue that there are alternatives to public ownership that can achieve the county's preservation goals. Through its land-use authority the county can prevent commercial development of the property, about half of which lies in the Yolo bypass and is subject to seasonal flooding.

The owners also question why the county doesn't condemn just the water and mineral rights, in order to protect those interests, instead of taking the entire property.

Conaway Ranch's ownership group includes Steve Gidaro, John Reynen, builder Carl Panattoni and homebuilder Jack Sweigart of [JTS Communities](#). They bought the land last year from an offshoot of [PG&E Properties](#) at a price estimated at \$60 million. The partners were said to want the land for duck hunting and to use as a mitigation bank for other developments in the region.