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## Massive security contractor faces growing protest in rural California town over 824-acre base



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Published: Tuesday April 3, 2007

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SAN DIEGO -- Potrero, California boasts a broad swath of meadowland that currently houses derelict chicken coops.

Surrounded by the Cleveland National Forest, the property boasts a former chicken ranch and includes an environmentally sensitive, protected agricultural preserve southeast of San Diego.

But if private security contractor Blackwater USA gets its way, this 850-strong community will soon host an 824-acre military training base, replacing the erstwhile chicken ranch with fifteen firing ranges and an emergency vehicle operator's course the length of ten football fields.

A [RAW STORY](#) investigation has already led to the removal of one lawyer connected to the project. The inquiry has also discovered that California congressman and current presidential candidate Duncan Hunter -- who is the ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee -- is a client of the firm, Blackwater USA, a massive US security contractor in Iraq.

Minutes of a planning meeting raise questions about whether Hunter was involved in lobbying for the project. At the Feb. 8, 2007 planning meeting, Vice President for Blackwater West Brian Bonfiglio said Hunter was one of the firm's clients.

"We talk with Duncan about *many* things," [Bonfiglio said](#) (emphasis in original).

Blackwater isn't a stranger to controversy. In February 2004, families of four security contractors killed in Fallujah, who are suing the firm for information regarding their deaths, testified before the House Government Reform Committee.



The private security contractor has seen its federal contract revenues swell since Sept. 11. Six years ago, the firm raked in \$250,000; today a single Iraq contract is valued at \$300 million. Much of its work

takes place in Iraq; the company was at one time responsible for the security of interim Iraq consul Paul Bremer. Blackwater now aims to expand operations by establishing several new training camps in addition to its headquarters in North Carolina.

Townspersons and environmentalists are squaring off against the company and public officials. The Potrero Planning Group approved the facility by a 7-0 vote in December, but since then more than half of the town's registered voters have signed a petition opposing the facility. Residents also say they are organizing a recall against members of the Planning Group who voted in favor.

Chairman of the Planning Group Gordon Hammers says he won't reconsider the board's decision.

"I think it's good for the community," he said in a recent interview with the *East County Californian*. "It provides jobs."

"It will improve the general economy of the community and as a result, improve property values," he added. Hammers contended that arguments against the project "have absolutely no rhyme or reason" and that some opposition is based on misunderstanding of the project's scope.

In a later email to [RAW STORY](#) regarding questions about whether noise would disturb nearby residents, Hammers wrote, "If the good science shows that Blackwater's claims are true then I will be a proud supporter of a vital partner with law enforcement and the war on terror," he said in an e-mail. "If good science shows that their claims are not true then they will lose my support."

### **Internal documents**

Internal documents acquired by [RAW STORY](#) show that the company had discussions about potential "fatal flaws" in the Potrero project in 2006.

Of most concern to the company seems to be the camp's effect on the local eagle population. On page two of an "Internal Working Draft," the authors identify that the eagle population in the area is a "[potential fatal flaw](#)."

This runs in direct opposition to public statements by the company. [In the minutes](#) in which Blackwater's Vice President admits the company has a contract with Hunter, he remarks, "Has anybody seen eagles?"

The firm also identifies a public versus private road "[reduced potential to be a fatal flaw](#)" and that plans for traffic had also "[reduced potential fatal flaw](#)."

### **The opponents**

Jan Hedlun is the lone Potrero planner opposing the project. Elected in November, Hedlun didn't vote at the December meeting because she says she wasn't told she was eligible.

"I'm in the middle of a battle," Hedlun said. "I am a lamb in a lion's den. They're pushing this through quicker than anything I've ever heard in my entire life."

Although the Potrero Planning Group has met monthly for several years, Hammers has refused to convene an April meeting, saying that only quarterly meetings are required and a quorum can't be met.

When Hedlun pressed Hammers to schedule a meeting in order to allow public input, Hammers responded in an email acquired by [RAW STORY](#), "Jan, get over it. There is not going to be a meeting."

The proposed Blackwater West training facility at Potrero would include 15 firing ranges for automatic and semi-automatic weapons and small caliber guns, as well as an emergency vehicle operator's course the length of ten football fields -- 3,280 feet in length and 1,320 feet in width, according to a project description. The facility would also include bunkhouses and commando-type training facilities, ship simulators, and law enforcement and rescue safety training towers with rock-climbing walls and platforms.

Multiple San Diego County records indicate that "hazards" -- including "explosives" should be stored in an "armory" at the site.

Blackwater West's Bonfiglio denied that the project would use explosives.

"No bombs," he said. "No tanks, no heavy artillery."

Residents contend Blackwater's proposal is being fast-tracked through the planning process under streamlined procedures recently adopted by San Diego County to expedite processing of major projects such as housing developments. A public "Notification of Preparation" hearing is scheduled for Apr. 5 at the San Diego Department of Planning and Land Use; citizens have until Apr. 27 to respond.

Some residents have voiced concern that the noise from the firing range will disrupt their lives. In response, Blackwater has proposed anti-skid pads and other measures to lessen noise from the driving course, which would operate for up to an hour and a half after sundown.

According to Bonfiglio, a helicopter pad would only be used for emergency landings and could benefit the community in the event of a medical emergency.

### **Conflict of interest**

Residents also raise concerns over the role of San Diego County officials in expediting the project. [An article](#) in the *San Diego Reader* concluded that Potrero residents are being "ambushed" by "county bureaucrats marching alongside Blackwater USA."

Documents filed with the county indicate Blackwater officials have been meeting privately with Department of Planning and Land Use personnel since at least May of 2006. Members of the public in Potrero did not learn of the proposed project until Oct. 12 at the earliest. One whistleblower

contends that failure to notify the public until late in the planning process may violate the California Environmental Quality Act; others allege that County planners may have violated the Brown Act, which mandates open meetings.

Environmentalist Duncan McFetridge questions why residents weren't included in early planning.

"It is as close to collusion as you can get without actually being illegal," McFetridge says. "I am convinced that one of the main reasons that Blackwater came to San Diego is that we are the capital of privatization where lines between private and public sectors is a total blur."

"In San Diego we don't have revolving doors," he added. "We have tunnels between politicians and profiteers."

A spokesperson for San Diego Supervisor Dianne Jacob denied that Blackwater has received special treatment.

"That would be illegal," the employee said, declining to be named. The streamlined procedures, she said, were created after "ample public input," in response to complaints that development projects were taking four years for approval.

Jacob's representative suggested that it would be inappropriate for the supervisor to speak with media regarding the Blackwater project, as she may have to vote on it eventually. Several community members noted, however, that Jacob had no such qualms about speaking out against a proposed high-rise Indian casino near her own ranch in Jamul.

One citizen opposed to the project revealed that Lori Spar, listed with the California Bar Association as an attorney with a law firm representing Blackwater on July 31, 2006, has since unexpectedly surfaced as a land use/environmental planner for the Department of Planning and Land Use.

"She walked into our Mar. 1, 2007 Save Potrero meeting, representing the County," said former Potrero planner Carl Meyer.

After **RAW STORY** inquired about her ties to Blackwater, the Department of Planning removed her from the project.

### **Quality of life concerns**

Area residents express alarm about disruption of their quiet, rural lifestyle and are skeptical of reassurances offered by Blackwater and local officials.

Dania Raum purchased property in Potrero three years ago "because it was so beautiful and peaceful."

Asked about the proposed project site, she replied, "It's a secret, hidden valley. There are wetlands up there and all kinds of raptor birds." Golden eagles nest 3,500 feet north of the meadow, she observed.

Blackwater has offered to supply foraging materials for the eagles. But Raum scoffed at the idea of raptors foraging near a firing range.

"Right," she said. "Those eagles are going to be so gone... I believe we are being railroaded into this disaster."

"Can you imagine tire squealing and crash-em ups?" she added. "They are pushing this as a night time course ... so they will have machine guns going all day and cars going all night."

Raum doesn't believe Blackwater's claims that noise can be muffled. "My son was way across the valley on a horse, and I could hear him coughing," she said. "It echoes for miles up there."

Hammers insists that the planning group is relying on scientific evidence that residents will not hear noise from the proposed facility. A recent noise test was canceled, reportedly due to liability concerns on the part of property owners.

San Diego County is now relying entirely on computer models to assess noise levels.

### **Safety and environmental concerns**

Residents also cite safety issues involving excessive traffic on a winding access road measuring at some points just 20 feet wide. Critics cite high fatality rates on nearby Highway 94 and raise alarm over Blackwater's plan to bus in local trainees and bring additional people from the airport on shuttles. Blackwater says its vehicles would be no larger than trucks that previously serviced the ranch.

Fire safety also concerns locals. Blackwater's Brian Bonfiglio asserted that the company proposed to local fire authorities a plan to not only shelter-in-place its own employees and facilities in the event of wildfire but also make Blackwater's site a "safe haven for the community."

However, a February 2007 report on guidelines for wildland fire and fire protection prepared for the County describes shelter-in-place as a "last resort design concept." Critics warn that the policy could prove a death sentence in

the event of a firestorm similar to the nearby 2003 Cedar wildfire, where twelve people died as 300-foot high flames reached temperatures of thousands of degrees.

"This strategy has, to my knowledge, never been put to the test on a large scale during a major wildland fire," Joseph W. Mitchell, Ph.D. of M-bar Technologies and Consulting in Ramona, California wrote in response to the County's proposal. "There are reasons to believe that it could lead to civilian and firefighter deaths and injuries as currently envisioned."

Duncan McFetridge, of Save Our Forests and Ranchlands, has raised additional concerns about the loss of potentially crucial wilderness areas, noting that national forest lands have shrunk from two million to 650,000 acres.

"Meadowlands are the biological heart of our forest," he said at a recent meeting. "We cannot lose our meadows without losing our forest."

Bonfiglio responded to criticisms on environmental grounds with the observation that no studies have been approved by San Diego County.

"There are people concerned about habitat and open space, but they are doing it based on no science, no information," he said.

McFetridge successfully blocked a proposed RV park in neighboring Descanso after citing a study by the University of California, Davis, tracking mountain lion movement. The Potrero valley proposed for Blackwater's project is also frequented by deer and mountain lion, he said.

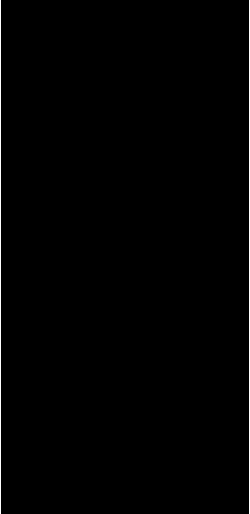
"This is a contest," McFetridge remarked. "Blackwater USA is very good at what they do -- and Save Our Forests and Ranchlands is very good at what we do. This battle will be won or lost on land use issues."

### **Citizen activism**

To win approval of the project, Blackwater must obtain a change in zoning on the property, which is currently zoned agricultural. McFetridge believes the project can be defeated on land use issues and cites data from radio-tracking of cougars that highlights the sensitive nature of meadowlands on the property.

Other groups have also joined the battle to block Blackwater's camp.

"I will work hard to block this deal," said Raymond Lutz, head of Citizens Oversight Panels, a grassroots organization. "Blackwater is well known as



one of the most egregious violators of human rights in the Iraq War ... We don't need a `black-ops" training camp in San Diego."

Bob Davis, a member of the San Diego Peace & Justice Coalition, fears that civil disobedience may be needed to halt the project, stating "We may have to put our bodies on the line."

Citizens are organizing opposition and public protests for the Apr. 5 meeting at the Department of Planning and Land Use.

"You can bet that Blackwater is lobbying the DPLU and its staff," Sierra Club land use committee chair Jeanette Hartman said. "Your only hope is to lobby back. Fight everything. If you don't, they'll just roll right over you here."