

Yolo County supervisors reaffirm Conaway Ranch deal

By Matt Weiser, mweiser@sacbee.com

Published: Wednesday, Feb. 9, 2011 - 12:00 am | Page 3B

<http://www.sacbee.com/2011/02/09/3387891/yolo-county-supervisors-reaffirm.html#>

An unusual deal between Yolo County and one of Sacramento's most powerful developers will stand, the county Board of Supervisors decided in a special meeting Tuesday.

The deal centers on Conaway Ranch, a 17,000-acre farm in the Yolo Bypass that is coveted by statewide interests for its water rights and habitat restoration potential.

Yolo County leaders have long sought greater control over the property because it has the potential to affect the economy and the future of farming in the region.

On Dec. 17, the Board of Supervisors approved an agreement with Conaway's new majority owner, Sacramento developer Angelo K. Tsakopoulos.

The agreement offers Tsakopoulos assurances that Yolo County will not stand in the way of certain limited water and land sales on the ranch.

In return, the county gets a small financial stake in those water sales and assurances that Tsakopoulos will support county interests in the bypass, including agricultural preservation and flood control.

Critics charged that the agreement was rushed, and that the public did not get adequate time to review it before the Feb. 8 vote, as required by the state's open meeting law.

Yolo supervisors denied that charge, but agreed to hold a new public hearing and vote again on the issue anyway to remove any doubt.

At that meeting Tuesday in Woodland, the board again voted 3-2 to affirm the agreement.

Newly elected Supervisor Don Saylor of Davis held the swing vote and opted to support the deal.

"It's a fairly straightforward agreement addressing very limited things," Saylor said. "It does provide the county with significant benefits, on balance."

The agreement is controversial because Tsakopoulos is negotiating a temporary sale of water to the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

He is also interested in selling 4,000 acres of the ranch for a fish habitat project that is linked to a larger effort to restore the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. That project

concerns many in Yolo County because it would flood the bypass more often, which could harm flood protection and rice growing.

Deputy County Counsel Philip Pogledich told the board its powers in each of these areas, without the agreement, are very limited under state law. In short, it cannot prevent water or land sales on the ranch.

But the agreement includes language that limits the terms of such sales. It also gives Yolo County first right of refusal over the water sales. And if it does refuse, the county will be paid a fee equal to 7.5 percent of any out-of-county water sales, which could amount to as much as \$1.5 million.

About a dozen people spoke at the hearing, and were evenly divided on the issue.

Supervisor Jim Provenza voted against the agreement, he said, largely because it grants Tsakopoulos a broad exemption to a moratorium the county recently enacted on habitat restoration projects in the bypass. The moratorium, he noted, was meant to block just the sort of project Tsakopoulos now proposes.

"I think it sets a bad precedent for us rolling over whenever somebody with a lot of money wants something," Provenza said.