

# WATERSHED

E-NEWS Winter 2015

## 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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## Fish Passage is an Integral Part of a Healthy River

Much has been written recently about the cost of revisions to the Vern Freeman Diversion Dam to allow southern steelhead to swim upstream past the dam and thereby access their spawning grounds in Santa Clara River tributaries. Many estimates have been floated about the cost of these revisions and, although apparently still to be finalized, it indeed promises to be a big number.

The Freeman Diversion facility has over many decades provided water for distribution to Oxnard Plain farmers and to replenish aquifers beneath the plain that have incurred seawater intrusion as a result of decades of over-drafting.

It is clear that Ventura County's farming industry would be significantly harmed by loss of the water provided by the Freeman Diversion. It is also clear, as far as the best science can determine, that a healthy Santa Clara River steelhead population is vital to the survival of this iconic fish, which has persevered for thousands of years in California streams.

Southern steelhead, whose range covers streams from Point Conception to the Mexican border, have now become critically endangered. It is estimated that only about 500 adult fish survive. These fish can survive in warmer water than their northern steelhead cousins. With climate change and warming ocean and stream temperatures, survival of the southern steelhead may well be a significant cog in keeping the entire species viable.

Steelhead are a keystone species for watershed and ecosystem health. A healthy and robust steelhead population indicates a healthy watershed. Healthy watersheds recharge groundwater and provide clean water for people and wildlife. Improving fish passage at the Freeman Diversion, although vitally important, is only one of many efforts underway to improve fish prospects for steelhead. The Santa Clara River Steelhead Coalition is working with landowners to identify opportunities to improve fish passage in local tributaries, and has in the works several projects and proposals in support of this effort.



Friends understand the difficulties that the United Water Conservation District and its customers are grappling with in how best to pay for and implement a solution that will ensure fish passage. We stand ready to work with United and the agricultural community in

locating resources and achieving a solution to this problem. We believe it is possible, as well as essential, to manage our land and water in a manner that benefits both people and native species like steelhead trout. Improving fish passage over the Freeman Diversion sets us on such a course.

## **Restoration Work Gets Off to a Moderate Start in 2015**

Habitat restoration work on 80 acres of the 220-acre Hedrick Ranch Nature Area, which is under the stewardship of Friends of the Santa Clara River, is now essentially complete except for weed control and a small *Arundo donax* removal effort. HRNA is now the largest green patch on the lower Santa Clara River.

FSCR and the University of California, as partners, will soon begin work on a major restoration project that will restore almost 200 acres of riparian habitat on properties adjacent to HRNA over a period of four years, by removing invasive plant species and using active re-vegetation to establish riparian forests. This project is slated to receive funding from Proposition 84 plus matching funds from UCSB, FSCR and the Santa Clara River Trustee Council.



Meanwhile, UCSB project leader Adam Lambert reports that *Arundo* control and restoration has continued on three properties in the project area where work had already begun. Several volunteer work days were held after rains and over 175 willow and cottonwood cuttings were planted on The Nature Conservancy's Taylor Property next to HRNA. *Arundo* control also began on the nearby Underwood property with mowing of about 1.5 acres of dense *Arundo*. UCSB also worked with students and staff from the Fillmore School Department to remove *Arundo* from over 6 acres of riparian habitat on their School Farm Property. Students also assisted in collecting and propagating cuttings of riparian plants. Efforts will now focus on planting during the remaining winter months, and monitoring vegetation and wildlife recovery during the spring and summer growing season.