

Stream consciousness

Report warns project will endanger river

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SANTA CLARITA - A report released today by a national environmental group says the Newhall Ranch subdivision will endanger the Santa Clara River, which could cause it to lose its status as the largest and last natural waterway in Southern California.

The report, compiled by the American Rivers coalition, says the 21,000-home development will channelize streams, pave wetlands, deforest riverbanks, pollute water, increase flash flooding and abolish already endangered wildlife.

"If the developer secures the required permits for Newhall Ranch, it will unleash its bulldozers on 19 square miles of natural areas straddling the upper Santa Clara River, including 141 acres located on the river's floodplain," according to the report. "The developer plans to smother 15 miles of tributary streams with concrete and channelize 17 more. These are the same heavy-handed and outmoded practices that have ruined almost every other river in Southern California."

The report lists the Santa Clara River as one of 10 in the United States that could be endangered within the next year.

The Newhall Land and Farming Company has already secured preliminary approval from Los Angeles County. Further studies are due later this year. If approved, construction would begin in 2006.

"Time may be running out," said Serena McClain, conservation associate for American Rivers. "Developers are about to repeat the same mistakes that have destroyed other rivers."

In 2000, Ventura County joined several environmental groups to sue Los Angeles County for its 1999 approval of Newhall Ranch. The plaintiffs said the project's environmental impact report was inadequate, forcing The Newhall Land and Farming Company into augmenting the study.

Newhall Land officials said Tuesday that every project had been thoroughly analyzed to help preserve the river. And the studies will continue, said Newhall Land spokeswoman Marlee Lauffer.

"We are very confident that our plan is protective of the river," Lauffer said. "We are actually restoring property adjacent to the river back into the corridor, property that has been used in farming. It is a very sensitive plan."

Last year, Los Angeles and Ventura counties agreed to conduct an \$8.2 million joint study of the Santa Clara River to set regional environment and development guidelines for the rapidly growing areas.

The four-year Santa Clara River Watershed Protection Plan Feasibility Study, which is largely funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will analyze flood control, erosion, water quality and natural habitats in the 1,600-square-mile area where the river and its tributaries run.

Groups such as the Friends of the Santa Clara River say the Army Corps study will only be effective if the agency acts quickly by placing moratoriums on any future projects until research is complete. A cumulative study of the effects of development on the Santa Clara River and its habitats has never been done.

"We're hoping (the American Rivers report) will give decision makers and federal and state agencies that make permit decisions a new perspective on how this river is an important watershed," said Ron Bottorff, chairman of Friends of the Santa Clara River. "Every other big river in Southern California has had extensive channelization. We're hoping it will point out how development is encroaching heavily in the floodplain of the river. We really don't know yet what all the effects are."

For years, local conservationists have worked to raise more awareness about the Santa Clara River, listing 16 species of animals that are close to extinction, including the Southwestern arroyo toad and the Southern steelhead trout.

The river begins in the San Gabriel Mountains, running 84 miles through the largest watershed in Southern California before draining into the Pacific Ocean. Los Angeles County takes up 772 square miles of the watershed. But the river, which includes fertile farmland and growing suburbs such as Santa Clarita, also has become a source of contention between environmentalists and developers. In addition to Newhall Ranch, the 1,100-unit development known as Riverpark has raised several concerns.

Various lawsuits have been filed, won and lost, and yet the river remains a virtual unknown to many Los Angeles County residents, local environmentalists say. In their eyes, that lack of awareness, plus ongoing development, may turn the Santa Clara into the Los Angeles River, an image that makes environmentalists shudder.

"I think it's already at that point, unless we step back and look at the bigger picture," said Santa Clara River alliance coordinator Teresa Savaikie. "While it's sad our river is listed in such a report, I think it's a really good opportunity to get this river out of the back hills of Los Angeles County and hopefully make the public aware of it. We have a responsibility to make sure that this river remains a river."

The Santa Clara River

Headwaters: Acton

Mouth: Oxnard

Length: 116 miles

Watershed: 1,600 square miles

Endangered or threatened species: unarmored three spined stickleback fish, least Bell's vireo songbird, Southwestern arroyo toad, Southern steelhead trout, Southwestern pond turtle.

Name: The river was discovered in 1769 by Spanish explorers on the feast day of St. Clare.