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## Ranch owner settles for raw deal in Yolo Co.

Yolo County has dropped its efforts to seize Conaway Ranch through eminent domain after a protracted two-year legal battle that wasted a lot of time, government resources and is costing the property owner a large amount of money.

Shortly before a jury trial was about to begin to determine how much money the county would have to pay to acquire the property, a settlement was reached.

The good news for Yolo County taxpayers is they won't have to pick up the \$2.4 million in legal bills for this fiasco, nor will they have to pay millions more to purchase the land due to the paranoia and capriciousness of county supervisors.

That purchase price would likely have been hefty too. When Conaway Preservation Group, a group of developers led by Steve Gidaro of Sacramento, purchased the property in a closed-bidding process several years ago it paid a reported \$60 million. The county's eminent domain proceeding would have stripped the group of most of the ranch's 17,300 acres. A jury would likely have compensated the property owners handsomely for the loss of their land.

But now that effort has come to a rather bizarre end.

Dudley Holman, president of the Yolo County Taxpayers Association, described the deal, which amounts to litigious extortion, perfectly.

"The county said basically 'Look, we'll stop beating on you if you pay us,'" Holman said. "From a taxpayer's viewpoint, this was a terrible thing to contemplate. To take over a business - and say you could run it better than they can - it's notoriously inefficient."

Private property is subject to a myriad restrictions in how it can be used due to federal, state and local regulations and planning laws. It's no wonder property owners throughout the West feel under siege. But Yolo County made a blatant attempt to seize the property, and was at least initially successful in the courts, using eminent domain.

There was no greater good to be served in the eminent domain process. The land would not have been used for a military installation to safeguard California and the nation. It would not have been flooded by a dam to provide additional water to slake the thirst of a growing population while guaranteeing water for agriculture use.

Quite the opposite, the county sought to take control of the land over some supposed fear that the property owners, Conaway Preservation Group, would sell the land, or the water, for uses the county would not support. But given that there was no pending proposal to do any such thing, the action was at least premature if not outright fear-inspiring to every landowner.

Yolo County Supervisor Mike McGowan described it this way to Capital Press:

"I hope, if nothing else comes out of this, that the general public will recognize that Yolo County saw a threat, that an important resource was going to be squandered... and they're willing to stand up and do something - even very unpopular - to protect the basic interests of the county and its resources."

It's tempting to say that Conaway Preservation Group should not have accepted the settlement, continued the legal fight and appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court if necessary. But







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how many more years and millions of dollars in legal expenses would that have cost?

It's not only unfortunate, it is flat wrong, that the property owner should have to pay the county's legal fees for a legal battle that never should have been launched.

"It's over and I'm happy it's over, and we can move on to other things," Supervisor McGowan said. Yes, this legal fight is finally and thankfully over, but it's difficult for any private property owner or taxpayer to be happy about process. And when the county moves on to other things, that better not mean any more shenanigans like this ever again.


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