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No dice on Conaway compromise

Owners want to work out a deal, but county says no

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With the recent flame-out of another compromise attempt, hope for an out-of-court settlement over the Conaway Ranch has taken still another hit.

Despite one attempt before and one attempt since a court gave Yolo County the right to take the 17,244-acre ranch, no compromise is in sight and both sides say they expect their next meeting to be a mediated talk required by law.

The latest effort at a deal collapsed almost as quickly as it began, when the county refused to respond to an agreement proposed by the owners. Critics have said negotiating a deal would save on legal fees and spare the county the long-term burden of managing a working ranch.

"The county is in the position of strength here," said Tovey Giezentanner, spokesman for the Conaway Preservation Group. "We're optimistic that there's an opportunity to find a compromise that keeps the property in private ownership and creates greater certainty for the county around the land and water."

County supervisors involved in the negotiations would not discuss their reasons for rejecting the settlement, citing an agreement with the owners.

"I won't comment on the negotiations at all," said District 1 Supervisor Mike McGowan. "We are looking forward to a court-sponsored settlement procedure here in the near future."

The deal would have given the county 50 percent ownership in the ranch and two of four seats on a management group. But it also offered no way for one side to stop the other from selling the ranch's water, and gave the CPG the permanent right to hunt on the land.

"I have no issue with their hunting rights," said District 2 Supervisor Helen Thomson, who handles ranch negotiations along with McGowan. "There are other things on that list that give me heartburn but I won't discuss them in particular."

For nearly two years, the county has been attempting to seize the ranch from its private owners, who are unwilling to sell it outright. In December, a judge gave the county the right to take the land, and set a June 2006 date for a jury to set a purchase price.

But the process also requires the sides try to work out an arrangement before the jury gets involved. That means a sit-down meeting, presumably between supervisors and landowners, has to happen before June.

"We need to sit down with these people and work out something that protects the water so it doesn't leave Yolo County and protects the land so it isn't subdivided," said District 5 Supervisor Duane Chamberlain. He was not on the board that voted to take the ranch, but calls that decision a mistake.

The county fears the CPG - a group of developers led by Sacramentan Steve Gidaro - will try to build on part of the land or sell the water rights. They voted for eminent domain after their efforts to buy it were rebuffed.

Gidaro and partner John Reynen have a long history of involvement with the property, which has rice fields, good

duck hunting and productive natural gas wells. They have repeatedly said they do not want to change the ranch and point to their stewardship since they bought it in December 2004

They bought it after eminent domain was already under way, although Giezentanner said the owners had been pursuing the ranch before that.

The county has placed a value on the property of around \$50 million.

"In the middle of the bid process, the county slams down eminent domain," he said. "This was part of a long-term vision, a long-term plan for them. Just because government says, 'Hey, I want that piece of property' doesn't mean it's theirs."

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