

WATERSHED

E-NEWS FALL 2010

FRIENDS OF THE SANTA CLARA RIVER

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Friends of the Santa Clara River (FSCR) is a non-profit, public interest organization dedicated to the protection, enhancement and management of the resources of the Santa Clara River, which flows approximately 100 miles from Acton, California to the Pacific Ocean. The Santa Clara is the largest natural river system remaining in Southern California, and was selected by American Rivers as one of the nation's most endangered rivers in 2005.

PUBLIC PRESENTATION

Vern Freeman Diversion Dam Fish Passage

Presented by members of the Independent Fish Passage Panel

When:

October 18, 2010, 2-5pm

Location:

Courtyard by Marriott
600 Esplanade Drive
Oxnard, CA 93036
Santa Monica Room

Hedrick Ranch Nature Area Update

74 least Bell's vireo nests counted

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Ron Bottorff, Chair

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EXPERT PANEL DEFINES FIVE OPTIONS FOR NEW FISHWAY AT FREEMAN DIVERSION



In a newly-released report, a panel of experts has defined five possible ways to revamp the Vern Freeman Diversion Dam (VFDD – shown above) for successful fish passage. This study was carried out as a condition of a lawsuit settlement between the United Water Conservation District and CalTrout. FSCR, CalTrout and Keep the Sespe Wild Committee have long fought for a solution to fish passage at the Diversion that will allow successful upstream migration of the federally endangered southern steelhead.

The options are: (1) remove the dam completely with direct piping of water from Lake Piru to United's settling ponds; (2) a vertical slot fishway similar to the current fishladder but with much improved entrance conditions; (3) a 4% grade, 82-foot wide rock ramp that would extend 562 feet upstream from the top of the dam; (4) a 6% grade concrete ramp similar to the rock ramp that would extend 367 feet from the dam top; (5) a 26-foot wide "nature-like" fishway that would provide a more natural rock-bottom, vegetated channel around the dam.

The study included cost estimates for each option. These varied from \$24 to \$28 million for all but the rock ramp which was estimated to cost \$46 million. Funding would have to come from rate increases to United's customers unless federal funding or grant money can be obtained.

The panel recommended the vertical slot fishway and the concrete ramp as the most promising options for further studies, but said all options deserve further consideration before a final design is selected.

United has claimed for years that the existing fishladder allows upstream migration of adult steelhead. However, to our knowledge, there is no recorded instance of an adult fish successfully transitioning the ladder. Some have been found dead and at least one was rescued alive from the upper part of the ladder. Smolts (young steelhead) going downstream and do not pass over the dam itself are normally trapped at the Diversion and transported to the Santa Clara estuary, from which they (hopefully) reach the ocean.

The dam removal option was not analyzed by the panel since it was considered beyond their level of expertise. However, the panel stated that "Considering the highly variable hydrologic characteristics of the basin, edge of steelhead ecosystem, fragility of the stock, inherent delays caused by dams, dam removal would have the greatest chance of allowing and promoting restoration of Santa Clara River fish stocks." Although there are many ramifications to dam removal that would require extensive hydraulic and water supply studies, this option needs to remain on the table as a long-term goal.

ARMY CORPS SET TO ISSUE NEWHALL RANCH PERMIT

A years-long process aimed at establishing permits under the Clean Water Act for Newhall Ranch from the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) is nearing a major milestone: the issuance of the Corps' Record of Decision for the project permit. (CDFG will also act later this year or early in 2011 regarding its Stream Alteration Agreement.) This Record of Decision, expected during October, will establish what the Corps believes to be the "Least Environmentally Damaging Practical Alternative" (LEDPA) that has been developed through the Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report process which analyzed several permit alternatives. FSCR and other groups have been quite active in this process, providing extensive comments on the alternatives and interacting with the various agencies involved.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has certain authority to revise or even block Corps decisions on Clean Water Act permits. A number of environmental organizations, including Heal the Bay, Ventura Coastkeeper, Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and American Rivers, participated in a “net” meeting with Region 9 EPA personnel on July 16, 2010. Numerous concerns related to the Newhall Ranch permit were communicated to EPA and we asked for their continued efforts in a process which could force the Corps to adopt a more favorable alternative for the permit. The EPA subsequently sent the Corps a very strong letter recommending additional avoidance of sensitive habitats and floodplain areas.

NEW STUDIES SHOW INCREASED FLOOD THREAT FOR SANTA PAULA

The viability of the Army Corps of Engineers’ (Corps) Santa Paula Creek flood control project that protects the City of Santa Paula is the subject of a new report (soon to be released) covering the potential for sediment deposit in the channel that could increase the flood threat to the city. This follows an earlier Corps study that revised the 100-year peak flow from 28,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) to 38,800 cfs.

FSCR has been following this issue closely because Santa Paula Creek is a prime spawning stream for the endangered southern steelhead. The fishladder that was built as part of the flood control project was heavily damaged in the near-record 2005 flood. The Corps had proposed to construct a second fishladder similar in design to the one that was damaged. This was to cost \$7 million, funds for which were to be committed by Sept 30, 2010.

In April, FSCR, CalTrout, and Keep the Sespe Wild Committee wrote to California’s two senators to oppose the construction of a second costly fishladder, which would also be at risk of being battered by boulders and filled with sediment. Subsequently, the Corps revised its plans and will, instead, devote the available funds to conduct an environmental assessment and design studies of project modifications that could result in improved flood protection.

In late July, the above three groups met with the County of Ventura Watershed Protection District and the Corps of Engineers regarding all of the above issues. The Corps issued assurances that we would all receive the new sediment study as soon as it is finalized, and we eagerly await this report. It is our understanding that sediment deposited downstream of the concrete-walled flood control channel could cause flooding which would leave Hwy. 126 access roads under 5 feet of water, and Hwy. 126 itself only 12 inches above the water level.

Even though the estimated peak flow in a 100-year flood has been revised to 38,800 cfs (not 28,000 cfs, as previously estimated), the Corps apparently is not allowed to use this new, higher number in their planning without federal legislation to authorize such a change. The Corps, along with the County, will next prepare a General Reevaluation Report on Santa Paula Creek. This will be included in their fiscal year 2012 budget and will be completed during 2013-15.

The overall situation is complicated by the fact that a new Santa Paula development project, termed East Area 1, is planned adjacent to the east side of the creek. Environmental review for the project will need to reevaluate the flooding threat, which was overlooked in the EIR for the East Area 1 Specific Plan. Modifications to the project, including possible channel widening, should be considered as part of overall improvement in flood protection for the entire east end of Santa Paula.

SANTA CLARITA REJECTS PLAN TO CUT CHLORIDE DISCHARGES

FSCR worked as a partner, over a period of two years, with the Los Angeles County Sanitation District, United Water Conservation District, the Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the Ventura County Farm Bureau, in crafting a 2008 plan to eliminate excess chloride levels in the Santa Clara River. The Saugus and Valencia waste water treatment plants in Santa Clarita are the primary sources of these chlorides. Although apparently not harmful to aquatic life, high chloride levels can adversely affect several farm products grown in Ventura County, including strawberries, avocados and nursery plants.

This plan, termed the Alternative Water Resource Management Plan, would require construction of a new reverse osmosis desalination facility at the Valencia plant, in combination with new wells near Piru for blending the Valencia high-quality water with lower-quality groundwater. This blended water would then be piped downstream and dumped into the river near the Fillmore Fish Hatchery, where it would have a diluting effect on the total river flow. The overall effect would be the reduction of river chlorides to levels that would be safe for crops.

However, the Santa Clarita Valley Sanitation District's board has now voted against the sewer rate increase that would fund studies of the project. Two members of the sanitation board, who are also members of the city council, have argued that Santa Clarita has done enough by getting rid of most of the city's salt-discharging water softeners. Even if softeners are eliminated, however, Santa Clarita imports water from the state in drought years that results in chloride discharge levels that exceed allowable limits.

If Santa Clarita does not soon reverse its actions and move forward under the previously agreed plan, heavy daily fines could be imposed by the Regional Board.

FSCR urges the Santa Clarita Sanitation District to approve the needed rate increases, which are modest, and live up to its obligations in reducing chlorides in the Santa Clara River.

HEDRICK RANCH NATURE AREA UPDATE

Survey Shows 74 Least Bell's Vireo Nest Sites

Two breeding bird surveys were conducted at HRNA this past spring. Griffith Wildlife Biology identified 74 sites occupied by least Bell's vireo, including 71 pair and 3 single males. Eight nests were located for six pair, and all were successful (23 fledglings were produced). In addition, 14 post-fledging family groups containing 48 fledglings were observed. A spring bird survey was conducted by the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, which found 70 bird species at HRNA between April 25th and June 24th. In descending order, the most abundant species overall were common yellowthroats, yellow warblers, song sparrows, spotted towhees, yellow-breasted chats, and black-headed grosbeaks, all constituents of healthy riparian ecosystems in Southern California.

Our restoration goals at HRNA have largely been met, and we have moved into a monitoring and maintenance phase. We are continuing to produce plants in our nursery, conduct weed eradication, and perform routine monitoring. To date, we have planted many thousands of plants from 28 different species of natives cultivated from on-site resources.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES WITH FSCR

We will be trying something new this year by expanding our volunteer efforts to properties owned by The Nature Conservancy along the Santa Clara River. Our first foray will be held Saturday November 6th at the TNC's Briggs Road/Mission Rock property. This is one of the largest holdings as part of the Santa Clara River Parkway. Volunteers will meet at the gate at the end of Mission Rock Rd. To reach the property, take Briggs Road off Hwy. 126. Take the frontage road on the south side of 126 to Mission Rock Road and follow it to the TNC gate at the end. The gate will be opened at 8 a.m. for birding, and restoration activities will begin about 9 a.m. and finish at 11:30. As usual, wear safe field attire, including closed-toe shoes and long pants.

The location of future workdays will be posted in this newsletter and emailed to our members and volunteers two weeks prior to the event. Substantial rain cancels these events! Workdays have been scheduled for the following dates:

- November 6th, Saturday
- December 5th, Sunday
- January 8th, Saturday
- February 6th, Sunday
- March 5th, Saturday
- April 3rd, Sunday