

#10 SANTA CLARA RIVER

THREAT: RUNAWAY REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT

SUMMARY

Until recent years, the Santa Clara River has largely escaped the intense development transforming most of Southern California, but developers are now eyeing the river and adjacent lands for a massive expanse of new condominiums and shopping centers. Unless regulators hold new development to high standards, Southern California will lose its last significant natural river.

THE RIVER

The Santa Clara River, Southern California's longest free-flowing river, rises on the northern slope of the San Gabriel Mountains in Los Angeles County and flows through Ventura County to the Pacific Ocean. During its 87-mile journey to the sea, the river meanders past mountains, desert, and berry and citrus farms. The river and its associated aquifer provide drinking water and carry away treated sewage from communities such as Santa Clarita, Fillmore, Santa Paula, and Ventura.

Sixteen species of animals and plants that are close to extinction cling to existence in the river and in the forested corridor along the banks. At the mouth of the Santa Clara in Ventura County, brown river water collides with ocean waves and white foam. The sand and sediment carried by the river settles out to nourish the area's world-famous surfing beaches.

THE THREAT

Developers are seeking permits to build four huge housing projects and develop more than 2,000 acres along the Santa Clara River. Additionally, Newhall Land and Farming is seeking approval for the five-village Newhall Ranch Project, one of the largest urban development projects ever proposed in Los Angeles County.

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. 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 consequences of burying and channelizing streams, paving wetlands, deforesting riverbanks, and the false security and hidden hazards of buried bank stabilization are well-documented — polluted water, trash-strewn banks, and vanishing wildlife.

Importantly, this type of development can also increase the frequency and severity of flash floods, such as those that swept communities along the Santa Clara in early 2005.

Even though construction has yet to start, the loss to the community has begun. Newhall has already closed about 15 miles of the Santa Clara and its shoreline to the public. As bad as the Newhall Ranch Project would be, there is more to come. Another 8,500 acres of development are on the drawing board.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Unless developers use 21st century techniques to reduce the damage that traditional development would have on the Santa Clara, the last major natural river in the area could be lost. The condition of the river is not just a senti-



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MUCH OF THE SANTA CLARA RIVER REMAINS SCENIC AND NATURAL.

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mental matter. Newhall Ranch and other developments will send more pollution downstream, and increase the risk of flash floods.

By fragmenting the riparian corridor and fouling the river with polluted runoff, overly aggressive development will push the southern steelhead trout, southwestern arroyo toad, the red-legged frog, and other endangered species closer to extinction.

THE 12-MONTH OUTLOOK

Newhall Ranch developers have already secured preliminary approval for their project from Los Angeles County and are awaiting final county approval for the first stage. They are also awaiting permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to fill wetlands and modify shoreline along the Santa Clara River.

The Corps should deny Newhall Land's application — and every other floodplain development permit along the Santa Clara River — until it has completed an \$8.2 million river study launched in September 2004 in partnership with Ventura and Los Angeles counties. The study should examine cumulative impacts, as well as identify opportunities for sound watershed planning, and managing growth in the area to protect the river for future generations of southern Californians to enjoy.

In early summer 2005, the Corps and the developer will each release environmental studies of the Newhall Ranch project. Both documents should disclose the full range of consequences of the proposed development along the Santa Clara, and include strong provisions to prevent development in the river's floodplain.

Communities along the Santa Clara River will need state-of-the-art sewage treatment plants to preserve their water quality in the face of future growth. Unfortunately, President Bush has asked Congress to cut clean water aid to the state of California by more than \$25 million in 2006. Congress should reject those proposed cuts and increase funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Loan Fund to \$3.2 billion nationwide.

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MORE AND MORE OF THE RIVER IS BEING SQUEEZED BY POORLY PLANNED DEVELOPMENT.

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO TAKE ACTION:
[HTTP://WWW.AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/SANTA CLARA 2005](http://www.americanrivers.org/santaclara2005)

