

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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Newhall Ranch Clean Water Act Case Headed for Appeals Court

The Newhall Ranch Project involves impacts to the Santa Clara River and its tributaries on a scale that is difficult to comprehend. The Project would result in the permanent elimination of about 110 acres of the Santa Clara River's 100-year floodplain, which would be built up and filled with houses. An immense volume of material would be excavated from the site to flatten hilltops and fill valleys – approximately 207.5 million cubic yards of soil, constituting in EPA's view twice the volume of the largest previous grading project in southern California. **About 10 percent of this material – 19.9 million cubic yards – would be dumped into rivers and streams on the project site.**

The Project as designed would also include two bridges crossing the Santa Clara River, three bridges and 13 culvert roads crossing tributaries, 35 drainage outlets into the Santa Clara River, and other infrastructure. The Project would involve nearly five miles of buried soil-cement bank stabilization along the Santa Clara River, which would alter and permanently confine the river channel. About 9 miles of tributary streams would be converted to buried storm drains, and another 7 miles of streams would be filled and reconstructed on top of filled areas. All of this had been approved by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers when it issued its 2013 Clean Water Act Section 404 permit for the project which, with only minimal changes, followed the developer's basic plan.

All of these issues and more were stressed recently in oral arguments as part of a federal lawsuit before U. S. District Court Judge Philip Guterrez by attorneys representing FSCR, the Center for Biological Diversity, SCOPE and Wishtoyo's Ventura Coastkeeper Program. Our arguments centered on the fact that the Corps had failed to follow the Clean Water Act and had erred in issuing a permit for a project involving almost 20 million cubic yards of fill to be deposited into rivers and streams.

The Judge, however, in a 39-page opinion issued the next day following oral arguments, rejected our claims and rendered a decision in favor of the Corps. This decision was not unexpected and the case will now be appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

FSCR and its allies have long considered that the Corps of Engineers, in issuing its permit for the Newhall Ranch project, not only failed to comply with the Clean Water Act but also failed to deal with numerous concerns expressed to the Corp by the Environmental Protection Agency. The Act clearly requires, in dealing with damage to rivers and streams, that avoidance be given priority over mitigation (or alleviation) of such damage. In the case of Newhall Ranch, the damage is substantial - but avoidance was given low priority and impacts have not even been adequately mitigated. This ruling must not be allowed to stand. Stay tuned.

Completion of Restoration at the Hedrick Ranch Nature Area to Get Underway

Educate. Motivate. Captivate. Restore. These are some of the goals of the restoration program that has been underway for over a decade at the Hedrick Ranch Nature Area (HRNA) just east of Santa Paula on the south bank of the Santa Clara River. This 220-acre reserve, formerly part of the Valley View Ranch, has undergone a remarkable transformation since its 1999 acquisition by the State Coastal Conservancy and subsequent transfer to Friends of the Santa Clara River (FSCR). HRNA was the first acquisition under the Santa Clara River Parkway Project, a program begun several years ago by the State Coastal Conservancy with the goal of eventually creating a 6,000-acre protected riparian corridor extending from Fillmore to the ocean. Approximately 3,200 acres have been acquired so far (see SantaClaraRiverParkway.org).

We have reported in previous issues on the restoration of about 50 acres at HRNA over the period from 2006 to 2013, which has transformed this area into the largest green patch on the river. The new program, which will be managed and carried out by the University of California Santa Barbara, will encompass a total of 81 acres on five adjacent properties along the Santa Clara River, including HRNA. FSCR will be an active partner in the project. Work will begin in the fall of 2015. The HRNA portion of the project will be implemented in two restoration areas totaling 31 acres (see figure below). The proposed work areas are impacted by non-native invasive plants including arundo, tamarisk and castor bean. The ultimate goal of these projects is to reduce the impacts of invasive species, agricultural runoff, and other stressors while enhancing riparian habitat for native species. Funding for the project is being provided by the Santa Clara River Trustee Council and California Department of Water Resources under Proposition 84 State Bond funding.

