

Environmental groups file suit over SR 125 extension

By Amy Oakes
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As expected, a coalition of environmental groups filed a lawsuit yesterday against the south state Route 125 project.

The suit was filed in U.S. District Court on behalf of five groups: Center for Biological Diversity, Preserve South Bay, San Diego Audubon Society, Sierra Club and Preserve Wild Santee.

It accuses the Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers of improperly issuing permits for the roadway in violation of several environmental protection laws.

Opponents of the project say the construction of the South Bay extension, which would run from state Route 54 in Spring Valley to state Route 905, violates the federal Endangered Species Act and threatens with extinction at least 10 plants and small organisms.

"Our belief is that when complying with the environmental statutes, you can't build this toll road," said Everett DeLano, the lead attorney in the case.

The project, which has been planned for several years, received its final permit in July from the Army Corps of Engineers. The Federal Highway Administration gave its approval last year.

Construction could begin early next year, regardless of the lawsuit, said Kent Olsen, president of the development partnership working with the state Department of Transportation on the \$300 million tollway project. The tollway could be open in 2005.

Olsen of California Transportation Ventures said the project, 10 years in the planning, has undergone intense scrutiny by several federal, state and local agencies.

"We have met and exceeded all of our mitigation requirements and have received final approval from every necessary agency," Olsen said.

Proponents of the 11-mile toll road say it will relieve increasing traffic congestion in the growing South Bay region.

DeLano said opponents want their issues to be resolved before the start of construction.