

WATERSHED

E-NEWS Spring 2013

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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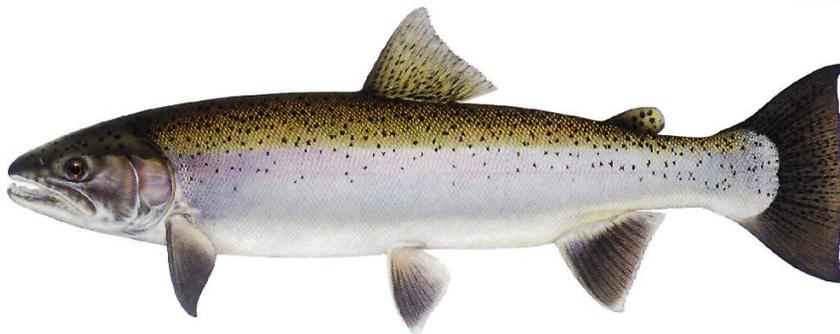
Ron Bottorff, Chair

Ginnie Bottorff, Editor

Santa Clara River Steelhead Coalition Formed

By Candice Meneghin

Steelhead are rainbow trout that exhibit an anadromous (i.e., migrating to and from the ocean) life history. Unlike other salmonids, however, steelhead do not perish after the first spawning season, and may complete the cycle of anadromy more than once. In addition, the Southern California population of steelhead, which range from the Santa Maria River in the north to the Tijuana River in the South, have a unique genetic makeup. This population tolerates warmer



water – a trait that could contribute to the species' long-term survival in the face of global climate change. Certain scientists also believe that the population is the “progenitor” (i.e., original ancestor of all

steelhead along the Pacific Coast). Unfortunately, human development, and in particular, the construction and operation of dams, has caused the Southern California steelhead population to decline by nearly 99%, prompting the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to list it as endangered, under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1997.

There are reasons, however, to be optimistic about this remarkable fish's chances for survival. The Santa Clara River and its principal tributaries, including Sespe Creek, Santa Paula Creek, Piru Creek, Hopper Creek and Pole Creek (collectively, Santa Clara River Watershed), contain exceptional habitat for the endangered population. For more than two decades, resource agencies and local stakeholders, including the Friends of the Santa Clara River, have been working to restore the species in the Santa Clara River Watershed. In 2012, their efforts received two major boosts. In January 2012, after years of public and agency input, NMFS released its Final Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan (NMFS Recovery Plan). The NMFS Recovery Plan identifies area-wide and Santa Clara Watershed specific threats to the Southern California steelhead. Moreover, it catalogs and prioritizes a wide-range of potential

steelhead recovery actions in the Santa Clara Watershed. According to NMFS, successful implementation of such actions leading to recovery “depends on the voluntary cooperation of multiple stakeholders.”

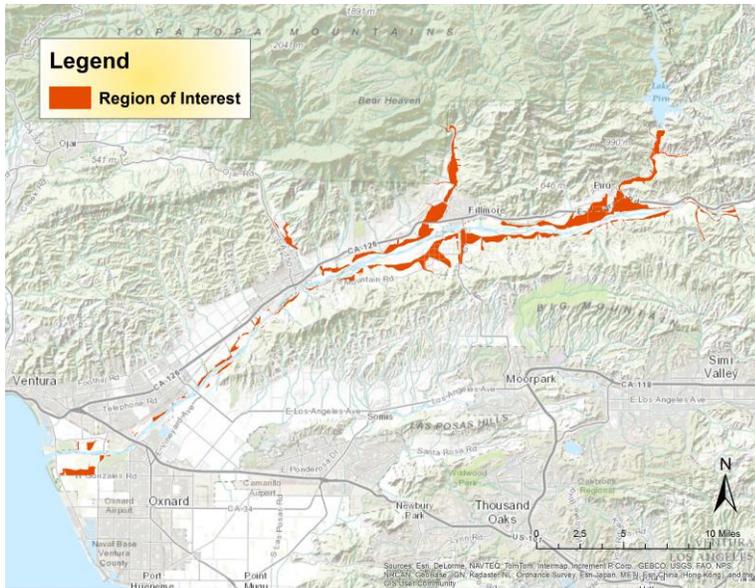
An example of such voluntary cooperation is the formation in the Fall of 2012, of the Santa Clara River Steelhead Coalition (Coalition). The Coalition, which has received generous funding from the California Department of Fish & Wildlife’s Fisheries Restoration Grant Program (FRGP), is chaired by the steelhead advocacy group California Trout, which also opened its Southern California Regional office in Ventura in 2012. In addition to CalTrout, the Coalition’s members include Friends of the Santa Clara River, the Nature Conservancy, Ventura Coastkeeper /Wishtoyo Foundation, the Santa Clara River Watershed Conservancy, Keep the Sespe Wild, UCSB’s RiVR Lab and Stoecker Ecological. CalTrout employee Candice Meneghin serves as the Coalition’s full-time Coordinator.

In the few months since its formation, the Coalition’s members have identified potential restoration projects for implementation in the Santa Clara River Watershed. Indeed, Coalition members have submitted grant proposals to the FRGP to underwrite some of these projects, including: elevation of the creek bed at the Harvey Diversion to provide interim fish passage until the Diversion can be “notched;” a monitoring program addressing upstream migration, fry and juvenile rearing, smolt outmigration, overall steelhead abundance and steelhead habitat suitability; and a study for the proposed restoration of 15-25 acres of steelhead habitat at the Santa Clara River estuary. Further, the Coalition is finalizing a strategic plan to identify and implement even more steelhead restoration projects in the coming years. The Coalition is also focusing on longer-term projects to benefit steelhead including the restoration of fish passage at the Vern Freeman Diversion Dam on the main stem of the Santa Clara River, and at the Santa Felicia Dam, which creates Piru Lake. Finally, the Friends of the Santa Clara River’s Chairman, Ron Bottorff, has committed to collaborating with Coalition Coordinator Candice Meneghin on drafting a comprehensive Communications Plan and planning community outreach events to publicize the Coalition’s efforts and inform the public regarding the status of the Southern California steelhead population at the regional and the Santa Clara Watershed level.

Floodplain Conservation Via Agricultural Easements

The Santa Clara River in Ventura County has one of the last remaining natural floodplains left in Southern California. In addition to prime farmland acreage, floodplains store floodwaters during peak flood periods and provide many other ecosystem services. The Ventura County Watershed Protection District has estimated that the Santa Clara’s natural floodplain could prevent downstream flood damages of \$204 million during a 100-year flood (2% chance of occurring in any given year).

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has received a \$3M Integrated Regional Water Management Plan grant and a \$1.5M match from the Santa Clara River Trustee Council to acquire easements



over agricultural land within the existing floodplain of the lower Santa Clara River. One of TNC’s key tasks in this project is to identify and prioritize those parcels that provide the greatest flood reduction and other benefits by remaining in the floodplain. These parcels would be of highest interest for participation in a voluntary floodplain easement program that could be offered to willing landowners.

The figure indicates the region of interest in the lower Santa Clara.

To complete this task TNC enlisted the help of the UCSB Bren School. After a year of investigation and analysis they have completed the parcel prioritization and evaluation analysis.

TNC will use this prioritization in future efforts to establish Agricultural Conservation Easements within the floodplain. An Agricultural Conservation Easement (ACE) purchases the development rights of a property, which allows farmers to supplement their income while lowering their tax burdens. The results of the easement valuation methodologies will provide a framework for TNC to begin acquiring easements as well as justification for easement value.

For more information, visit the Bren School website (<http://www2.bren.ucsb.edu/~santaclara/>)

SCOPE and FSCR Prevail in Vista Canyon Ranch Case

In a long-awaited decision the Los Angeles County Superior Court ruled that environmental documents submitted for the Vista Canyon Ranch in Canyon Country, California, were inadequate and set aside both the Environmental Impact Report and the project approvals. The ruling was made in a lawsuit brought by three environmental and neighborhood preservation groups - FSCR, Santa Clarita Organization for Planning and the Environment (SCOPE) and



Homeowners for Neighborhood Preservation. The lawsuit claimed that the EIR for the project did not comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requirements in several respects.

Proposed for the rural Sand Canyon area, the 1050 unit Vista Canyon Ranch also includes 800,000 square feet of commercial and retail

space and a 200 room hotel. It is located almost entirely in the floodplain of the Santa Clara River, and will require some 500,000 cubic yards of dirt to fill the floodplain area in order to meet Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) safety standards. It also calls for 7500 linear feet of channelization of the Santa Clara River in the project area.

In his finding, Judge Goodman ruled that the EIR could **not** use the full 1620 square miles of the Santa Clara watershed to determine that the project had no cumulative effect on the environment, but rather that it must focus on the effect of the construction in the vicinity of the project.

We are pleased that this Judge recognized the ongoing problem of cumulative effects to the river. There is no question that 7500 feet of linear banking and massive filling of the river in this area are significant impacts and that they lead to the loss of natural river function. California water policy now recognizes the importance of natural floodplains and recommends against usurping them for development projects.

There may be an appeal in the works. Stay tuned.