

Santa Clara River in Danger, Group Says

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The Santa Clara River, which snakes 84 miles from the San Gabriel Mountains to the Ventura County coast, is one of two California waterways that rank among the nation's most threatened for 2005, according to an environmental group that annually compiles a list of endangered rivers.

The American Rivers group ranks the Santa Clara, the longest and wildest river remaining in Southern California, as the nation's 10th most endangered, because of the massive Newhall Ranch project and other urban development planned along its banks.

The Tuolumne River near Yosemite National Park ranks eighth, the rivers group said, because of a proposal that would allow San Francisco to take more water from the mountain stream, already a principal supplier of Bay Area drinking water.

Four of the 10 waterways identified as endangered by American Rivers are polluted by spilled or poorly treated sewage, with the Susquehanna River, which drains into the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, ranked as the most threatened.

The Washington, D.C.-based group each year ranks endangered rivers as those with the most uncertain futures, based on decisions that could harm them in the coming 12 months. It has worked with about 400 local environmental groups nationwide in designating about 250 rivers as endangered over two decades.

In an announcement early today, American Rivers said 2005 is pivotal for the Santa Clara River, and called on Los Angeles County officials and the Army Corps of Engineers to protect the rare woodlands and endangered animals of the river corridor.

"Time may be running out for Southern California's last natural river," said Rebecca R. Wodder, president of American Rivers, in a statement. "The government should show some backbone and put the brakes on more development until the consequences have been carefully studied and disclosed to the public."

Developers of Newhall Ranch said the nearly 21,000-home project, the largest residential development approved in Los Angeles County, hardly affects the river and returns many acres that have been farmed commercially to protected status.

The first environmental study of Newhall Ranch was done in 1996. An overall blueprint for development was approved by Los Angeles County supervisors in 2003 after legal challenges on more than two dozen issues were dropped, settled or resolved through court decisions. Developers were forced to restudy the project's effects on traffic, water quality and availability, a wildlife corridor and the Santa Clara River.

"We have worked very hard to make sure the river is preserved," said Newhall Land Co. spokeswoman Marlee Lauffer. "Our plan is very sensitive to the river corridor."

She said the developer plans buffer zones of 300 to 700 feet along the Santa Clara in the first of five phases of Newhall Ranch, a city-size project west of Magic Mountain. Additional environmental studies are required before the 1,400-home Landmark Village project goes before the Los Angeles County Planning Commission by the end of the year, she said.

"I think our opponents are trying to use a lot of misinformation to advance their issues," Lauffer said. "Newhall Ranch has been thoroughly reviewed."

But Ron Bottorff, chairman of Friends of the Santa Clara River, one group that nominated the waterway for the endangered list, said Newhall Ranch encroaches into about 100 acres of the river's flood plain, reducing the size of one of the region's most valuable ecological areas. The project would also "smother" 15 miles of tributary streams with concrete and channelize 17 more, American Rivers reported.

Southern California has already lost 97% of its original river woodlands and 90% of its wetlands — rivers, marshes and pools, Bottorff said.

"This region has been hammered by development and farming," he said. "So our point is: Let's take care of the rest, folks; let's do our best."

In the Santa Clara River, willows and cottonwoods help form a habitat for about 30 species of animals that are classified by state or federal agencies as endangered, threatened or of special concern, he said.

"We would like the county to move these projects out of the flood plain and create a buffer much larger than currently planned," Bottorff said. His group also opposes proposed construction along miles of riverbank, he said, because it takes away the natural flow of the river.

American Rivers also asked that the Army Corps of Engineers withhold building permits that affect the Santa Clara until the corps has studied the cumulative effect of proposed development along the river corridor.

The corps and Los Angeles and Ventura counties announced last fall an \$8.2-million, four-year study of ways to balance growth with protections of the Santa Clara River.

Aaron Allen, the corps' project manager for Newhall Ranch, said the new study is separate from the federal permitting process required for construction of bridges, roads and flood control structures.

"It would take an authority in Washington, D.C., or some kind of court decision to suspend the processing of applications [for Newhall Ranch]," he said. "If somebody submits an application, we're required to process it."

An environmental impact statement on the Newhall project is expected to be completed by the corps late this year. The report must be publicly reviewed before permits can be granted, he said.