

## **Coalition Seeks to Protect Watershed's Very Nature**

**Army engineers and Ventura and L.A. counties will study ways to prevent development from harming the Santa Clara River.**

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Balancing growth with protecting the Santa Clara River, the last free-flowing river in Southern California, is the goal of an \$8.2-million study by a partnership that includes Ventura and Los Angeles counties.

Plans for the four-year study were announced Wednesday at a news conference held under a canopy of oaks in the Santa Clara River Valley and attended by Ventura County Supervisor Kathy Long, Los Angeles County Supervisor Mike Antonovich and representatives from the Army Corps of Engineers.

The study is aimed at creating better policies on flooding, water protection, erosion and restoration to help guide development decisions that could affect the Santa Clara River, which flows west 84 miles from the San Gabriel Mountains north of Acton to the ocean near Oxnard and Ventura.

"Working together on this wonderful resource, we will use the county line that traverses the watershed as a bridge to bring together the information that will guide our regions to a healthier, vital and enriched watershed for the next 20 years," Long told the 40 guests at the signing ceremony at Rancho Camulos, a national historic landmark near the river east of Piru.

Increased pressure to develop within the watershed — including housing, citrus farming and gravel mining — must be reconciled with the need to protect the 1,600-acre watershed, which is about the size of Delaware, Long said.

The corps will put up half the money for the study, Los Angeles County will contribute \$1.7 million and Ventura County will spend \$2.3 million through 2007. Each county's allocation is based on its portion of the watershed and the number of streams in its jurisdiction.

About 60% of the river's length flows through Ventura County. The water is used to recharge groundwater supplies for irrigating farmland in the Santa Clara Valley and Oxnard Plain.

The watershed also provides habitat to 14 endangered or threatened animal and plant species, including the San Fernando Valley spineflower, the least Bell's vireo songbird and fish such as steelhead trout and the unarmored threespine stickleback.

"This will allow us to improve the protection of the residents near the Santa Clara River and also protect the ecosystem," Antonovich said. "It will help preserve the balance so we can protect the environment and prepare for future growth, where appropriate. We're not looking to create another L.A. River and cement it in."

Jeff Pratt, director of the Ventura County Watershed Protection District, said the plan would build upon an earlier study of the river's 500-year flood plain that provided background on biological, commercial, recreational and cultural resources along the river.

Computer models will compile 50 years of data about rainfall, water flow, evaporation and temperature to predict how future storms might affect property and the environment and how proposed development projects might further alter flood conditions.

"We're going to take a closer look at the watershed than anyone has ever done," he said. "There's a ton of public policy questions that can be answered a lot better if you've got good information."

The intent, he said, is to consider the perspective of the watershed's stakeholders: cities, water and sanitation districts, state and federal regulators, environmentalists, nature conservancies and developers.

Ron Bottorff, chairman of Friends of the Santa Clara River, said he was encouraged to see the watershed district, the Los Angeles County Flood Control District and the Army Corps of Engineers working on a long-term plan to protect the environment.

To preserve the more than 400 acres of prime woodland remaining along the river, Bottorff said he would like to see development prohibited within the 500-year flood plain, or at least 300 feet from the river itself.

Marlee Lauffer, spokeswoman for Newhall Land Co., said the developer planned buffer zones of 300 to 700 feet along the Santa Clara in the first phase of Newhall Ranch, a city-size project to eventually create more than 20,800 homes west of Magic Mountain. The first phase of its 1,400-home River Village project should go before the Los Angeles County Planning Commission for consideration early next year, she said.

Fillmore Councilwoman Patti Walker said her city would monitor the watershed study's progress to ensure that its recommendations wouldn't interrupt city plans for Heritage Valley Park, a development of 750 homes to be built near the river.

Santa Paula plans a \$50-million waste treatment plant adjacent to the river and intends to be involved in the watershed protection plan, said City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz.

"We want to be at the table for this," Bobkiewicz said. "We don't want to do things that don't make sense for the larger region."