

Conservancy Buys Riverfront Land

Group purchases 377 acres along the Santa Clara that was once slated for mining.

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The Nature Conservancy has purchased nearly three miles of land along the Santa Clara River in Ventura County, reaching the halfway point in its goal to protect about 20 miles of habitat along the riverbank.

The 377 acres near Piru Creek, once slated for aggregate mining, is home to nearly three dozen endangered, threatened or sensitive species, including steelhead trout and the California red-legged frog.

"It's really a big deal for us, because we've crossed the 2,000-acre threshold. We've crossed the 10-mile milestone, too. It's motivational," said E.J. Remson of the conservancy, the nonprofit environmental organization that is creating a conservation zone along one of the last free-flowing rivers in Southern California.

"Not only is the acreage good, but the amount of river they've captured is quite long," said Ron Bottorff, chairman of Friends of the Santa Clara River, a nonprofit group working to restore habitat on 230 acres farther downstream. "That's what we want to see: the river flood plain and the surrounding terraced lands protected."

The conservancy paid \$575,000 for the land, owned by Vulcan Materials Inc., which was unable to secure permits for mining on the property. The sale was announced Thursday.

So far, the conservancy has purchased acreage amounting to a roughly 10-mile-long corridor along the Santa Clara, which flows 84 miles from the San Gabriel Mountains east of Acton to the ocean near Oxnard and Ventura.

The conservancy plans to honor leases on 19 acres — held by a horse rancher — of the Vulcan parcel. The leases bring in more than \$23,000 in annual payments, which will assist in maintaining that and other land the organization controls along the river, Remson said.

Farmers and other landowners along the river had been vocal in their opposition to Vulcan's proposal to mine the riverbed, which usually is underwater during the rainy season only.

"The Nature Conservancy is doing an excellent job of taking what had been an environment disaster and turning it into a wonderful resource in Ventura County forever," said Kathy Long, chairwoman of the county Board of Supervisors.

"I think Vulcan is astute enough to know there is a community that doesn't want mining in the river," she said. "I think it's a good corporate decision on their part."

Unlike earlier purchases, which were funded by the California Coastal Conservancy, the money for this acquisition came from an \$8.1-million restoration fund that Arco Pipeline Co. was forced to establish after the 1994 Northridge earthquake ruptured one of its

pipelines in at least eight places near the Santa Clara. About 168,000 gallons of crude oil traveled 16 miles downstream before being contained.

About \$4 million of the Arco settlement was earmarked for Nature Conservancy programs. This is the first land acquisition using those funds, according to Dana Michaels, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Fish and Game, which is overseeing the settlement fund along with representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"It's a great piece of property for its conservation value, and this is a property that was directly affected by the oil spill," Remson said.

In March, the two conservancies paid \$1.28 million for more than 1,000 acres along about a mile of the river, between Saticoy and Santa Paula.