

WATERSHED

E-NEWS WINTER 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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FRIENDS OF THE SANTA CLARA RIVER

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Winter 2011

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Friends Join Lawsuit Opposing Wildlife Agency's Approval of Massive Newhall Ranch Project; Development Would Devastate Wildlife Habitat and Desecrate Native American Resources Along Santa Clara River



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 sprawling Newhall Ranch development — one of the largest single residential development projects ever contemplated in California — proposed for 12,000 acres along the Santa Clara River in northwest Los Angeles County. 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.

The Department's December 3 approval authorizes filling of the Santa Clara River and its floodplain on a massive scale; filling or concrete lining of nearly 20 miles of tributary streams; unearthing and desecration of Native American burial sites; paving over of natural areas used by the California condor and other wildlife; and the destruction of about one quarter of the San Fernando Valley spineflower population — a species found in only one other location — on and around the Newhall Ranch site. Los Angeles County has approved the Specific Plan for the project but has not approved any of the individual villages that make up the total development.

FSCR has long promoted protection of the Santa Clara River as one of the few major Southern California rivers that remain in a relatively natural state. Its watershed is home to a great diversity of rare species, including the unarmored threespine stickleback fish, the California condor, the least Bell's vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, California red-legged frog, arroyo toad, southern steelhead trout and the San Fernando Valley spineflower. FSCR believes the Department's approvals would result in unacceptable impacts to some of the finest riparian areas to be found anywhere in Southern California — a region which has lost all but 3 percent of its historic river woodlands.

The suit was filed under the California Environmental Quality Act, California Endangered Species Act and several provisions of the California Fish and Game Code in San Francisco County Superior Court. FSCR's partners in the suit are the Center for Biological Diversity, the Santa Clarita Organization for Planning the Environment, Wishtoyo Foundation/Ventura Coastkeeper and the California Native Plant Society.

We promise to keep you informed as the lawsuit moves through the court process. Meantime, we await release of the Army Corps of Engineers' Record of Decision on the federal 404 permit for Newhall Ranch under the Clean Water Act. Currently available information on the Draft Permit indicates the final document will still have unacceptable impacts, and should be changed to encompass more floodplain avoidance and much better treatment of the river's tributaries. The Environmental Protection Agency has sent several letters critical of the proposed permit.

UNITED WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN
STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEE TO INVESTIGATE POSSIBILITY OF FREEMAN
DIVERSION DAM REMOVAL



As we reported in our last issue (Fall, 2010) , a panel of experts has recently defined five possible ways to revamp the Vern Freeman Diversion Dam (shown above) for successful fish passage. This study was carried out as a condition of a lawsuit settlement between the United Water Conservation District (United) and CalTrout. The panel's report can be found on United's website at www.unitedwater.org. The report was developed to assist United in developing a Habitat Conservation Plan and Incidental Take Permit under the Endangered Species Act that

will allow accidental take (kill) of the federally endangered southern steelhead, which must migrate upstream past the diversion to reach its historic spawning grounds in the river's tributaries.

The options for establishing successful fish passage are: (1) as a long-term goal, remove the dam completely in conjunction with incorporation of alternate water diversion techniques; (2) a vertical slot fishway similar to the current fish ladder but with much improved entrance conditions; (3) a 4% grade, 82-foot wide rock ramp that would extend 562 feet upstream from the top of the dam; (4) a 6% grade concrete ramp similar to the rock ramp that would extend 367 feet from the dam top; (5) a 26-foot wide "nature-like" fishway that would provide a more natural rock-bottomed, vegetated channel around the dam. The panel recommended the vertical slot fishway and the concrete ramp as the most promising options for further studies, but said all options deserve further consideration before a final design is selected.

The dam removal option was not analyzed by the panel since it was considered beyond their level of expertise. However, the panel stated that "Considering the highly variable hydrologic characteristics of the basin, edge of steelhead ecosystem, fragility of the stock, inherent delays caused by dams, dam removal would have the greatest chance of allowing and promoting restoration of Santa Clara River fish stocks."

At a January 27 meeting of the Habitat Conservation Plan's Stakeholder Committee (FSCR is a member), the dam removal option was the center of an extensive discussion among committee participants. At the close of the meeting, a subcommittee was established by United to take a preliminary look at the overall ramifications of dam removal and to consider possible options for water diversion without a dam. United has a legal right to divert water from the Santa Clara River and the subcommittee will of course recognize this right. Regardless of the outcome of this subcommittee's evaluation, FSCR believes the dam removal option needs to remain on the table as a long-term goal.

SANTA PAULA CREEK FISH PASSAGE IS DEPENDENT ON FIXES TO FLOOD CONTROL PROJECT

As we noted in our last newsletter, the viability of the Army Corps of Engineers' (Corps) Santa Paula Creek flood control project that protects the City of Santa Paula is the subject of a new report (soon to be finalized) covering the potential for sediment deposition in the channel that could increase the flood threat to the city. The draft report, now available, indicates that sediment deposited downstream of the concrete-walled flood control channel could cause flooding which would cause flooding of Hwy. 126 access roads. However, the Ventura County Watershed Protection District has now revised the peak flow in a 100-year flood from 28,000 cfs to 38,800 cfs, an increase of 39% over the peak flow used in the Corps' analysis, and

updated analyses using the new peak flow show there would be impingement (called pressure flow) directly against the Hwy 126 bridge.

FSCR has been following this issue closely because Santa Paula Creek is a prime spawning stream for the endangered southern steelhead. The fishladder that was built as part of the flood control project was heavily damaged in the near-record 2005 flood. The Corps had earlier proposed to construct a second fishladder similar in design to the one that was damaged, but has now abandoned these plans due to the probability of damage to a modified ladder of similar design.

In January, 2011, FSCR hired the hydrological consulting firm cbec eco engineering of Sacramento (which is preparing a 2-D model of Santa Paula Creek for the State Coastal Conservancy) to attempt an answer to several questions related to the Flood Control Project and the possibility of achieving eventual fish passage by reshaping the channel grade to establish an incline the fish can ascend without a fishladder.

In its response, cbec recommended that a holistic reevaluation (of the flood control channel design) be undertaken to provide updated analyses addressing flood conveyance, sedimentation, and fish passage to include revised hydraulic and sediment transport analyses to account for changes to flood conveyance, sediment dynamics, fish passage, and routine maintenance based on updated information. They further recommended that these analyses should also consider:

- Potential widening of the flood control channel eastward to improve flood conveyance and/or minimize fish passage barrier formation and the need for subsequent maintenance within the pilot channel;
- Infrastructure improvements in the vicinity of Hwy 126 for flood conveyance;
- Fish ladder redesign taking into account the issues of outflanking, physical fish passage criteria and timing, timing of routine maintenance, and long-term maintenance costs;
- Sensitivity tests to account for the variability in sediment inputs and the impact of back-to-back storms when maintenance removal of sediment has not or cannot be performed in a timely manner.

The overall situation is complicated by the fact that a new Santa Paula development project, termed East Area 1, is planned adjacent to the east side of the creek. Modifications to the project, including possible channel widening, may have to be considered as part of overall improvement in flood protection for the entire east end of Santa Paula. East Area 1 annexation to Santa Paula will be taken up by the Ventura County Local Agency Formation Commission on March 16.

SANTA CLARA CHLORIDE ISSUE REMAINS UNRESOLVED

FSCR worked as a partner, over a period of two years, with the Los Angeles County Sanitation District (L.A.SAN), United Water Conservation District (United), the Regional Water Quality

Control Board (RWQCB), and the Ventura County Farm Bureau (VCFB), in crafting a plan to eliminate excess chloride levels in the Santa Clara River. The Saugus and Valencia waste water treatment plants in Santa Clarita are the primary sources of these chlorides. Although apparently not harmful to aquatic life, high chloride levels can adversely affect several farm products grown in Ventura County, including strawberries, avocados and nursery plants.

This plan, termed the Alternative Water Resource Management Plan (AWRM), would require construction of a new reverse osmosis desalination facility at the Valencia plant, in combination with new wells near Piru for blending the Valencia high-quality water with lower-quality groundwater. This blended water would then be piped downstream and dumped into the river near the Fillmore Fish Hatchery, where it would add to total instream flow. The overall effect would be the reduction of river chlorides to levels that would be safe for crops – approximately 117 milligrams per liter (mg/l).

However, the Santa Clarita Valley Sanitation District's board has now voted against the sewer rate increase that would fund studies of the AWRM project. This failure to approve rate increases has brought progress toward eventual resolution of the chloride issue to a halt. The RWQCB could, at some point, force a return to the previous Chloride limit of 100 mg/l. Currently, the Ventura County Agricultural Water Quality Coalition (VCAWQC - which includes the VCFB and other grower organizations) leans toward keeping the AWRM, even though they could opt out, because it benefits everyone in the watershed. If L.A. SAN is forced to go back to Plan "A", i.e., meeting the 100 mg/l limit and installing a 40-mile brineline to the ocean, they could build reverse osmosis facilities and sell the desalinated water, which would thereby be lost to the Santa Clara River system. That would leave unresolved the existing chloride problem in the East Piru Basin, and so is far from a desirable outcome. The RWQCB has been requested by the VCAWQC, United and other groups to move forward in addressing this issue.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES WITH FSCR

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!