

WATERSHED

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FRIENDS OF THE SANTA CLARA RIVER

Friends of the Santa Clara River 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 watershed is the largest natural river system remaining in Southern California, and the river was selected by American Rivers in 2005 as one of the nation's most endangered.

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Los Angeles County Begins Environmental Review on Homestead South - Newhall Ranch 3rd Phase

Los Angeles County's Department of Regional Planning on March 28, 2014 issued a Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for Homestead South, the next phase of the proposed 21,000-home Newhall Ranch Project. The Homestead South tract map joins Landmark Village and Mission Village tract maps as partial Implementation of the Newhall Ranch Specific Plan, which was first approved by the County in 2003.

The Homestead South tract map proposes development of 3,617 residences, 66,400 square feet of commercial uses, three school sites, and a 67.4-acre spineflower preserve. This phase will have major impacts to the Santa Clara River and its tributaries. Both Friends and our allies in the environmental community will be carefully monitoring this environmental review as it moves through various stages of public hearings and approvals.

Meanwhile, lawsuits against both Landmark and Mission Villages under the California Environmental Quality Act are proceeding through the courts. This litigation primarily argues that these developments have failed to adequately mitigate for impacts to the river and its wildlife and to Native American sites, as well as for creation of greenhouse gases. Neither the Landmark Village lawsuit nor the Mission Village lawsuit was successful in the trial courts. Appeals of both lawsuits are underway.

We have been disappointed that a lawsuit filed early in 2011 against the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (formerly Fish and Game) for an improper stream alteration permit has not held up at the appeal court level after a favorable outcome in the trial court. A Petition for Review has been filed with the California Supreme Court, but the Court has discretion as to whether to review the case. We are, of course, hopeful that the Court will agree to do a review.

However, a potentially much more important legal action was filed in March 2014 against the Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency by Friends, SCOPE, Wishtoyo's Ventura Coastkeeper Program, and the Center for Biological Diversity. This action claims that these agencies approved a Section 404 permit for Newhall Ranch in 2011 that fails to comply with the federal Clean Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act. **In view of the fact that the Newhall Ranch grading plan allows the dumping of 20 million cubic yards of fill into the river and its tributaries, the outcome of this lawsuit carries deep implications for the manner in which these laws are applied to rivers, streams, and wetlands.**

Oxnard Levee Project to Get Critical Review

Downstream of Highway 101 on the south bank, the existing Santa Clara River levee system currently has a 2,500'- long "gap" in flood protection. Moreover, the existing so-called SCR-3 levee system downstream of the gap does not have the design capacity to provide flood protection to properties located in the City of Oxnard. Consequently, in its current configuration, the levee system does not meet federally-mandated levee certification regulations.

The Ventura County Watershed Protection District has developed options for correcting deficiencies in the existing levee system, and has also defined an improvement plan to meet federal requirements. The goal of the improvement project is rehabilitation of the levee system so that it will provide adequate protection from a 1%-annual chance (formerly known as the 100-year) flood event for approximately 3,800 structures located in North Oxnard, and thereby eliminate the regulatory requirement that property owners with federally-backed mortgages in this area purchase flood insurance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Flood Insurance Program (FEMA-NFIP).

The official Santa Clara River Levee Project website is now open at www.vcwatershed.com/levee. It describes the need for the levees and the reasons for the chosen alternative designs. A comment form is expected to be added to the website in the near future.

It is indeed unfortunate that Oxnard has allowed development in the floodplain of the river that has resulted in the need for this levee project, which will be quite expensive. We will be paying close attention as the environmental review process proceeds in an effort to limit environmental damage and ensure that adequate mitigation measures are adopted.

Finding of Quagga Mussels in Lake Piru Arouses Significant Concerns

Quagga mussels, an invasive species found in various rivers and lakes of the United States, have now made an appearance in the Santa Clara River watershed. The mussels were discovered in Lake Piru in December 2013 and in lower Piru Creek in January 2014.

The mussels have been present since 2007 in waterways connected to the Colorado River, but this is their first appearance in Ventura, Los Angeles or Santa Barbara Counties.

The journal *Management of Biological Invasions* (2013) Volume 4, Issue 1 argues that quagga mussels are among the most serious biofouling pests in North America. They can clog water intakes and cause multiple problems in pipes and pumping systems, leading to substantial economic costs.

UCSB biologist Tom Dudley has argued that quaggas are probably here to stay and that a proper biocontrol program is the best response to the problem. He also maintains that the concern relates more to reservoir/water conveyance facilities rather than biodiversity because it is fairly unlikely that a sufficient quagga population will establish itself in naturally flowing streams such as Piru Creek or the Santa Clara River.

It is clear that the discovery of this species in Lake Piru and Piru Creek represents a serious problem for the United Water Conservation District. Since discovery, United has made efforts to determine the extent of mussel distribution and undertaken preliminary measures to control the spread of the species, including dissemination of educational materials to boaters and posting signage at the Lake.

There is much still to be done. United is currently working on a Quagga Mussel Monitoring and Control Plan, which must be approved by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.