

WATERSHED

E-NEWS SUMMER 2011

FRIENDS OF THE SANTA CLARA RIVER

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 in 2005 as one of the nation's most endangered rivers.

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Update - Newhall Ranch Project Permits Get Closer



The sprawling Newhall Ranch development proposed for 12,000 acres along the Santa Clara River in northwest Los Angeles County is one of the largest single residential development projects ever contemplated in California. Newhall Ranch would create a city of more than 60,000 on a six-mile stretch of the river that is currently mostly rugged open space and agricultural land. As we have reported previously, on January 3, 2011, a coalition of five environmental and Native American groups filed suit against the California Department of Fish and Game over its approvals of permits for the project. Action on this lawsuit is pending.

Meanwhile, the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), which must issue its own permit under the Clean Water Act, has moved closer to a final permit, termed a Record of Decision. The Corps has spent months in negotiations with the Environmental Protection Agency over several outstanding issues involving the permit. FSCR is still hopeful that the final permit will eliminate its most egregious feature – the proposed filling with dirt of 110 acres of the Santa Clara River floodplain.

There are numerous issues that concern us regarding Newhall Ranch in addition to the proposed permits.

Coupled with harm to natural resources is the harm posed by the 357,000 additional trips per day this project will add to already-gridlocked local roads and freeways. Also, we note that Santa Clarita has tens of thousands of units already permitted for building in a period of continued housing market turmoil – we question the need to approve 21,000 more units of sprawl development at this time.

Lennar Corporation, which controls the project and will need to provide financing, had its bonds downgraded a few weeks ago to BB - essentially junkbond status. A question therefore arises as to whether the public will be required to pick up the tab for a large portion of eventual project costs. Recently, Los Angeles County Supervisor, Michael D. Antonovich, approved transferring \$21 million from bridge and thoroughfare districts in the Valencia and Bouquet area, specified for traffic improvements in their neighborhoods, to help fund the \$55 million Commerce Center Bridge Interchange that will serve Newhall Ranch. Newhall was required to come up with only \$3 million of the funding out of pocket; the remaining funds are to come from grants and other taxpayer funds.

There is also the matter of the recent well closure (the sixth) due to ammonium perchlorate pollution in Santa Clarita's water supply. This chemical, a by-product of munitions manufacturing, has known serious health effects and has permeated the Saugus aquifer underlying the area. The concern now is that the spread of the plume will be increased by additional groundwater pumping for 21,000 units of Newhall Ranch. The Los Angeles County Department of Health Services has ordered additional monitoring and new modeling to track the plume's spread.

Newhall Ranch is NOT a done deal, as many would have us believe. Los Angeles County supervisors need to hear from you at this autumn's hearings, starting September 27, which will look at final approval for the first two tracts of this massive project: Landmark Village and Mission Village. You can write to them at: Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012.

Santa Clara River Estuary Special Studies Final Report

[Note: The following summary is adapted from the final report on beneficial uses (termed the Estuary Subwatershed Study) and is available on the City's website at www.cityofventura.net/rivers.]

The City of San Buenaventura owns and operates the Ventura Water Reclamation Facility (VWRF), which discharges tertiary treated municipal wastewater to the Santa Clara River Estuary (Estuary) just south of the City, near the mouth of the Santa Clara River. Under the California Enclosed Bay and Estuaries Policy, discharges of municipal wastewater to enclosed bays and estuaries are to be phased out except in circumstances "when the Regional Board finds that the wastewater in question would consistently be treated and discharged in such a manner that it would enhance the quality of receiving waters above that which would occur in the absence of the discharge." Consequently, the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board (LARWQCB), in May 1977, granted the City an exception to the discharge prohibition and

allowed continued discharge of the VWRP effluent into the Estuary. However, due to a number of issues regarding the effects of existing discharge practices on existing beneficial uses, the LARWQCB ordered the City to complete a series of special studies on estuary issues. The primary purpose of this study was to confirm that VWRP effluent discharge to the Estuary provides an enhancement of existing beneficial uses as compared to the absence of discharge.

In general, the Santa Clara River flow is the dominant inflow to the estuary from the fall through the spring, causing a relatively high mouth breaching and subsequent open-mouth frequency from November through June (i.e., the mouth is open >50% of the time on average). However, during the summer months, the VWRP effluent discharge is the dominant inflow to the Estuary and the mouth breaching frequency is relatively low during most years (mouth closed >50% of the time on average). When the mouth remains closed for long periods during these dry conditions, the VWRP effluent discharge fills the Estuary to “full” elevation that can be maintained for extended periods.

Historical data indicates that water within the Estuary periodically exceeded Basin Plan objectives for several parameters including ammonia, pesticides, toxicity, and bacteria. Currently, the VWRP effluent meets discharge effluent limitations set by the LARWQCB; however, effluent nutrient enrichment (eutrophication) can cause low levels of dissolved oxygen as well as periodic exceedances of ammonia toxicity criteria – both of which can harm aquatic species. Four species which inhabit the Estuary were included in this study: southern steelhead, tidewater goby, western snowy plover, and California least tern.

Six discharge alternatives were developed to represent the full range of potential management conditions of the estuary, from existing conditions (No Action), to complete discharge elimination, volume reductions, additional treatment, including planned VWRP upgrades and potential implementation of constructed wetlands or further mechanical treatment for additional removal of nitrates (NO₃). Comparison of alternatives indicates that maintenance of current discharge will continue to be associated with periods of unsuitable dissolved oxygen levels attributable to excess nutrient loading to the Estuary and continued episodes of flooding. Alternatives, including treatment improvements to reduce nutrient loading were shown to provide benefits to steelhead and least tern. Effluent flow reduction alternatives were shown to benefit focal species habitat and human recreational uses within and adjacent to the Estuary; however, decreases in Estuary stage have been shown to potentially limit rearing habitat for steelhead, suggesting that the current VWRP flows provide some degree of enhancement relative to the expected lower Estuary stage under a complete flow removal alternative.

The LARWQCB plans to issue its final determination on allowable effluent flows during the next few months.

Environmental Groups Reach Agreement with City Over Handling of Sewage Plant Effluent

In a very important development related to the Santa Clara River Estuary, Wishtoyo and its Ventura Coastkeeper Program, and Heal the Bay have entered into a settlement with the City of Ventura to protect the Estuary from Ventura’s discharge of treated sewage and to reclaim the tertiary treated effluent. Jason Weiner, attorney for Wishtoyo, reports that the agreement will go a long way toward ensuring ecological protection for this vitally important estuary - while also securing a significant volume of a much needed water supply for a water-scarce region.

More specifically, the settlement provides for diverting a minimum of 50% and up to 100% of Ventura's tertiary treated effluent from discharge to the Santa Clara River estuary to reclaimed water uses, for only allowing effluent discharge to the estuary if needed for the estuary's species, and for sending all tertiary treated effluent, if any, needed for the estuary's species through a treatment wetland. This wetland would function to further treat the effluent and to reduce its nitrate concentrations to levels that will not result in unacceptably-low dissolved oxygen content.

FSCR congratulates this environmental team on a truly important accomplishment.

The settlement must still be approved by the Ventura City Council after a period of public outreach and comment.

Steelhead Coalition is Re-activated

Nica Knite, California Trout's Southern California Regional Manager, is leading an effort to re-start the former Southern California Steelhead Coalition. The group, which has worked in the past to prevent extinction of the federally-endangered southern steelhead trout, held its first meeting on June 11 at Environment Now in Santa Monica. FSCR was unable to attend but is greatly encouraged that the group is re-forming. Stay tuned for further developments.

Major Hedrick Ranch Nature Area Restoration Completed

FSCR and its volunteer restoration team, led by restoration coordinator Jackie Worden, have now completed a major restoration effort at the Hedrick Ranch Nature Area (HRNA) funded by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The funds became available to FWS from settlement claims for damages from an ARCO oil spill into the river in 1994. Work under this grant began in December 2004 and was completed in May 2011.

The goal of the restoration project was to restore natural function to riparian and wetland habitats historically found along the Santa Clara River. The project included removal of invasive, non-native plants and re-vegetation with native plants. The project focused on 48 acres of the approximately 220 total in HRNA, which was placed under FSCR stewardship after being acquired by the State Coastal Conservancy in 1999 as part of the Conservancy's River Parkway Project.

Historic uses at HRNA included cattle and horse grazing as well as production of orchard and row crops. Once livestock was removed, however, the pastures became choked with a number of weed species, necessitating hand-removal. This work was initially carried out by Sandy Hedrick and a small group of volunteers. After this, grant funding became available from several sources, allowing the expansion of the volunteer effort, hiring of professional restoration consultants and the establishment of an onsite nursery.

Thirty-one species of native plants were installed to improve habitat diversity. These plants included yerba mansa, mugwort, field sedge, saltgrass, western goldenrod, and California blackberry. Shrub species planted included quailbush, Mexican elderberry, giant ryegrass, and sandbar willow. Tree species comprised southern California black walnut, black cottonwood, western sycamore, coast live oak, and arroyo willow.

Prior to restoration, wildlife on the property was restricted to common species tolerant of existing land uses. All of this has now changed as a result of restoration activities (see attached photographs comparing the west pasture restored area in 2009, 2010, and 2011). Professional wildlife and botanical surveys have documented qualitatively the many species now utilizing the habitat at HRNA for foraging, roosting and nesting. Over 190 species of birds have now been identified, including a very exciting record of the federally-endangered yellow-billed cuckoo in June 2011. An amazing 74 occupied least Bells vireo nest sites were recorded in 2010 – with six pairs that were tracked by biologists producing 23 fledglings! There are now 69 species breeding at HRNA, compared with only 35 species breeding in 2002.

At least 14 mammal species are known to utilize the property, including mountain lion, deer and bobcat. We are still looking for our first black bear, but no doubt one will show up some day. Other species observed include 19 species of amphibians and reptiles, including rattlesnake, gopher snake and king snake.

Overall restoration at HRNA has been carried out under several grants, including one grant which is ongoing. The success of these projects is due, in large measure, to our volunteer effort led by Jackie Worden, which has included notably several members of the Ventura Audubon Society. FSCR board members, Sandy Hedrick and Richard Sweet, deserve great credit for their countless hours of work on the project, as do our Coastal Restoration Consultants team of Dave Hubbard and Matt James.

The full report, “Restoration at the Hedrick Ranch Nature Area” under FWS Agreement Number 811440-05-G-016 will soon be available on the FSCR website, www.fscr.org.