

# Newhall Ranch Back in Spotlight

The Signal, May 6, 2004 by Burt Stillar

The Sierra Club and The Newhall Land and Farming Co. are squaring off again over the Newhall Ranch project, as well as a long-term development plan for land bordering the Santa Clara River. A "natural river management plan" will detail where bridges, housing developments and infrastructure can be planned in the remaining riverfront areas.

"Our goal is for all agencies who issue permits on the river to agree with work done in the area," Newhall Land spokeswoman Marlee Lauffer said.

"Rather than piecemealing each project near the river, this plan would be a blueprint for future development," she said. "It will be a shared vision of all parties."

Henry Schultz of the Santa Clarita Sierra Club disputes Lauffer's claim of diverse involvement in the crafting of the plan, and refers to the Santa Clarita River Enhancement and Management Plan as "the real plan."

SCREMP, originating in 1991, included Newhall Land on a 26-member steering committee. A draft of the plan was completed in January.

"Newhall Land isn't reaching out on this new plan," Schultz said. "They want to use this plan as though they have concern for the river, yet they build right on it."

"The Sierra Club should be involved in this project, but I learned years ago that it is naïve to think that developers will modify their plans for the sake of the local environment."

In a recent fund-raising letter, the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club said the 20,885-home Newhall Ranch project will destroy the wild character of the Santa Clara River.

The letter asks members to sign a petition designed to influence the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from issuing a permit on the project.

The Army Corps is the last regulatory body that must sign off on the Newhall Ranch project as a whole. The county of Los Angeles approved a revised specific plan for the development after a court challenge; now each of the planned five phases must go through individual county approval before phase-by-phase construction can begin.

In part, the Sierra Club letter reads:

"In 1998 you (the Army Corps) issued a large permit for projects in Santa Clarita similar to what you propose for this Newhall Ranch permit. The existing permit has failed to protect endangered species; the stickleback and arroyo toad have disappeared from the area. It allowed illegal fill and indiscriminate channel clearing. It blocked wildlife corridors and failed to stop off road vehicle use. No public hearings were allowed when changes were made. The corps has failed to enforce required mitigation measures. This is not acceptable. No permit should be issued unless problems with the existing permit are corrected. If you can't enforce a permit, don't issue it."

Newhall Land responded April 21 in a letter to the Sierra Club:

"I would expect an organization of your stature to be more factual in your public comments. ... (We) would like to extend an invitation to you to meet with our community so we can provide you detailed

information on Newhall Ranch, tour the property, and answer questions you may have.”

Schultz said he has actively tried working with Newhall Land in the past.

“About eight years ago, I had a series of meetings with (Newhall Land’s) Jim Harter and we discussed how we could work together to make changes,” Schultz said. “But in the end, I learned that the builders do not have to make changes. They are the 500-pound gorilla.”

He said that for the moment, the Sierra Club is reviewing some new court cases that may give it a new fighting chance against the Newhall Ranch project.

“Right now, we are in reaction mode,” Schultz said.

He said a recent case found that the state is now ultimately responsible for water levees on new housing projects, and that Newhall Ranch, as well as the company’s Riverpark project in central Santa Clarita, must meet new state standards.

“The Sierra Club doesn’t have the resources to fight most projects,” Schultz said. “We only can select the most egregious, and Riverpark and Newhall Ranch are two of the worst.

“Most of the time on the local level, we don’t oppose a project outright, but rather we recommend modifications to improve the development.”