

WATERSHED

E-NEWS Winter 2012

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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Lawsuit Filed Against L.A. County Approval of Massive Newhall Ranch Project Development in Floodplain Would Devastate Wildlife Habitat, Hurt Cultural Resources

LOS ANGELES— A coalition of five public-interest groups today sued Los Angeles County in Superior Court over its approval of permits for the first phase of the sprawling Newhall Ranch development — one of the largest single residential development projects ever contemplated in California — which is proposed for 12,000 acres along the Santa Clara River in northwest L.A. County. Newhall Ranch would create a city of more than 60,000 on a six-mile stretch of the river that is currently rugged open space and farmland by channeling the county's last mostly free-flowing river.

The construction approved by the county on Feb. 23 would require filling of the Santa Clara River's floodplain on a large scale; channelizing over three miles of river and converting many tributary streams to concrete-lined channels; unearth and desecrate American Indian burial sites, sacred places and cultural natural resources such as the California condor; and threaten the San Fernando Valley spineflower — a species found in only one other location on the planet.

“It’s appalling that L.A. County would be so reckless with the last free-flowing river in the region,” said Ron Bottorff with the Friends of the Santa Clara River. “This area has lost all but 3 percent of its historic river woodlands; the county’s approval would replace some of the finest riparian areas remaining anywhere in Southern California with ugly strip malls and housing we don’t need.”

The Santa Clara River is one of two major Southern California rivers remaining in a relatively natural state. It flows for about 116 miles from its headwaters on the north slope of the San Gabriel Mountains near Acton to its confluence with the Pacific Ocean between Oxnard and Ventura; its watershed is home to a great diversity of very rare species, among them the [unarmored threespine stickleback](#) fish, [California condor](#), [least Bell’s vireo](#), [southwestern willow flycatcher](#), [California red-legged frog](#), [arroyo toad](#), [southern steelhead trout](#) and San Fernando Valley spineflower. [Wildlands of the Santa Clara River](#) provides a full accounting of rare environmental resources of this precious landscape.

Said the Sierra Club’s Jennifer Robinson: “The Sierra Club has fought throughout the nation and internationally for floodplain and river protection. As part of this national focus, it is only fitting that the 50,000-member Angeles Chapter should continue its longstanding battle to protect Los Angeles County’s last free-flowing river, the Santa Clara River, with legal opposition to a project that will be built almost entirely in its floodplain.”

“Developing in a river floodplain is never a good idea,” said Ileene Anderson, biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. “We should protect our precious water resources, not destroy them.”

The suit was filed in Los Angeles Superior Court under the California Environmental Quality Act, and will include additional “Map Act” and “Plan Consistency” issues. Brought by the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club, Friends of the Santa Clara River, Santa Clarita Organization for Planning the Environment (SCOPE), and Wishtoyo Foundation and its Ventura Coastkeeper program, the suit will ask the court to review the legality of the county’s approval process in order to protect this last remaining river resource area.

Los Angeles County approved an overall plan for the Newhall Ranch development in 2003. After promising groundbreaking for the project in 2000, approval of this first phase some 12 years later is the first authorization permitting construction. Plans have been slowed by the bankruptcy of LandSource Communities Development, the predecessor of Newhall Ranch’s current developer. CalPERS, California’s public pension fund, lost \$970 million of state employees’ investment in Newhall Ranch with the LandSource bankruptcy. Now, with the infusion of cash and majority ownership by several out-of-state hedge funds, investors are again looking to move forward on this destructive and questionable proposal. “Before a single house has been built, Newhall Ranch has already cost California’s taxpayers and workforce, including the county’s own staff, nearly a billion dollars of lost pension funds,” said Lynne Plambeck, president of the Santa Clarita Organization for Planning the Environment. “Although the state will never recover any of the largest single loss ever suffered by CalPERS, and will spend millions more in public monies to build roads, bridges and other infrastructure to serve this project, the county has once again endorsed this same development that will threaten the region’s water supply, worsen air pollution and cause further gridlock on our highways.”

“The project will impart irreversible impacts to the ecological integrity and water quality of the Santa Clara River watershed and Ventura’s coastal waters, harming the wellbeing of watershed

residents and visitors for years to come,” said Jason Weiner, associate director and staff attorney for the Wishtoyo Foundation’s Ventura Coastkeeper Program.

“The impacts to hundreds upon hundreds of our burial sites, and natural cultural resources such as the California condor that are such a vital component of our culture and religious practices, will be devastating and irreversible,” said Mati Waiya, a Chumash ceremonial elder and executive director of the Wishtoyo Foundation.

“The project information was substantially changed at the last minute just prior to the final hearing before the county supervisors,” said attorney Dean Wallraff. “The public and the decision-makers should have a document they can read through in a straightforward way to understand the environmental impacts of the project, and this isn’t it.”

New Protections for California Wetlands Sought

(Adapted from the California Habitat Conservation Planning Coalition Winter 2012 Newsletter)

In an encouraging development for river groups, the State Water Resources Control Board is preparing a new Wetlands and Riparian Area Protection Plan to provide for the protection of wetlands that are no longer protected by the federal Clean Water Act due to Supreme Court rulings.

The current Phase 1 effort is preparation of “Wetland Area Protection Policy and Dredge and Fill Regulations.” The purpose of Phase 1 is to protect all waters of the State from dredge and fill discharges, and will include a wetlands definition and assessment framework plus requirements applicable to dredge or fill material. Focus is expected to be on the sequencing approach of the federal 404(b)(1) alternatives analysis (avoidance, minimization, mitigation), with a strong emphasis on avoidance.

For further information on the SWRCB process, go to http://www.swrcb.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/cwa401/wrapp.shtml.

May, 2012 Watershed Forum

May, 2012 has been selected as a time to emphasize watersheds throughout California. In line with this, the Santa Clara River Watershed Committee, which operates within the Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County but also includes Los Angeles County, is planning a dinner-hour (light refreshments) event for May 2 at the Faulkner Farm near Santa Paula. Presentations from key agencies and other groups involved in managing various aspects of the watershed are anticipated. In addition, several tours of various water-related facilities in both the upper and lower watersheds are planned for two Saturdays – May 12 and 19. We’ll keep you posted.

Volunteer River Restoration Effort Will Continue

FSCR and its volunteer restoration team, led by restoration coordinator Jackie Worden, have now basically 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.

We will continue to expand our volunteer efforts by working on properties owned by The Nature Conservancy along the Santa Clara River, as well as at the Hedrick Ranch Nature Area. 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!! Remaining workdays for 2012 are scheduled for the following dates:

- April 7th, Saturday
- May 6th, Sunday (tentative, based on weather)