

A debate rages, and three rivers run through it

Two Southland waterways are being restored, but Santa Clara in danger

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SANTA CLARITA -- The rivers that run through Los Angeles County more closely resemble drainage ditches than natural waterways, but there is one glaring exception: the Santa Clara.

Government officials and environmentalists realize this, and they are pouring millions of dollars -- and entire careers -- into restoring habitat around the Los Angeles and San Gabriel rivers.

However, while projects ranging from massive land buys to drastic rechanneling efforts find support on the blighted watersheds, there is growing concern that planners are dropping the ball with respect to the last naturally intact Southern California river.

This oversight has alarmed and befuddled the region's environmental community.

"The county of Los Angeles is working down here (at the L.A. River) on how to change the way they do things to support watershed management," said Melanie Winter, founder and director of The River Project, a group that has helped gather more than \$150 million for projects related to revitalizing the L.A. River.

"So, while they're looking at how they're going to carefully and thoughtfully undo and mitigate the damage that was done here in L.A., they're rushing headlong into a process that's going to create the same result up in Santa Clarita that we're working to undo here.

"It's hard to reconcile, and it's a maddening thing because it's the same county -- it's Los Angeles."

Winter and others point to the 21,000-home Newhall Ranch project that is planned along a five-mile stretch of the Santa Clara as evidence. Likewise, they say, the continued development of the banks of the river and of flood plains throughout the valley indicate a disregard for the health of the watershed.

County Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, whose 5th District contains much of the Santa Clara River, contends that those concerns are regularly addressed.

"Supervisor Antonovich has directed our county staff to conduct a very thorough review and analysis of proposed development projects to ensure that they are not adversely impacting the critical resource that is the Santa Clara River," said Paul Novak, Antonovich's planning deputy.

Novak added that Antonovich was supportive of the Santa Clara Watershed Protection Plan, a comprehensive study to be conducted by Ventura and Los Angeles counties and the Army Corps of Engineers, if it is approved Tuesday by the Board of Supervisors.

Peter Galvin, California and Pacific director of the Center for Biological Diversity, emphatically disagreed with Novak's assessment.

"It's ironic all of the efforts that are going on to re-green the San Gabriel and L.A. rivers," Galvin said. "Thirty miles over the hill, the exact opposite process is occurring. They are rushing to put concrete in and develop it."

At its headwaters in the parched mountains along the Antelope Valley Freeway, the Santa Clara River lines the creases of forgotten canyons with a shimmering green canopy of cottonwood trees that give life to the dusty landscape.

The river, which runs more than 100 miles from the hills of Acton to the ocean north of Oxnard, is the wildlife artery that sustains the region's entire ecosystem. Environmentalists say they cannot overstate its value. Their claims ring with hyperbole, but biologists and ecologists agree.

"It is the last large remaining natural river in all of Southern California -- every other large river has been either heavily channelized, or heavily impacted by massive development," said Ron Bottorff, founder and chairman of Friends of the Santa Clara River, an environmental group that operates in Los Angeles and Ventura counties. "It is a regional resource of unparalleled importance."

Like many Southern California watersheds, the Santa Clara does not often resemble a river, but rather a dried-out channel of dirt and shrubs. But in the rainy season, the water flows. And in all seasons, animals and plants native to the habitat -- many of which are endangered or threatened -- depend on its unique ecosystem.

Some of the more noteworthy species are the Southwestern arroyo toad, the unarmored three-spined stickleback fish and the least Bell's vireo, a small songbird.

These endangered animals, which could disappear if the habitat were drastically altered, are a symbol for the fragile livelihood of the river itself. As homes encroach on its banks and car dealerships fill in its flood plains, the Santa Clara, Galvin says, could be reduced to a barren wasteland.

"It's an ecosystem that's suffering multiple contusions," Galvin said. "It's just a question of how many it can take before it can't get back up. The big problem is that nobody's looking at the cumulative impact of it all. They're looking at it one project at a time."

The same thing once could have been said about the San Gabriel and Los Angeles rivers, according to Jeff Yann, chairman of the San Gabriel River Campaign for the Sierra Club.

Driving down a gravel access road alongside a 1-mile stretch of river surrounded by development, Yann pointed to a row of splintered wooden structures where a duck farm used to operate. Now, after purchasing the farm for \$3.2 million, the property has been set aside as part of the river restoration project.

"Our preference is for this to look more like what the river-associated habitat used to look like -- to some degree, just like brush," said Yann, who has worked with the county and several other agencies to accomplish many environmental improvements to the San Gabriel River. "This is one of the five projects that really exemplify what we're trying to do."

Likewise, Winter, of The River Project, has embarked on a plan to transform the Los Angeles River.

Over the past four years, The River Project has helped buy up the 100-acre Taylor Yard just northeast of downtown Los Angeles for \$40 million. Winter also is helping replace concrete river channels with natural materials that will encourage the ecosystem to flourish once again.

"These are the lessons we've learned from being wrong, and we did it wrong because we didn't know enough at the time," Winter said. "We were in love with what engineering could accomplish,

and we weren't thinking from an integrated perspective. We were looking to facilitate housing and development, and we were in a hurry to get it done."

According to Winter, the same is taking place again in North Los Angeles County. And Yann worries that the urgency apparent on the San Gabriel and L.A. rivers might not be found in Santa Clarita until it's too late.

"Those of us involved realize that the pressure gets greater when there's so little of the resource left," Yann said.

With that urgency, Yann and Winter have done what activists in Santa Clarita have failed to do: that is, find the ear of developers and public officials with the power and money to fight the oppressively persistent push for development.

Teresa Savaikie is a stay-at-home mother of three who has dedicated the majority of her waking hours to fighting development along the Santa Clara River. She says Antonovich and the development community are determined to build at all costs.

"Their main objective is to get as many houses crammed in, without any regard for the environment," Savaikie said.

But Novak, Antonovich's planning deputy, argues that Santa Clarita's environmentalists have been unwilling to seek compromise.

"Supervisor Antonovich would welcome a more collaborative approach amongst all parties working to protect and preserve the Santa Clara River," Novak said. "It is regrettable that ancillary issues have polarized the debate to the point that all parties seem to be working across purposes rather than working together in a positive fashion."

And officials at the region's most powerful developer, The Newhall Land and Farming Company, contend that they have gone beyond the call, even implementing what they call the Natural River Management Plan, which is intended to give a comprehensive view of the Santa Clara River.

"Before you do any development, you have to get a variety of different approvals," said Marlee Lauffer, vice president of Newhall Land. "The form of flood control that people used in the 1920s, '30s, '40s, '50s and '60s -- the development that occurred in the Los Angeles area -- is not at all acceptable or appropriate today. We don't even look at anything within the resource lines of the river.

"It's not appropriate to compare rehabilitation going on in San Gabriel and Los Angeles to the Santa Clara River. It's two different extreme examples."

The less extreme comparison may be outside of Los Angeles County.

Tuesday, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors is expected to vote on the Santa Clara Watershed Protection Plan, which will team Los Angeles County with Ventura County and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Ventura County has taken a far more progressive and proactive approach to protecting the Santa Clara River than has Los Angeles County, and environmentalists hold it up as proof of what can be done.

"This river basically has two major pieces, one in the L.A. County section and the other in the Ventura section," said Bottorff, head of Friends of the Santa Clara. "Ventura is the part of the river where some good things are going on. Once you go upstream of the county line, you see massive developments which are changing the entire watershed."

According to Jeff Pratt, director of the Ventura County Watershed Protection District, the Santa Clara Watershed Protection Plan would be a good step for Los Angeles County to take.

"What we are trying to do is get the big picture, and it's incredibly expensive and time consuming," said Pratt. "We are going to start looking at things on a grand scale, trying to assess and plan in the future comprehensively, in a coordinated fashion on how the watershed will evolve in the next 50 years."

Environmentalists skeptical of Antonovich contend that investing in the plan is one thing, but committing to act on it could be a different story.