

Threat to river disputed in letter

Newhall Land says group's list in error

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VALENCIA -- The major owner of land along the banks of the Santa Clara River is challenging a national environmental group for naming the channel as one of the nation's most endangered waterways -- without visiting the region.

In a letter Friday to the president of American Rivers, based in Washington, D.C., Marlee Lauffer of The Newhall Land and Farming Company urged a meeting between representatives of the group and the development company with the goal of removing the Santa Clara from its list of 10 threatened U.S. rivers.

"We believe that the Santa Clara was included in error, and that this error could have been avoided if American Rivers had contacted Newhall Land," Lauffer wrote.

Lauffer said Newhall Land, which continues developing along the banks of the normally dry river in the Santa Clarita Valley, is taking the very steps recommended by American Rivers to protect the waterway.

Newhall Land recently won approval from the city of Santa Clarita to build 1,089 homes on 695 acres north of the Santa Clara just east of Bouquet Canyon Road, a development environmentalists are challenging in court. The company also is behind the 21,000-home Newhall Ranch project planned along the river just east of the Los Angeles County-Ventura County line.

Lauffer could not be reached Monday for comment, and Eric Eckl, spokesman for American Rivers, said his agency would withhold extensive comment until reviewing Lauffer's letter.

Serena S. McClain, conservation associate for American Rivers, said the organization relied on reports from various environmental groups about the river and the impacts of planned development, but representatives did not visit the area.

Reports came from Friends of the Santa Clara River, the Santa Clara River Alliance, the Center for Biological Diversity, Heal the Bay, Lawyers for Clean Water and Ventura Coastkeeper. The list of rivers was announced in April.

Peter Galvin of the Center for Biological Diversity said he believed Lauffer was masking the issue -- that development is degrading the last wild river in Southern California and that American Rivers is a legitimate organization that monitors environmental issues nationwide.

"Clearly, the Santa Clara River is under siege and for Newhall (Land) to suggest that it is not under siege is simply not true," said Galvin, contacted at his home in Eureka, Calif.

McClain said that rivers are included on the annual list "based on a combination of scientific and nonscientific data we gather from the community, agencies and other local groups."

Newhall Land and other landowners along the Santa Clara, which runs 84 miles from Acton to Oxnard where it empties in the Pacific, were not notified that the river was included on the list until just before the list was made public, McClain said.

"The whole point of the list is it's a surprise," she said. "If you tell Newhall (Land) months in advance it wouldn't be a surprise."

Lauffer wrote in her letter that American Rivers erroneously contends the developer will "smother 15 miles of tributary streams with concrete and channelize 17 more." The developer, in fact, will leave 22 miles of river bank undisturbed and intrude upon just three miles of small natural drainages that do not support delicate habitats, she said.

She also said the organization found fault with planned buried bank stabilizations, a system Newhall Land contends is a recognized means of flood protection that is environmentally sensitive compared with conventional methods of flood control.

While American Rivers said "Newhall has already closed about 15 miles of the Santa Clara and its shoreline to the public," Lauffer said that the river has crossed property Newhall Land has owned for 130 years that will open to the public for the first time when trails are built within the Newhall Ranch project.

Last year, Los Angeles and Ventura counties agreed to conduct an \$8.2 million joint study of the river to set regional environmental and development guidelines for the growing areas along the river.