

WATERSHED

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FRIENDS OF THE SANTA CLARA RIVER

Friends of the Santa Clara River 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 watershed is the largest natural river system remaining in Southern California, and the river was selected by American Rivers in 2005 as one of the nation's most endangered.

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California Top Court to Review Approval of Newhall Ranch Project

In a case that promises to test the scope of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the California Supreme Court (Court) has agreed to review a petition filed by Friends of the Santa Clara River, the Center for Biological Diversity and other environmental groups. The petition challenges a recent appellate court decision allowing the 21,000-home Newhall Ranch project to proceed under a Stream Alteration Permit granted by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The Court will address whether CEQA supersedes other state statutes that prohibit the taking (killing) of “fully protected” species and thereby allow such a taking if it is incidental to a mitigation plan developed under CEQA. The Newhall Ranch project proposes the capture and relocation of unarmored threespine stickleback, a fully protected fish.

The Court will also decide whether CEQA allows a public agency to ignore comments submitted after the close of the public comment period on a draft environmental impact report but many months before the project’s approval. It will further address whether an agency may avoid analyzing the significance of a project’s greenhouse gas emissions by comparing the project to a hypothetical project that emits even more greenhouse gases.

This action is the latest in a string of legal challenges to the project that go back to the late 1990s. Newhall Ranch, situated just east of the Ventura County line, will impact almost 6 miles of the Santa Clara River main stem and 20 miles of tributaries. The project involves 200 million cubic yards of grading and will have major impacts to Native American sites as well as numerous animals and plants.

This phase of the dispute began in 2011, when environmental and Native American groups sued the Department after it approved what is known as a Stream Alteration Agreement for the project. The groups claimed the agency had failed to protect endangered plants and animals by performing a substandard environmental review.

In 2012, a state judge granted the plaintiffs’ petition for a writ of mandate ordering the Department to set aside its approvals of Newhall Ranch and suspend the project until deficiencies in its process were corrected. However, a state appeals court panel later reversed that ruling, following which the plaintiffs filed a Petition for Review with the California Supreme Court. The Supreme Court’s grant of review supercedes the appeals court’s ruling.

In addition to Friends and the Center for Biological Diversity, plaintiffs include Wishtoyo Foundation's Ventura Coastkeeper arm, the California Native Plant Society and Santa Clara Organization for Planning and the Environment.

The Nature Conservancy Los Angeles – Ventura Project Hanson Conservation Node Habitat Restoration Project

Background

The Santa Clara River is one of the most important and most intact river systems in southern California. A vital source of fresh water for the community and farmers, the 1,600-square mile watershed also supports 38 species on the state or federal threatened or endangered lists, and hundreds more migratory and resident species. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and its partners have worked to protect the river, its tributaries and wetlands since 1999.

Successes to date include:

- Significant and strategic land acquisitions, totaling more than 3,000 acres of floodplain that total over 13 miles of river and 500 acres of coastal wetlands.
- Creating the Coastal Resilience Ventura project aimed at advancing nature-based solutions to climate change through science, decision-support tools and public policy.
- Establishing a floodplain easement program designed to maintain natural floodplains while preserving agricultural use of the land illustrating the compatibility of farming and conservation.
- Cultivating diverse partnerships with local, State and Federal agencies, as well as farmers, developers and local organizations to implement nature-based solutions that provide additional economic, social and ecological benefits.

Watershed Planning

An initial assessment of the watershed in 1999 by TNC determined the practicality of conserving large portions of the Santa Clara River through acquisition of the river's mostly privately owned floodplain. This approach was further refined in 2001 and 2006 to focus acquisition within "conservation nodes" (see map on page 4) that contain ecologically high-value reaches of the river. Today, some of these conservation nodes contain more than 1,000 contiguous acres and over 4.5 miles of river front.

The Hanson Conservation Node, located near the City of Santa Paula, is an example of a large reach of the Santa Clara River that has been conserved and is now transitioning from the acquisition phase to the restoration phase. This node was ranked as a high priority site for restoration in a 2011 watershed strategic plan, and identified as once containing expansive riparian forests in a historical ecology study. Moreover, restoring the Hanson Conservation Node is the next step for the Santa Clara River Parkway, a project of the California State Coastal Conservancy, TNC, and other stakeholders to acquire and restore floodplain land along the lower Santa Clara River for habitat, flood protection and recreation.



Restoration Plan

The Hanson Conservation Node is the largest and most complete node on the Santa Clara River, totaling 4.5 miles of river, consisting of the following properties: Hanson (1,000 acres), Bunn-Birrell (40 acres), City of Santa Paula (76 acres), and Banman (146 acres). Immediately upstream of the Hanson Node is the Hedrick Conservation Node, which includes the Hedrick Ranch Nature Area, a 220 acre floodplain preserve restored under management of Friends of the Santa Clara River.

The Hanson Conservation Node Restoration Project will restore 238 acres of riparian habitat on TNC-owned Hanson property. The project will accomplish the following goals: 1) restore riparian floodplain habitats to complement adjacent remnant and restored habitat, and 2) promote the recovery of migratory and resident birds, and other aquatic and terrestrial species. This project will also provide numerous benefits to the 12 million people who live within an hour's drive of the property, including improved water quality for people, agriculture and wildlife; flood damage reduction, increased recreational opportunities, and improved aesthetics.