

Santa Clara River named to endangered list

Report cites existing and planned developments in Santa Clarita area

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Rampant urban sprawl in Los Angeles County has led an environmental group to place the Santa Clara River on its Top 10 endangered list, a first for the 100-mile tributary that empties at the Pacific Ocean in Oxnard.

A report out today from American Rivers, based in Washington, D.C., blames the problem on a combination of existing and proposed development in the Santa Clarita region. The 20th annual Most Endangered Rivers 2005 singles out Newhall Ranch, a proposed 20,885-home development along the river's banks. The project is slated for just east of Piru in Los Angeles County.

"Unless regulators hold new development to high standards, Southern California will lose its last significant natural river," the report says.

Building more homes along the river's banks will increase runoff from streets and sidewalks, environmentalists said. The runoff carries a toxic brew of grease, oil and pesticides into the river and its tributaries, threatening water quality, riparian habitat and wildlife, they said.

"Rivers provide life," said Serena McLain, conservation coordinator with American Rivers. "They don't just provide life to critters and aquatic species. They provide life to people. So it's important we manage those resources sustainably in a way that prolongs the maximum benefit to the environment and community. And I don't think putting an entire town over and on a river is the best way to do that."

Environmentalists want a moratorium on new building permits until the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completes an \$8.2 million study. That report will examine the impacts of development on the river's 1,600-square-mile watershed. The study could lead to a federal plan that balances the needs of development with protecting the region's natural resources, including the river.

A Newhall Ranch official defended the project, saying it has already withstood intense scrutiny on these issues.

The Santa Clara River meanders to the ocean from headwaters near Acton in Los Angeles County.

Willow, cottonwood and sycamore trees dot roughly 4,000 acres of along the river's banks, supplying habitat for endangered birds, plants and fish. In Ventura County, citrus and avocado farms depend on the river's underground water supplies.

When finished in roughly 25 years, Newhall Ranch would provide homes for about 60,000 people in a 19-square-mile community. Los Angeles County supervisors approved an environmental impact report for the project's specific plan in 2003 after a long and costly court challenge from Ventura County, United Water Conservation District and several environmental groups.

A Kern County Superior Court judge also approved the report after first rejecting it over concerns about water supplies and other issues. With those decisions, developer Newhall Land and Farming can now apply for building permits.

To satisfy detractors, developers agreed to give Ventura County 1,500 acres of open space adjacent to the development, create a 64-acre spineflower reserve and reduce the project by 730 homes.

About 6,000 acres are dedicated to open space.

Ventura County dropped out of the litigation later in 2003 after feeling the developer satisfied its concerns about water supplies.

The project, however, still threatens large aquifers, according to Ron Bottorff, executive director of Friends of the Santa Clara River. "The county's water issues may have been temporarily taken care of," said Bottorff, who worries about other projects on the river in Santa Clarita. "But in the long term ... if population continues, the potential for overpumping that aquifer is great."

Besides threats to water quality and habitat, environmentalists say Newhall Ranch and other projects sit in flood plains. These sites put residents at risk in the event of a large storm, environmentalists say.

Marlee Lauffer, a Newhall Land and Farming spokeswoman, disagreed. Public hearings and the environmental study addressed all the issues, satisfying courts, Los Angeles and Ventura County supervisors, several state and federal environmental agencies, and Santa Paula-based United Water Conservation District, Lauffer said.

"These are all issues that have been thoroughly reviewed and analyzed," she said. Besides, Newhall Ranch will go up in five phases, each subject to a new environmental study, Lauffer said. The public and others may comment on each phase.

Though they are not mentioned in the report, Bottorff also criticized plans to build 750 homes in Fillmore along the river. Eighty percent of Heritage Valley Parks will sit in the floodplain between Highway 126 and the river.

Developer Griffin Industries has offered to build an \$8 million debris basin to protect the development and a nearby mobile home park. And the Federal Emergency Management Agency has signed off on a study ensuring that development in the flood plain is safe.

Matthew Griffin, vice president of Griffin Industries, said he was surprised by Bottorff's remarks. Friends of the Santa Clara River signed off on all the flood control studies for the development, he said.

"I think it's an effort to stop development," Griffin said. "It's not an effort to objectively look at the river."

Environmentalists say they're also concerned about the Army Corps study and whether it will analyze all potential impacts to the river.

Jay Field, an Army Corps spokesman, said it will.

"Any study they can possibly think of, they will do for that area," Field said.