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San Diego Fire

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By Rod Coronado

In the largest act of environmental sabotage in US history, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) has accepted responsibility for a \$50 million fire in San Diego, California, that destroyed an unfinished five-story condominium complex on August 1. The complex is owned by Garden Communities, the second largest developer in Southern California. Nationwide, Garden Communities owns more than 40,000 apartments and 25 million square feet of commercial space.

Fire crews arrived on the scene and evacuated apartments surrounding the 34-acre construction site. No one was hurt in the blaze, which was credited to the ELF through a painted slogan: "If you build it-we will burn it. E.L.F."

The fire was in San Diego's Golden Triangle area, which boasts a mix of luxury apartments, upscale office buildings, fashionable retail centers and biotechnology companies. The Golden Triangle is adjacent to Rose Canyon-home to bobcats, coyotes, ash-throated flycatchers, red-shouldered hawks, barn owls and orioles, as well as at least two rare and threatened plants.

From 2,000 years ago until the last century, the Kumeyaay people inhabited a seasonal village in Rose Canyon, gathering acorns from the once abundant coastal live oaks, weaving baskets from the arroyo willow and hunting not far from where a seven-million-dollar crane was destroyed by the ELF fire. San Diego County is one of the most rapidly growing regions in the US and has been identified as one of

the world's 25 biodiversity "hotspots." It also boasts the fifth worst rush-hour commute in the nation.

The Garden Communities project was approved in 2000, despite opposition from nearby residents. Many who hike Rose Canyon's four-mile length are tired of the sprawl engulfing the canyon and have expressed support for the ELF's efforts to draw attention to the development of San Diego's last remaining wetlands and wild places. The US Fish and Wildlife Service transferred Endangered Species Act implementation authority to the developer-friendly San Diego government in 1998. The Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSCP) acts as a regional Habitat Conservation Plan that was established to cover nearly 900 square miles. As one of the Southwest's first large-scale plans to protect entire ecosystems rather than just particular species, the MSCP has proven to be inadequate in preserving native biodiversity and ensuring the recovery of endangered animals and plants in San Diego County. E

"I think it's a positive statement that at least someone somewhere is trying to point out that over-development is clogging our already congested urban areas. This is a war to protect the environment, to raise the consciousness of people," said 41-year-old Richard Marose, a local restaurant manager. Marose also noted that rain and humidity made the night of the fire moist enough to prevent it from spreading to Rose Canyon: "The canyon would have gone up in smoke if this was done at any other time." He refused to talk to agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms who wanted to question him.

This particular project, La Jolla Crossroads, when completed would comprise 1,800 apartments with an average monthly rent of \$1,340. The 42-acre Nobel Research Center, which will house the biotechnology company IDEC Corporation, is planned to be built adjacent to the site. Following the fire, a small, hand-printed sign was taped to a traffic barrier near the construction site: "Thank-You E.L.F. Burn Baby Burn." Tad Simmons of Carlsbad said that as an environmentalist he had mixed feelings about the fire. "Part of me thinks it's kind of cool that somebody had the guts to stand for something like this-a cause, and that nobody ever gets hurt."

No arrests have been made, but the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force said several suspects were being tracked.

On August 14, FBI agents raided the home of animal rights activists affiliated with the San Diego-based Compassion for Farm Animals (CFA). CFA organized a lecture with Rod Coronado on the day of the ELF fire. Agents seized phone lists, a computer, a video camera and videotape of the lecture, which was part of on-going Revolution Summer events in San Diego. Since the fire, CFA activists have been under constant surveillance and have had their home mysteriously broken into and vehicle stolen.

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