

Land trusts to restore 8,000 acres of San Luis Obispo County wildlife habitat

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The Santa Margarita-based [Carrizo Plain Conservancy](#) has teamed up with the [Sequoia Riverlands Trust](#) of Visalia in an ambitious plan to restore thousands of acres of degraded wildlife habitat in the Carrizo Plain area of southeastern San Luis Obispo County.

The two land trusts say that over the coming three years, nearly 8,000 acres could be restored as habitat for pronghorn antelope, San Joaquin kit foxes, giant kangaroo rats, blunt-nosed leopard lizards and birds.

“There is plenty of work for everyone to do in this effort,” said Neil Havlik, Carrizo Plain Conservancy president. “We all are looking forward to what will ultimately become one of the biggest habitat restoration efforts in California history.”

The land trusts acquired the land as a result of the installation of two large, commercial photovoltaic power plants on the northern part of the Carrizo Plain. Settlements from several lawsuits required the two solar companies to conserve the land as mitigation for the environmental impacts of the plants.

The sprawling 550-megawatt [Topaz Solar Farm](#) was required to conserve 5,400 acres, and the nearby 250-megawatt [California Valley Solar Ranch](#) was required to conserve 2,500 acres.

Sopac “Soapy” Mulholland, executive director of the Sequoia Riverlands Trust, said her group has about 10 projects they plan to pursue, including wildlife habitat restoration and fence building. The work will be paid for using an endowment totaling several million dollars provided by the Topaz Solar Farm as part of the settlement.

“It is our belief that if you are going to promote solar power, you need to replace the wildlife habitat that is displaced,” Mulholland said. “We’ve been working to make it work for the solar companies and be sensitive to habitat.”

The restoration work will consist of replanting the land with brush cover. Centuries of farming and grazing has converted the land to grassland.

The goal would be to establish a 15 percent brush cover, said Havlik, the conservancy’s president. Pronghorn fawns are particularly vulnerable to predation if they do not have brush to hide in.

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife owns 38,900 acres in the Carrizo Plain as part of its [Carrizo Plains Ecological Reserve](#) and is undertaking similar restoration work, making restoration of the area one of the biggest such efforts in the state, Havlik said.

The Carrizo Plain Conservancy chose to collaborate with the Sequoia Riverlands Trust because the trust has a good track record in land conservation in the southern San Joaquin Valley, Sierra foothills and nearby areas, including the Carrizo Plain. The trust was formed in 2000 and is based in Visalia.

The Carrizo Plain Conservancy was formed in 2013 and recently completed its first major purchase of land for conservation, acquiring the 42-acre Hebron property, a private in-holding within the [Carrizo Plain National Monument](#). The group is now in the process of turning over that property to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, managers of the Carrizo Plain National Monument.

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