

# WATERSHED

E-NEWS Spring 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.

### In this issue

- NEWHALL RANCH PROJECT UPDATE – Mission Village Lawsuit Filed



- REGIONAL WATER BOARD REFUSES WATER QUALITY CERTIFICATION FOR NEWHALL RANCH
- STATE OF THE WATERSHED EVENT HIGHLIGHTS WATER PLANNING

# FRIENDS OF THE SANTA CLARA RIVER

**WATERSHED**

E-news

Spring 2012

Ron Bottorff, Chair

Ginnie Bottorff, Editor

## **Environmental Groups Sue Newhall Ranch (Again!)**



Phil Hof

### **Lawsuit Challenges Second Massive Newhall Ranch “Village”**

#### ***Sprawling Development in Floodplain Would Devastate Wildlife Habitat, Hurt Cultural Resources***

LOS ANGELES— Five public-interest groups sued Los Angeles County in superior court on June 13 over its approval of permits for the *second* phase of the sprawling Newhall Ranch development — Mission Village. The Newhall Ranch development, conceived in the 1980s as one of the largest single residential development projects ever contemplated in California, is archaic and out of step with contemporary urban planning.

The project is intended to eventually include 60,000 housing units — the size of a mid-size city — including development in the floodplain along the Santa Clara River, the last mostly free-

flowing river left in Los Angeles County. The sprawling project threatens endangered species and natural areas and will bury many of the river's tributaries.

The [lawsuit](#) — brought by the [California Native Plant Society](#), [Center for Biological Diversity](#), [Friends of the Santa Clara River](#), [Santa Clarita Organization for Planning the Environment](#) (SCOPE) and [Wishtoyo Foundation and its Ventura Coastkeeper program](#) — challenges the legality of the county's approval process in order to protect the rare plant, animal, cultural resources and water quality.

The plan approved by the county on May 15 will develop open space that is home to endangered species in and along the Santa Clara river; eliminate habitat for the highly endangered San Fernando Valley spineflower; harm California condor habitat; and unearth and desecrate American Indian burial sites, sacred places and cultural natural resources.

"Decades have passed, planning principles have shifted and improved, and yet the county has failed to incorporate contemporary planning principles into this dinosaur of a project," said David Magney with the California Native Plant Society. "As a result, rare plants, including the San Fernando Valley spineflower, are going to be needlessly bulldozed and replaced by more strip malls, parking lots and houses no one can afford."

"It's unimaginable that L.A. County is so reckless with the last free-flowing river in the region," said Ron Bottorff with the Friends of the Santa Clara River. "Southern California has paved over and lost all but 3 percent of its historic river woodlands, yet these are resources are key to protecting our precious water."

The Santa Clara River Valley 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.

"Developing in endangered species habitat pushes rare plants and animals to the brink of extinction," said Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "These days, smart planning protects them instead of destroying their habitat."

Los Angeles County approved an overall plan for the Newhall Ranch development more than a decade ago. Approval of this second phase, called Mission Village, follows just months after the county approved the first phase, Landmark Village. Northern Los Angeles County is already plagued by high foreclosure rates and thousands of permitted housing units that have not been built. Financial bankruptcy by the development's previous investors cost California's public pension fund more than \$970 million of state employees' retirement. New investors are out-of-state hedge fund managers with no interest in California's rich natural legacy.

"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.

“Mission Village contains a former oil field now proposed for housing. Project information on toxic contamination was substantially changed at the very last minute just prior to the county’s approval,” said attorney Dean Wallraff. “Tetrachloroethene (PCE) contamination was discovered on the old oil field but the public was not given a chance to review any of this data in the review process, which is a violation of law.”

## Regional Water Board Refuses Water Quality Certification for Newhall Ranch

In an encouraging development for groups protecting the Santa Clara River, the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board, on June 7, rendered a decision that will require Newhall Ranch to address shortcomings in various mitigation requirements and make improvements in areas affecting water quality before it can get a go-ahead from the board.

The Water Board cited concerns about the alternatives analysis that was done by the Army Corps of Engineers in selecting the Least Environmentally Damaging Practical Alternative. The Board also was concerned that they should not give certification for the entire project, but only those villages so far approved by Los Angeles County.

The extensive floodplain losses and filling of tributaries incorporated in the Newhall Ranch Project are not in line with the Regional Board’s 2005 Hydromodification Resolution. Additionally, doubts were expressed about the manner in which mitigation measures will be funded, and whether there will be adequate monitoring of mitigation areas.

Newhall has until October 3 to address these concerns. Water quality certification, a requirement under the Clean Water Act, will not be forthcoming until the Board is satisfied all areas of concern have been addressed.

## Friends Participates in State of the Watershed Event Highlighting Regional Water Planning

May 2012 was selected as a time to emphasize the values of 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, held a dinner-hour event on May 2 at the Faulkner Farm near Santa Paula. Friends of the Santa Clara River is a member of the Watershed Committee and attends monthly meetings. Speakers from several organizations, including FSCR, presented talks on aspects of their respective watershed activities and areas of interest, followed by a poster-board session.

Speakers included Ventura County Supervisor Kathy Long, Coastal Conservancy Project Manager Director Peter Brand, Ventura County Farm Bureau CEO John Krist, United Water Conservation District Manager Michael Solomon, Santa Clarita Parks Director Richard Gould, Farm Bureau Water Programs Manager Dale Zurawski, and FSCR Chairman Ron Bottorff.

In his talk, Bottorff covered his group's accomplishments in the Santa Clara watershed, defined the major challenges facing us today, and what FSCR is doing about them. He emphasized the need for taking a long-term view, preserving floodplains and limiting river channelization, taking care of threatened and endangered species, improving water quality and water conservation, and coping with climate change as the primary issues to be addressed in the Santa Clara River watershed.