

# WATERSHED

E-NEWS Fall 2014

## 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.

### In this issue:

- ❖ A Brief Review of 2014 Activity and What is On the Way for Next Year
  - Habitat Restoration
  - Litigation
  - Integrated Water Management Plan
  - Steelhead Coalition
  - Santa Clara River Parkway Project

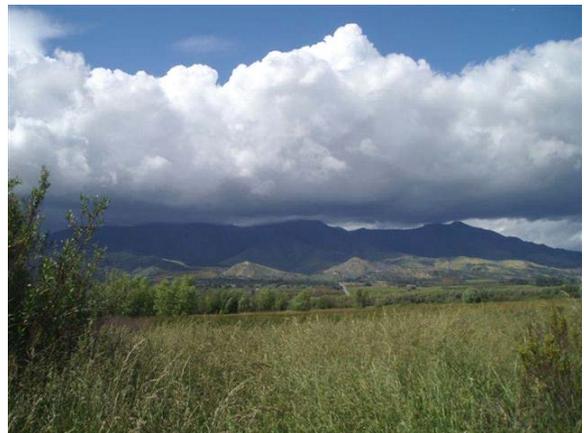


## **A Brief Review of 2014 and What's On the Way for Next Year**

### **Habitat Restoration**

Restoration work on 80 acres of the 220-acre Hedrick Ranch Nature Area, which is under the stewardship of Friends of the Santa Clara River, is now essentially complete except for weed control and a small arundo donax removal effort. HRNA is now the largest green patch on the lower Santa Clara River and has seen visits this year and in 2011 by a yellow-billed cuckoo, the first sightings of this bird species in many years. This has opened up the exciting possibility that this species, which requires a broad swath of thick riparian vegetation, may resume nesting on the river - something they have not done in decades.

Starting in 2015, FSCR and the University of California, as partners, will be working on a major restoration project that will restore almost 200 acres of riparian habitat on properties adjacent to HRNA over a period of four years, by removing invasive plant species and using active re-vegetation to establish riparian forests. This project will be funded by California Proposition 84 (see below) plus matching funds from our two organizations and the Santa Clara River Trustee Council.



### **Litigation**

FSCR and three partners filed suit in March under the Clean Water Act against the Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency for approving a permit for the massive (21,000-home) Newhall Ranch project. Our case is focused primarily on the failure of these agencies to consider much less environmentally damaging alternatives and failure to provide adequate mitigation for project impacts to the river ecosystem and to Native American archeological sites. This lawsuit, the first to be filed in federal court against the project, is the best opportunity we have to significantly reduce project impacts and achieve better mitigation.

Meanwhile, lawsuits under the California Environmental Quality Act are ongoing in the appeal courts against Landmark Village and Mission Village, the first two of the project's five "villages" that have already been approved by Los Angeles County. An Environmental Impact Report for the third village, Homestead Village, is now being prepared by the County.



**Newhall Ranch (shown above) involves massive grading (over 200 million cubic yards) of the 12,000-acre site and will alter this landscape forever. The specific plan proposes to dump 20 million cubic yards of dirt into the river and its tributaries. This fact alone would justify the long-running battle against the project, which first began in the late 1990s and undoubtedly will continue for an extended period of time.**

### **Integrated Regional Water Management Plan**

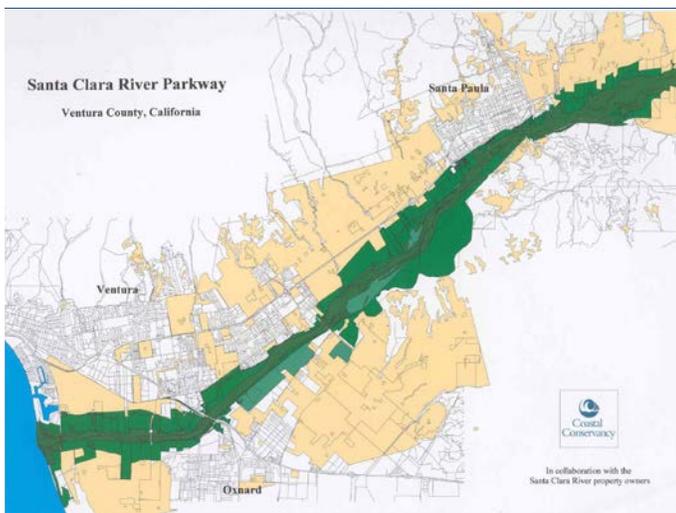
The Santa Clara River system (over 1600 square miles) is the only major river system that remains relatively intact in Southern California. This is, in itself, a remarkable fact in an area known for massive urban development - a region that has lost all but 5% of its historic river woodlands and habitat to farms and cities. The closest entity we currently have to a river management group is the Integrated Regional Water Management Plan under the jurisdiction of the Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County. You can view the new 2013 version of the Plan at [www.ventura.org/wcvc](http://www.ventura.org/wcvc) and click on IRWM Plan 2013.

This group envisions a Santa Clara River system that allows for natural river processes; preserves and protects sustainable uses; emphasizes environmentally sensitive flood management; maintains biodiversity with minimal habitat fragmentation and barriers; is unimpaired by pollution and non-native species; supplies water for agriculture and groundwater recharge; and is managed by cooperating public entities, private landowners, and organizations working toward the common vision. It remains to be seen, of course, how well this vision will be achieved in the long run - and it must be recognized that much of the activity in the watershed, such as urban development projects and large flood control projects, are outside the purview of the Plan. Friends of the Santa Clara River (a participant in the IRWMP process) and our allies have worked for over 20 years toward achieving this vision for the Santa Clara River. We have called on all river stakeholders to move forward cooperatively in defining and implementing the necessary actions that will ensure long-term enhancement and preservation of the river system.

Multiple water projects in Ventura County are now complete or underway under this Plan, funded primarily by California propositions 50 and 84, which have provided \$44 million in funding to date. The 200-acre Santa Clara River habitat restoration project described under Habitat Restoration has been funded at the \$2 million level under the Plan, with matching funds at 31%. FSCR has provided over \$16,000 in matching funds through volunteer restoration work hours alone.

### **Santa Clara River Parkway**

The State Coastal Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy have now combined to protect over 3200 acres of natural floodplains and terrace lands under the Santa Clara River Parkway project ([www.santaclarariverparkway.org](http://www.santaclarariverparkway.org)) In addition, TNC has secured \$4.5M under IRWMP and Proposition 84 for natural floodplain protection and is beginning a special 300-acre restoration at its Hanson site near Santa Paula (reported on in our Summer 2014 E-news). All of this is, of course, very good news. Long-term habitat restoration will be needed for significant acreages under these acquisitions and funding for this restoration work poses a significant challenge for the future. Acquisitions will continue during the coming year as funding becomes available.



The SCR Parkway Envisions a Continuous Riparian Corridor from Fillmore to the Ocean

### **Steelhead Coalition**

The Santa Clara River Steelhead Coalition continues to play an active role in helping to recover the Santa Clara River population of the endangered Southern steelhead. Chaired by Kurt Zimmerman, California Trout's Southern California Program Manager, the Coalition includes FSCR, Wishtoyo Foundation's Ventura Coastkeeper Program, the University of California Marine Science Institute and The Nature Conservancy.

The Southern steelhead ranges from approximately Point Conception to the Mexican border. There are only an estimated 500 Southern steelhead remaining. Limiting factors contributing to the decline and interfering with the recovery of this iconic fish include fish passage barriers, reduced stream flows from dams and surface water diversions, wildfires, urban and agricultural development, river channelization, and climate change.

Key Coalition projects to date include the Harvey Diversion Fish Passage Restoration Project on Santa Paula Creek, funded by the Santa Clara River Trustee Council. Santa Paula Creek is a major tributary to the river and a primary migration corridor for steelhead moving upstream to spawn. The fish ladder at the Harvey Diversion was rendered unusable for steelhead by previous severe floods in 2005. Other projects are being proposed for funding next year through the California Department of Fish and Wildlife's Fisheries Restoration Grant Program. There are many challenges ahead but small victories are important and keep us headed toward the goal of steelhead recovery.