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## **Funds OKd for Ballona, Ahmanson**

A state board allocates \$275 million to preserve the sites for the public. Both have been the focus of development battles lasting many years.

By Martha Groves

SACRAMENTO — Marking a watershed event in the battle to salvage open space in densely packed Southern California, a small state agency voted Tuesday to spend \$275 million to spare the Ballona Wetlands and the sprawling Ahmanson Ranch from development.

The dual purchases, which years ago seemed unlikely, are huge victories for environmentalists who over more than two decades chained themselves to bulldozers, filed lawsuits and showcased celebrity lobbyists to keep development at bay.

Though conflict over development and preservation of open space will continue, the long-running Ahmanson Ranch and Ballona Wetlands disputes have prompted some builders in the region to alter their tactics and deal with environmentalists rather than fight them.

Together, the deals will preserve about 3,400 acres of degraded but restorable wetlands near Marina del Rey and rolling hills and oak savannas in Ventura County.

In recent weeks, activists and state resources officials pushed to get the deals on a fast approval track before a possible change in administration.

The timing of the vote — amid the campaigning before next Tuesday's recall election — caused some critics to fume that taxpayers were being forced to pay too much for the land.

Still, most of those who spoke before Tuesday's vote by the Wildlife Conservation Board passionately supported the purchases, to be paid for with bond money that voters approved last year to buy parkland. Several activists praised Gov. Gray Davis for pushing the deals forward through years of often contentious negotiations.

"These two projects represent a very major and full-hearted recognition of the value of open space in urban areas," Mary D. Nichols, the state resources secretary, said after the meeting. "Both of these are projects with multiple benefits that will provide opportunities for outdoor recreation, protect habitat areas and provide for a permanent greenbelt around the urban areas.

"All of these," Nichols said, "are critical needs in the Los Angeles area."

The board's vote puts the funding in place for the transactions, but the state Public Works Board is charged with ensuring that the final paperwork is in order. That panel is scheduled to meet to sign off on the deals on Oct. 10, which Nichols said would effectively mark the close of escrow.

The Wildlife Conservation Board met in a Capitol hearing room whose centerpiece was a Works Progress Administration-era mural featuring such natural California treasures as redwoods, rivers and Yosemite's Half Dome.

The three panel members, all Davis appointees, voted unanimously to approve the Ballona Wetlands and Ahmanson purchases.

They also approved two smaller but significant allocations: \$20 million to help study ways to restore the Salton Sea in Imperial and Riverside counties, and \$18.3 million to expand the Grizzly Creek Forest Area — and preserve giant redwoods — in Humboldt County.

The largest allocation of state bond money was \$140 million to buy what is left of the Ballona Wetlands, the last sizable coastal marsh in Los Angeles County.

The complex wetlands deal, negotiated in part by the nonprofit Trust for Public Land, calls for the state to buy 192 acres from Playa Capital, owner of the Playa Vista development that encompasses the parcel, and for Playa Capital to donate another 291 acres.

Those 483 acres will be bolstered by Playa Capital's agreement to waive its right to buy and develop 64 acres east of Lincoln Boulevard that has been held in trust. And, under a previous agreement, Playa Capital also intends to give to the state a separate 60 acres just west of Lincoln, including a newly completed freshwater marsh. That transfer is expected to take place early next year.

All told, the purchase and donations would mean that about 607 acres will be turned over to the public.

Over the last 25 years, a series of developers have proposed everything from high-rise office buildings to luxury housing to a golf course on the site. Opponents fought the proposals in the courts and on street corners, with one activist famously dressing up as a frog to call attention to the many species that call the wetlands home.

For Ahmanson, a 2,800-acre spread on the Ventura County side of the border with Los Angeles County, the panel allocated \$135 million of state bond money. Making up the rest of the \$150-million purchase price will be the state Coastal Conservancy, which will contribute \$10 million, and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which will kick in \$5 million.

The seller is Washington Mutual, the nation's largest savings and loan, which had encountered heated opposition in its bid to build a \$2-billion city at the site. Ventura County approved a 3,050-home golf course community in 1990, but lawsuits, the discovery of a rare frog and flower, and a \$1.5-million campaign led by movie director Rob Reiner became stumbling blocks.

Acknowledging that the purchase sums are "huge," David Myerson of Environment Now, a Santa Monica group, said the properties were nonetheless "absolutely worth the money."

"These are very important purchases, for different reasons," Myerson said. "Ballona is paramount for wildlife species and for water quality. Ahmanson speaks more to the issue of development and sprawl. It would have encouraged discontinuous development. And I think all of the rest of the area would have paid countless billions to accommodate that growth."

Bill Fulton, an urban planner, praised the purchases — even at what critics maintained were hefty price tags that would deprive the state of funds for future parkland purchases.

"Any large, undeveloped property close in to Los Angeles is really, really important now," Fulton said. "Are they worth the money? Well, they're both extremely expensive ways out of a political problem. We're talking about spending tax money in response to political pressure."

The lesson to developers from these deals, Fulton said, is "talk tough and hold out as long as you can. Washington Mutual talked tough about the need to build houses until they saw they could sell quickly at a price they liked. Then all that talk about housing went away really fast."

There are lessons for the future too, Fulton said. Developers already have altered their strategies to gain approval for large housing projects and avoid suits that block them. Many are now trying to satisfy critics when they propose a project, instead of trying to fight their way through opposition.

In the hall outside the Sacramento hearing room, longtime foes engaged in mutual backslapping after the board's votes. Steve Soboroff, a former Los Angeles mayoral candidate who is now president of Playa Vista, waved over Marcia Hanscom, executive director of the Wetlands Action Network and an outspoken Playa Vista opponent.

"I think that after 20 years, this controversy's over," Soboroff said. "Los Angeles has a huge lack of housing. And it has a huge lack of open space. I really believe there are a number of heroes that the birds, fish and plants can thank.

"And I think Marcia's at the top," he said, putting his arm around Hanscom.

Hanscom blushed. But she couldn't resist suggesting that Soboroff offer for sale more land, a parcel east of Lincoln that has been approved for development. "What about that east end of Area D, the one that's supposed to be a commercial campus?" she said.

"Let's not argue today," Soboroff said. "Sandy Koufax quit when he was ahead."

"We're not quitting," Hanscom said.