

2025-2026



**COUNTY *of* VENTURA**  
Civil Grand Jury

**Giant Reed, Giant Problem:  
Arundo in Ventura County**

June 25, 2026

# Giant Reed, Giant Problem: Arundo in Ventura County

## SUMMARY

Arundo donax is a bamboo-like invasive plant that presents a fast-growing, fast-burning, water-stealing, high ember-casting threat within watersheds across the state and beyond. A previous Ventura County Civil Grand Jury report from 2015-16 looked at the threat of Arundo from a flood hazard perspective and recommended the Board of Supervisors create a countywide eradication plan and provide the necessary funding. Ten years later, the Civil Grand Jury received a public complaint about Arundo growing unchecked on county-owned land within 100 feet of residential structures, posing an ongoing fire hazard.

Through interviews with county agencies and nonprofit groups as well as extensive research, the Ventura County Civil Grand Jury learned the county has no plan and no clear idea of what it spends annually trying to control Arundo. There are multiple agencies and groups in the county working toward control/eradication in two of the three major watersheds in Ventura County, but no effective countywide oversight to ensure that scarce resources are being optimized, best practices are being followed, and expertise is being shared.

The Civil Grand Jury recommends the Board of Supervisors recommit to eradicating this plant, noting that significant work has been done already by various nonprofits as well as the Ventura County Resource Conservation District.

Information was gathered from multiple news sources, county and state agencies and nonprofit organization websites, expense and program reports provided by agency leads, and recent proceedings from California Invasive Plant Council's 2025 Symposium.

## METHODOLOGY

To address a specific public complaint about Arundo, the Ventura County Civil Grand Jury conducted interviews with the complainant as well as officials from the following county agencies:

- Ventura County Public Works Agency
- Ventura County Department of Agriculture/Weights & Measures
- Ventura County Fire Department

The Civil Grand Jury also interviewed leadership at Ventura County Resource Conservation District, which is a special California district governed locally (see details below). The Civil Grand Jury also spoke with leadership at the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, a local nonprofit organization deeply involved in Arundo eradication efforts.

Information was gathered from multiple news sources, county and state agency and nonprofit organization websites, expense and program reports provided by agency leads, and recent proceedings from California Invasive Plant Council's 2025 Symposium.

## BACKGROUND

The Civil Grand Jury investigated a complaint about an ongoing Arundo infestation on county-owned land in the Conejo Creek area of Camarillo. The land, as well as the complainant's home, are now considered to be in a "Very High" Fire Hazard Severity Zone (FHSZ) and the Arundo was confirmed to be within 100 feet of some homes in the Leisure Village Tract of Camarillo. (Ref-001)

The California Invasive Plant Council (Cal-IPC) defines invasive plants as plants that are not native to an environment, and once introduced, they establish, quickly reproduce and spread, and cause severe harm to the environment, economy, or human health. (Ref-018) Arundo is classified as a California State Noxious Weed under Title 3, California Code of Regulations Section 4500, meaning it's destructive to agriculture and difficult to eradicate. (Ref-027)

Arundo generally grows best near water but adapts to many different habitat conditions and soil types. Once established, it is drought tolerant and able to grow in dry or saline conditions; in California it is found growing along the edges of beaches and estuaries. (Ref-007) Arundo threatens California's streambank ecosystems by outcompeting native species, such as willows, for water.

The threat of Arundo as a highly flammable, highly invasive species in our region has been well-established for decades. This bamboo-like plant can grow up to 30 feet under ideal conditions. It spreads via underground rhizomes, often forming dense stands that choke out native plants. With an ability to consume greedy amounts of water compared to native plants, Arundo is one of the fastest growing plants in the world, growing up to 4 inches a day and providing virtually no habitat or food for wildlife. (Ref-007, Ref-010, Ref-014)

A Ventura County Civil Grand Jury report published in 2016 titled "Riverbed Hazardous Vegetation" focused on the threats of Arundo to riverbank erosion, floodplain inundation and damage to infrastructure. The 2015-16 Civil Grand Jury recommended creation of a countywide Arundo eradication plan and corresponding budget line item. (Ref-002) In response to the Civil Grand Jury's recommendations, the Board of Supervisors along with the Public Works Director agreed with the findings and partially agreed with the recommendations. Specifically, the response stated that there was "partial agreement" with the recommendation that the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, in conjunction with the Ventura County Watershed Protection District (VCWPD), develop a long-term plan and corresponding budget line item that leads to the eventual eradication of Arundo. However, the response confusingly indicated this recommendation had already been implemented. (Ref-002)

The response from the county specifically agreed that VCWPD would:

- work with the three major watershed councils to develop a long-term plan for countywide control of Arundo and identify annual budgetary opportunities. (Ref-002)
- work with the EPA and other agencies to apply the best and most recent science to achieving the goal of Arundo control with the least environmental impacts. (Ref-002)

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Ten years later, the 2025-26 Civil Grand Jury focused its investigation on the status of the county's long-term plan to eradicate Arundo, including its financial commitment via budget line item, as well as the current fire-specific threats posed by this fast-growing invasive plant.

While the county itself has not coordinated a cohesive plan of attack (Ref-001), there have been several projects and groups trying to eradicate Arundo in Ventura County going back decades. Many of these are habitat restoration projects led by various nonprofits. A Ventura County Arundo Task Force was created in 1999 under the direction of the Ventura County Resource Conservation District. This group was composed of various relevant federal, state, and local governments as well as nonprofit groups concerned with the complicated challenges of eradicating Arundo. Eventually the Arundo Task Force morphed into what is currently operating as an informal group called the Ventura County Weed Management Area (WMA) in 2009, which focuses on a variety of invasive weeds. ([Ref-004](#))

## DISCUSSION

From interviews with county officials, the Civil Grand Jury concluded that no one was aware of a countywide plan to eradicate Arundo. Our interview with Public Works (the agency that oversees Watershed Protection Districts and ongoing operations and maintenance of waterways in those districts) confirmed there was no dedicated budget line item for eradicating Arundo, but that expenses were rolled into annual operations and maintenance (O&M) budgets. (Ref-001)

As detailed below, different agencies involved in efforts to remove Arundo presented different levels of awareness of the issue and different attitudes about efforts to eradicate it. The Civil Grand Jury researched the current challenges and offers recommendations for moving forward collaboratively.

### **New Impetus to Act: Updated Fire Hazard Maps**

The State Fire Marshal is mandated to classify lands within State Responsibility Areas into Fire Hazard Severity Zones (FHSZ). These zones fall into one of the following classifications: Moderate, High or Very High. The FHSZ maps are developed using a science-based and field-tested model that assigns a hazard score based on the factors that influence fire likelihood and fire behavior. Many factors are considered, such as fire history, existing and potential fuel (vegetation), predicted flame length, blowing embers, terrain, and typical fire weather for the area.

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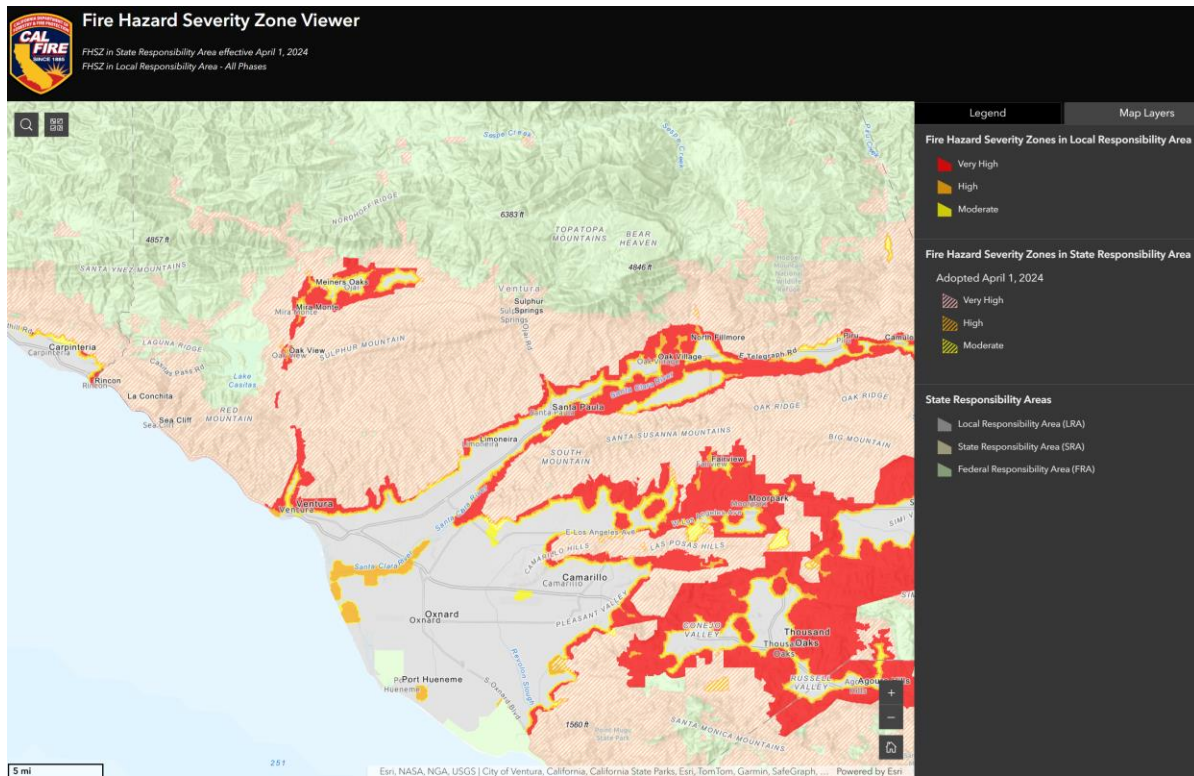


Figure 1. CAL FIRE - Fire Hazard Severity Zone Map, Updated July 2025. ([Ref-016](#))

Fire Hazard Severity Zone maps evaluate “hazard,” not “risk.” They are like flood zone maps, where lands are described in terms of the probability of a particular area being inundated by floodwaters, and not specifically prescriptive of impacts. “Hazard” is based on the physical conditions that create a likelihood and expected fire behavior over a 30- to 50-year period without considering mitigation measures such as home hardening, recent wildfire, or fuel reduction efforts. ([Ref-016](#))

Arundo presents both a hazard and a risk. Arundo can burn at any time of the year under varying conditions. It has transformed heavily invaded riparian habitat, which includes many coastal river systems in southern California, from a vegetation type that is normally resistant to fire to a source of fire events. ([Ref-007](#)) Arundo stands contain enough dead, dry fuel that can be ignited and carry a fire even under poor fire conditions, such as low wind speed, cool weather, and even when humidity is high or during light rains. Arundo directly increases the probability of fire ignition due to Arundo stands supporting human activities that lead to fires. Arundo stands offer concealment and shelter, which results in human encampments. In addition, a large study concluded: ([Ref-007](#))

- Watersheds with significant Arundo stands experience fire events that are due to the presence of Arundo. The occurrence of these Arundo-initiated fires is quantifiable, both as percent of stands burned and acreage burned.
- Arundo is a significant fire threat due to high fuel levels in combination with harboring ignition sources. Fires that start in Arundo stands are observed in nearly all watersheds.
- Wildland fires that burn riparian areas containing Arundo burn hotter and more completely due to higher fuel levels associated with the presence of Arundo.

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- The large amount of biomass per unit area along with a favorable structure for burning generates fires that burn intensively.

In Ventura County, Arundo has been attributed to 158 fire starts in Ventura County river bottoms over the last 10 years. The heat map below represents frequency of fires as a color gradient, with yellow indicating a higher number of fires and purple indicating a fewer number of fires in the last 10 years. (Ref-001, [Att-001](#))

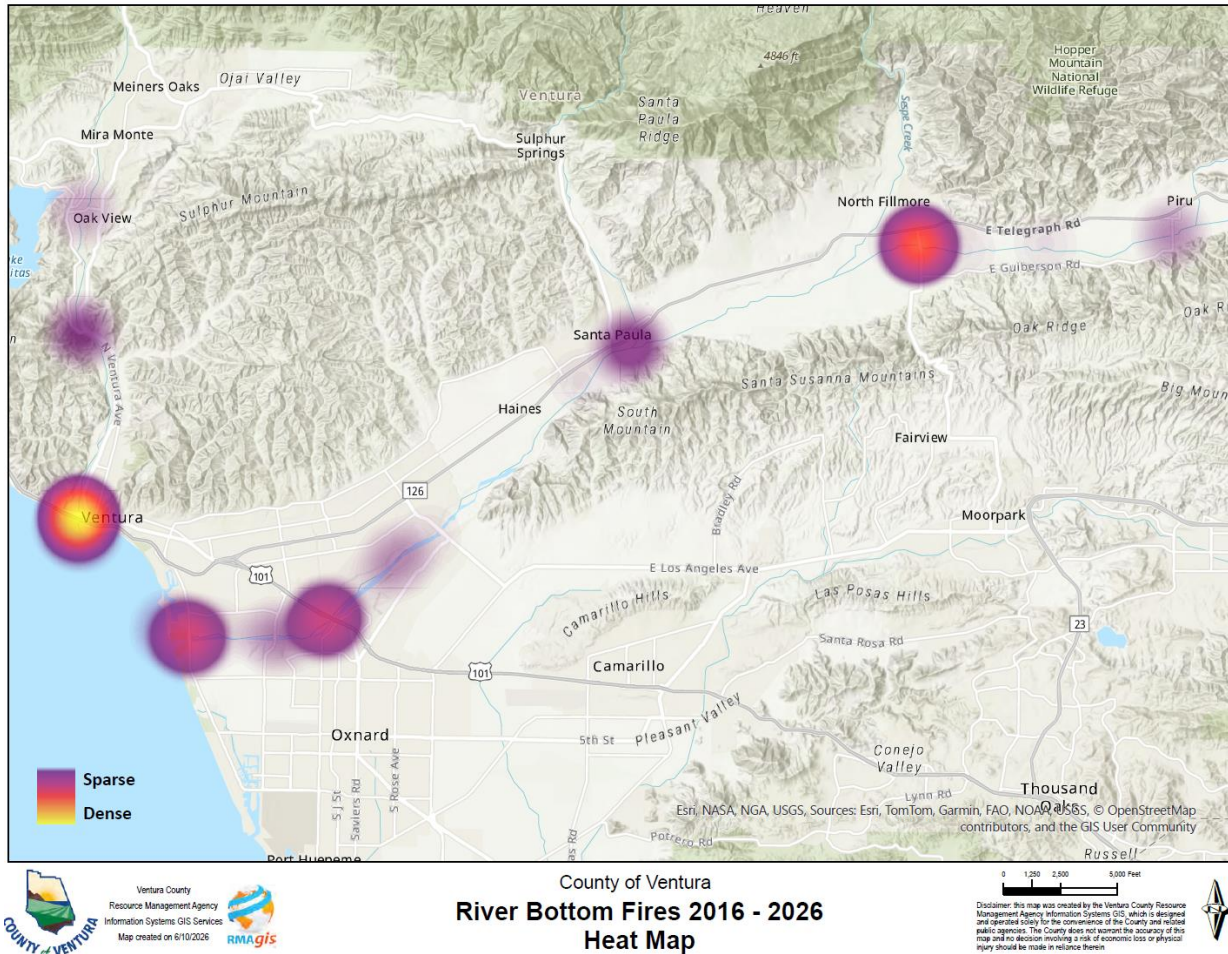


Figure 2. Heat map of Arundo-related fires in Ventura County river bottoms over the last 10 years. Data table provided by VCFD. ([Att-001](#))

The 60-acre Auto Fire on January 13, 2025 (see photo below) highlighted the threat of Arundo-driven blazes in the Santa Clara River bottom, exacerbated by Santa Ana winds.



Figure 3. Flames from the Auto Fire, which broke out in the Santa Clara River bottom in Ventura, January 13, 2025. Photo credit: Dominic Massimino/Ventura County Star. ([Ref-042](#))

### **Different Watersheds, Different Challenges**

Watersheds are defined as the land area that channels rainfall and snowmelt to creeks, streams, and rivers, and eventually to outflow points such as reservoirs, bays, and the ocean. There are three major watersheds in Ventura County, and they all drain to the Pacific Ocean.

The **Calleguas Creek** watershed covers approximately 377 square miles in southeastern Ventura County. The watershed includes Conejo Creek, Arroyo Santa Rosa, Arroyo Simi, Arroyo Las Posas, and Calleguas Creek, as well as Revolon Slough and Mugu Lagoon. Due to development, Calleguas Creek is now primarily a perennial stream predominantly fed continuously by treated wastewater flows, with secondary surface flows originating from rising groundwater, agricultural and urban runoff, and periodic stormwater flows. ([Ref-045](#))

Water from Conejo Creek (the site at the center of our public complaint) eventually flows into the Pacific Ocean at Mugu Lagoon, the largest salt marsh in Southern California. Mugu was recently awarded a \$1.1 million five-year grant from the National Pollution Funds Center to remove debris, combat non-native species, and restore the marsh ecosystem after the site was damaged by a refueling plane crash in 2011. The restoration work will be facilitated by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Office of Spill Prevention and Response, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Navy. ([Ref-005](#))

This watershed has been relatively underfunded and not considered a priority to conservation groups relative to the other watersheds, due to the lack of protected species found there. (Ref-

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001) From 2009 to 2019 a Calleguas Creek Arundo/Tamarisk Removal Program was led by Ventura County Resource Conservation District ([Ref-037](#)) but the programmatic permits they held for ten years expired under the former leader of Ventura County Resource Conservation District. (Ref-001) The Civil Grand Jury could not find evidence of any recent Arundo removal activity in this watershed.

**Ventura River**, the smallest of Ventura County's three major watersheds, covers an area of about 228 square miles. Major tributaries include Matilija Creek, North Fork Matilija Creek, San Antonio Creek, and Canada Larga. Several key nonprofits have successfully eradicated hundreds of acres of Arundo from the upstream portions already ([Ref-009](#)); the Army Corps of Engineers required removal of the Arundo to gain approval for removal of the Matilija Dam. ([Ref-013](#)) Now there is a clear path forward to eradicating the rest of the river downstream thanks to a well-organized and well-funded coalition of stakeholders led by the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy. ([Ref-009](#), [Ref-035](#))

**Santa Clara River** is the largest and least altered river in southern California. Its tributary system covers about 1,634 square miles. Major tributaries include Castaic Creek and San Francisquito Creek in Los Angeles County, and the Sespe, Piru, and Santa Paula creeks in Ventura County. Approximately 40 percent of the watershed is in Los Angeles County and 60 percent is in Ventura County, which makes collaboration across jurisdictions more complex. The Santa Clara River was identified as a critically endangered river by American Rivers in 2005 ([Ref-025](#)) and contains 38 special status listed species.

The Santa Clara Watershed is generally characterized as consisting of upper and lower watersheds, with the upper watershed described as areas upstream (east) of the City of Fillmore.

Multiple groups (detailed below) are involved in Santa Clara River Arundo eradication and habitat restoration efforts, and funding for projects has not been consistent ([Ref-050](#)) making overall progress difficult to track ([Att-013](#)). By 2006 the Ventura County Resource Conservation District had completed mapping of 16,400 acres in the upper watershed. ([Ref-026](#)) As of February 2026, a Santa Clara River Arundo Control Program spearheaded by Southern California Coastal Water Research Project was mapping out a long-term plan and strategy to tackle the remaining stands of Arundo throughout the entire watershed. Project managers forecast \$285,000 annually for labor and supplies and partner agreements were being developed. ([Att-010](#))

### **Different Groups/Agencies, Different Missions, Different Attitudes, Different Outcomes**

Many different groups, both government and nonprofit, are involved with tackling Arundo eradication. Interviews with representatives from county agencies revealed different levels of knowledge and different attitudes about the Arundo problem, from realistic to pessimistic. Different agencies conveyed different beliefs about whether Arundo could even be eradicated at all given the expense and challenges of seeking permits and cooperation from so many different stakeholders. (Ref-001, [Att-011](#))

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### Ventura County Fire Department (VCFD)

**Mission Statement:** “The mission of the Ventura County Fire Department is to anticipate and respond to the dynamic public safety needs of a diverse community of about 840,000 people. This includes not only fire prevention, but also education, response, and communication.” ([Ref-019](#))

For VCFD, the threat of Arundo is exacerbated by humans taking advantage of the density of Arundo stands as cover for river bottom encampments. When humans spark fires in these makeshift living areas, other hazardous material ends up in flames too. (Ref-001)

At the time of this report writing, the VCFD was in the process of ramping up hiring to do inspections on lots within designated Fire Hazard Severity Zone (FHSZ) areas. The number of impacted lots has tripled with the new designations, so the effort will require additional staffing and is expected to take a while. In the past, VCFD sent emails and made phone calls to resolve issues about weed abatements on county-owned parcels; with the updated FHSZ maps, county agencies in charge of maintaining these parcels will start receiving formal Fire Hazard Reduction Program (FHRP) notices this year with a June 1 clearance deadline. The FHRP is in effect and will apply to many (but not all) landowners. (Ref-001, [Ref-046](#))

The VCFD wildfire preparedness team has had great success convincing some landowners to participate as partners in the Ventura River Arundo eradication program, often having costs covered by grants. (Ref-001)

### Ventura County Resource Conservation District (VCRCD)

**Mission Statement:** “To facilitate the conservation, sustainability, and restoration of Ventura County’s natural resources for current and future generations by working with willing partners and community members.” ([Ref-020](#))

Once known as Soil Conservation Districts, these are “special districts” of the state of California.. The Ventura County RCD is a local unit of the government and is administered under the provisions of Division 9, of the Public Resource Code, State of California. The VCRCD is one of 99 RCDs in California and belongs to the California Association of RCDs (CARCD). ([Ref-020](#))

The VCRCD is governed by a board of seven Directors appointed for four-year terms by the Ventura County Board of Supervisors. RCDs manage a diversity of resource conservation projects, including soil and water conservation, wildlife-habitat enhancement and restoration, control of exotic plant species, watershed restoration, conservation planning, education and many others. Since most RCDs receive very little regular funding through local taxation, they rely heavily on grants and other types of fundraising to stay in operation. ([Ref-020](#))

The Civil Grand Jury learned the VCRCD has been appointed lead agency to many Arundo eradication projects, both past and ongoing, and has a successful history obtaining

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programmatic permits from the regulatory agencies that have jurisdiction within the watershed, including the Army Corps of Engineers and California Department of Fish and Wildlife. (Ref-001, [Ref-004](#), [Ref-008](#), [Ref-026](#), [Ref-028](#), [Ref-037](#)) Programmatic permits are designed to streamline the process of approvals for commonly performed and high-priority activities. For projects along the Upper Santa Clara River, the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board is also involved. The permit process for Arundo eradication projects is now shifting in line with CDFW's "Cutting the Green Tape" initiative and promises to be more streamlined for future projects focused on Arundo eradication. (Ref-001, [Ref-030](#))

### Ventura County Public Works Agency (Public Works)

**Mission Statement:** "To deliver efficient, responsive and cost-effective public works services that protect and enhance the safety, health and quality of life in Ventura County." ([Ref-021](#))

This is a big agency tasked with a wide variety of responsibilities, from road maintenance and traffic engineering to household hazardous waste collection, water and sanitation. Public Works oversees the Watershed Protection Districts.



Figure 4. Public Works Agency Watershed Protection District Zones of Ventura County ([Ref-043](#))

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### Ventura County Watershed Protection District (VCWPD)

**Mission Statement:** “To protect life, property, water courses, watersheds, and public infrastructure from the dangers and damages associated with flood and stormwaters.” ([Ref-022](#))

Contained under the Public Works Agency and organized into four zones (see Figure 4 above), this group is ultimately tasked with maintaining/controlling the Arundo on county-owned or county-maintained land to protect waterways and related infrastructure. (Ref-001, [Att-005](#), [Att-006](#), [Att-012](#)) They do not conduct maintenance on the waterways that lie on private property ([Att-011](#)) which is a challenge to eradication that is discussed below.

The Civil Grand Jury learned that the VCWPD has recently been served violation notices for improper herbicide application in unrelated projects, as well as informal abatement email requests from the VCFD concerning the Arundo stand in Conejo Creek which was the subject of public complaint. (Ref-001, [Att-014](#), [Att-015](#), [Att-016](#))

The Civil Grand Jury reviewed Oct/Nov 2025 routine maintenance reports of work performed along Conejo Creek and viewed the Conejo Creek site in person on April 8, 2026 (five months after the work report confirmed the Arundo had been cut to the ground). The Civil Grand Jury observed massive stands of Arundo as if they were never removed, looming several feet high and spreading miles just over the fence line from a row of houses in Leisure Village.



Figure 5. Arundo growing along Conejo Creek just outside Leisure Village, April 8, 2026. Photo by Ventura County Civil Grand Jury. ([Att-003](#))

### Ventura County Agriculture/Weights and Measures Department

**Mission Statement:** “To protect and promote agriculture and equity in the marketplace, while ensuring the welfare of the public, the industry and the environment.” ([Ref-023](#))

This agency provides oversight and compliance monitoring for herbicide applications used to treat Arundo and is the lead agency of the informal Ventura County Weed Management Area (WMA), which is detailed below.

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### Weed Management Areas (WMAs)

Most California counties have established a Weed Management Area. ([Ref-017](#)) A WMA is a local organization that brings together all interested landowners, land managers (private, city, county, state, and federal), special districts, and the public in a county or other geographical area for the purpose of coordinating and combining their action and expertise to deal with their common weed control problems. The organization functions under the authority of a mutually developed memorandum of understanding (MOU). A WMA may be voluntarily governed by a chairperson, steering committee, County Agricultural Office or Resource Conservation District. These programs are defined in state code. ([Ref-024](#))

The WMA program is funded by one-time budget allocations with gaps in between, so it's challenging for this group to plan long-term eradication projects with sporadic funding. The California Invasive Plant Council (Cal-IPC) is the lead advocate for funding the WMA program. ([Ref-012](#)) The VCWMA organized by the Ventura County Agriculture/Weights and Measures Department includes all of Ventura County.

The Civil Grand Jury originally discovered the VCWMA through the California Land Conservation Assistance Network website, where WMA activities are described as focusing upon the exclusion, detection, eradication, and suppression of priority noxious and invasive weeds using an integrated approach. ([Ref-006](#)) The link from this page pointed to a domain [www.VCWMA.org](http://www.VCWMA.org) that was up for sale. Searching the Agriculture Commissioner's website for "Arundo" or "WMA" yielded no results as of this report writing. When asked about the WMA's activities, the Civil Grand Jury was forwarded some email correspondence with an agenda for a meeting March 5, 2026 and a video link from a meeting held December 11, 2025 ([Att-017](#)) but there were no minutes, agendas or recorded meetings publicly posted. From presentations published on Cal-IPC's website, the Civil Grand Jury determined the VCWMA was formed in 2004 and went dormant in 2015, then revived in 2019. Notably, the VCWMA lacked any web presence through the Agriculture Commissioner's website or any domain of its own when the Civil Grand Jury began investigating. ([Ref-015](#))

The Civil Grand Jury requested and obtained documents confirming the MOU existed ([Att-007](#), [Att-008](#)), and a current cooperative funding agreement with California Department of Food and Agriculture was in effect. ([Att-002](#)) Group participants signing onto the MOU include UC Cooperative Extension, California Conservation Corps, Friends of the Santa Clara River, Santa Clara River Conservancy, VCRCO, Concerned Resource and Environmental Workers aka The C.R.E.W., Ventura Land Trust, OVLC, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. ([Att-008](#))

The VCWMA ranks Arundo as the number one weed in terms of environmental impact. ([Att-002](#)) After some digging, the Civil Grand Jury discovered evidence of all the work this group is doing across a variety of invasive species, not from any county website but based on information from Cal-IPC and proceedings from the 2025 Cal-IPC Symposium held in Ventura. ([Ref-015](#))

Despite the notable amount of work that is being done to control or eradicate Arundo, the table and map from Cal-IPC's Weedmapper Tool below show a countywide picture highlighting only three areas that are seeing a verifiable decrease in Arundo spread: ([Ref-011](#))

Ventura County Regional Species Map: *Arundo donax*

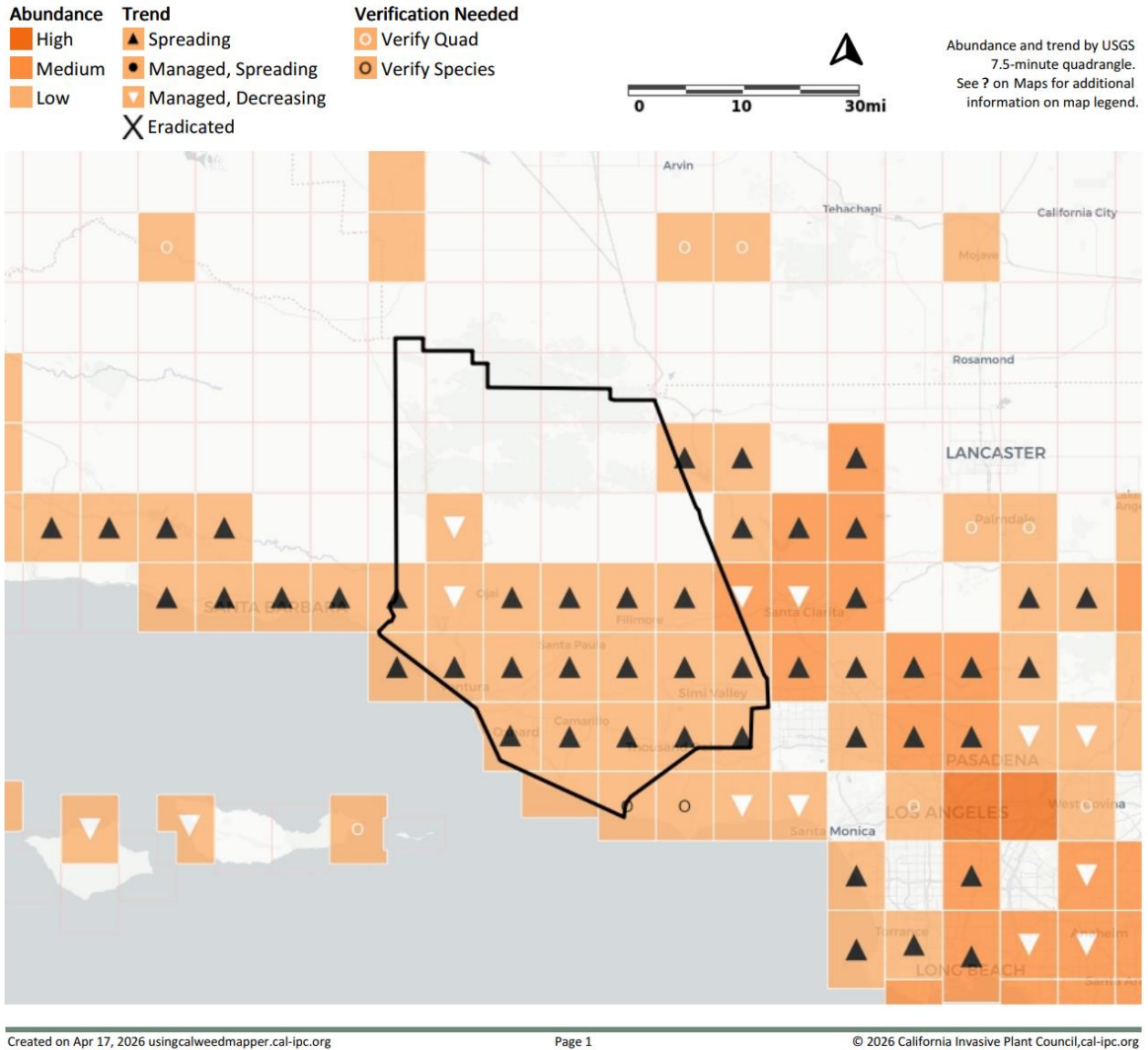


Figure 6. Cal-IPC Weedmapper Tool shows quadrants of *Arundo* abundance and growth trends in the Ventura County Weed Management Area. ([Ref-011](#))

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Species	2013		2018		2023		2024		2025	
	Quads Present	Percent Managed	Quads Present	Percent Managed	Quads Present	Percent Managed	Quads Present	Percent Managed	Quads Present	Percent Managed
Arundo donax	25	12%	25	12%	25	12%	25	12%	25	12%
Species of Concern Overall	25	12%	25	12%	25	12%	25	12%	25	12%

Figure 7. Cal-IPC Weedmapper Timeline View for Arundo management in Ventura County. ([Ref-011](#))

This table indicates there has been no progress eradicating Arundo from a countywide perspective, although the map reflects small successes along the Ventura River.

### Watershed Councils

Only two of the three major watersheds, Ventura River ([Ref-038](#)) and Santa Clara River ([Ref-039](#)) have active watershed councils in Ventura County, both well-organized, spearheaded and supported by staff of the VCRC. They exist to facilitate communication between various interest groups, educate and engage with willing partners, provide a forum for sharing information and data, maximize grant funding collaboration, and keep environmental professionals and the community up to date on watershed-related programs.

The Ventura River Watershed Council lists Public Works and VCWPD as stakeholder participants ([Ref-051](#)).

Calleguas Creek does not have a watershed council as of this report; from the Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County website ([Ref-040](#)) the Civil Grand Jury learned that the Calleguas Municipal Water District is named as “fiscal agent” of the Calleguas Creek Watershed. The water district promotes several water use efficiency and conservation programs but notably does not mention the word “Arundo” on its website anywhere. ([Ref-044](#))

### Nonprofits Doing the Work

The number of nonprofit groups uncovered by the Civil Grand Jury who worked or are working on the Arundo problem are seemingly endless. Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, Ventura Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, Friends of Santa Clara River, Santa Clara River Conservancy, Channel Islands Restoration, Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP), Treepeople, California Conservation Corps, Concerned Resource and Environmental Workers aka The C.R.E.W., and U.C. Santa Barbara are a few examples.

In late 2025 the SCCWRP, a joint powers authority applying next-generation science to aquatic ecosystems management, began working with Santa Clara watershed managers to develop a pilot program for Arundo removal looking at nature-based solutions to restore natural flow to the urbanized watershed. The draft plan is expected in late 2026. ([Ref-032](#))

From the SCCWRP website the Civil Grand Jury learned that nature-based solutions (i.e. landscape or structural modifications designed to improve or protect ecological health by mimicking nature) are a promising area of research “In contrast to traditional engineered approaches for achieving environmental flow objectives, such as managing storage volumes, diversion rates and discharge patterns – all modifications that can have unintended

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environmental and societal consequences. Nature-based solutions... tend to have less harmful environmental effects while providing co-benefits for both humans and wildlife.” ([Ref-032](#))

### Ojai Valley Land Conservancy

**OVLC Mission Statement:** “To protect and restore the natural landscapes of the Ojai Valley forever.” ([Ref-033](#))

The Civil Grand Jury interviewed OVLC based on its recent \$2.05 million grant award from CAL FIRE to finish the work it started eradicating Arundo in the Ventura River Watershed. ([Ref-035](#), [Ref-052](#))

From interviews the Civil Grand Jury learned the task of eradicating Arundo in county-owned parcels along the Ventura River has been effectively passed to OVLC (Ref-001); Public Works stated there were no Arundo eradication efforts for this zone in 2025 or 2026 to date ([Att-012](#)). County-managed areas of Foster Park have noticeable Arundo stands that will be removed as part of the OVLC watershed-wide eradication program funded by CAL FIRE. (Ref-001, [Ref-035](#), [Ref-052](#))

OVLC’s website speaks for itself: “OVLC has the experience, the permits, and the funds, but we can’t solve this problem alone. We need a holistic plan, landowner participation, and community vision to completely remove this invasive weed and restore the waters we love ... Grant funding will also enable OVLC to implement an Early Detection-Rapid Response program to monitor all prior treated areas and target regrowth immediately to prevent new infestations. Importantly, we will be working in partnership with dozens of riparian landowners to provide access for treatments but also assist with neighborhood outreach as part of our watershed-wide strategy.” ([Ref-009](#))

This photo on OVLC’s website shows the significant difference between Arundo-infested and natural wetland corridors following a targeted Arundo removal and habitat restoration project: ([Ref-009](#))

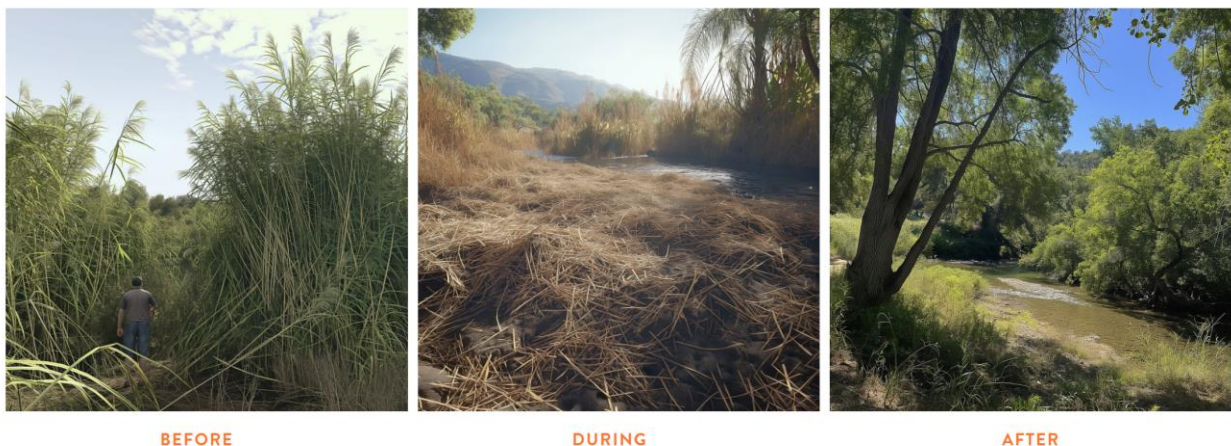


Figure 8. Ojai Valley Land Conservancy Arundo removal project on San Antonio Creek ([Ref-009](#))

### Best Practices for Arundo Removal

The Civil Grand Jury reviewed operational reports and expenditures for Watershed Protection District Zone 3 Fiscal Year 2024-25 ([Att-006](#)) and noted the following best practices for invasive plant removal cited in the Conejo Creek Vegetation Removal Project report, which are set forth in the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and state permits issued to Public Works ([Att-006](#), [Att-009](#)):

- Remove invasive plant species in a manner that prevents propagation.
- Spray or mow plants before seeds ripen, when feasible.
- All cut/removed invasive vegetation shall be taken to a dump as a destruction load.
- Do not stockpile invasive vegetation including mulch where materials would wash downstream or be allowed to propagate.
- For giant reed (*Arundo donax*), minimize ground disturbance and use foliar glyphosate treatment on smaller infestations, as feasible. Best to apply herbicide from May 1 to October 1 if breeding birds are absent. No grading to remove root masses unless earthwork is part of routine maintenance work.

### Herbicide Use / Early Detection, Rapid Response

The best practices for Arundo removal call for application of specific herbicides (which are regulated by the County Agricultural Commissioner) within a specific and very short timeframe of cutting; the method generally accepted as the most effective is called “cut and daub” and requires cutting the stem near the ground and immediately applying an approved herbicide to the cut stump to prevent resprouting. ([Ref-007](#), [Ref-008](#), [Ref-009](#))

A 2004 cost analysis comparison of different Arundo eradication techniques in the Ventura River shows the cut-and-daub technique to be the most cost-effective, with higher initial costs mitigated by lower long-term maintenance costs (more detail below). ([Ref-008](#)) Cost benefit analyses from Texas and the Santa Clara River also showed a positive benefit to cost ratio. ([Ref-007](#)) Applying approved herbicides to Arundo immediately after cutting it and closely monitoring for regrowth, then vigilantly retreating as necessary, is the only current proven strategy for eradicating this weed. ([Ref-001](#), [Ref-007](#), [Ref-008](#)) But herbicides are not problem-free, and new options for controlling Arundo with harmful herbicides is an ongoing area of research.

The October/November 2025 Public Works work order for the Conejo Creek parcel owned by the county confirmed no herbicide was applied to cut Arundo stalks by work crews. ([Att-006](#))

Another report from Public Works regarding a Coyote Creek Pilot Channel Project (Zone 1) in September/October 2024 states: “Approximately 0.61 acres of giant reed (*Arundo donax*) was removed along Coyote Creek. The initial removal was conducted by the California Conservation Corps (CCC) in October 2024. The CCC crews did not apply herbicide, they cut the giant reed stalks and disposed of them in a 40-yard rolloff bin placed nearby.” This report indicates that herbicides were not applied until January 25, 2025, three months after the initial cutting. By estimates from this project summary, more than \$98,000 (largely grant funded) was spent on a project that did not observe best practices in timing of herbicide treatment. ([Att-005](#))

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Other projects mentioned in this report involving Matilija Creek and Santa Clara River did seem to observe this practice, so the Civil Grand Jury determined that best practices are only sometimes being followed by Public Works. ([Att-005](#))

### Offsite Disposal of Biomass

In contrast to the stated best practice of removing cut invasive vegetation to avoid regrowth, the October/November 2025 Public Works report noted: "All vegetation was mulched on site such that offsite disposal was not required." ([Att-006](#))

The Civil Grand Jury learned that under typical routine Public Works maintenance activities, Arundo encountered during vegetation removal is generally mulched and left onsite, unless a specific task or project scope of work requires otherwise. Additionally, the Civil Grand Jury learned that acceptance of Arundo material from waste collectors has been challenging and the budget for routine maintenance does not cover the cost of cutting/daubing and offsite disposal. (Ref-001)

Leaving the mulched Arundo onsite violates the lake and streambed alteration permits, which are required for those routine maintenance activities. ([Att-009](#))

Biomass management would include finding creative ways to use biomass instead of mulching it. At minimum, the county could find a better place to leave the composted biomass. Ojai Valley Land Conservancy reports it has made use of space at the old Honor Farm off Baldwin Road in Ojai, where stalks of Arundo are stockpiled until CAL FIRE can send a crew (often incarcerated labor) to chip up the stalks into compostable piles (Ref-001).

### Permits

The permitting process for removing large stands of Arundo in our watersheds has been complex. (Ref-001, [Ref-034](#)) If you are a private landowner looking to eradicate a large patch of Arundo on your own land, you might be confused about what permits are required and what is needed to obtain them. Both VCRC and Public Works reference helping private landowners with this process, but VCRC's permits only apply to Ventura River and Upper Santa Clara River (they may expand later). (Ref-001, [Ref-028](#))

The Civil Grand Jury found information about CDFW's new "Cutting the Green Tape" initiative to streamline permitting for these kinds of activities ([Ref-030](#)), but it is unclear what parts of that initiative, if any, apply to routine water channel maintenance projects that do not have habitat restoration as the primary goal (even though the tasks are essentially the same).

The process as explained by Public Works seems particularly confusing and demonstrates the complexities involved in permitting activities that take place within watersheds. ([Ref-029](#), [Ref-031](#)) Adding to the complexity, the Civil Grand Jury noted that the extensive Wetlands Permitting Guide from the Ventura County Planning Division has not been updated since 2006 and does not reflect any language about programmatic permits held by VCRC that can be used by others, or CDFW's Cutting the Green Tape Initiative. It refers to the California Department of Fish & Game, the old name for the current California Department of Fish & Wildlife before it was changed 13 years ago. ([Ref-028](#), [Ref-031](#))

Public Works entered into a Streambed Alteration Agreement long ago with CDFW to authorize ongoing maintenance activities for Conejo Creek. The Civil Grand Jury learned that this permit

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has been extended as allowed but expired December 31, 2024. ([Att-009](#)) Public Works was in the middle of getting these renewed as of this report writing. (Ref-001)

Both OVLC and VCRCDD are fully permitted for activities they oversee in their respective watersheds. (Ref-001, [Ref-028](#), [Ref-035](#))

During interviews with the Civil Grand Jury, county officials stated that the main obstacles to eradicating Arundo are the environmental permitting requirements and the need to avoid working around nesting species or spraying herbicides. These challenges are reflected in mainstream press articles (Ref-001, [Ref-010](#), [Ref-034](#)) These are indeed challenges, and public concerns about pesticides and herbicides have led to shifts in local policy and reporting requirements. ([Ref-047](#), [Ref-048](#), [Ref-049](#)) However, it is noteworthy that the nonprofit conservation groups working on eradicating Arundo understand the requirement to use narrowly applied herbicides and scrupulously follow best practices to achieve desired results. They have been able to effectively eradicate the noxious weed in many areas and overcome any permitting challenges.

### Challenge: Private Landowner Compliance

In response to the 2015-16 Civil Grand Jury Report on Arundo, Public Works suggested that the creation of a weed abatement district would be a useful way to encourage compliance among private property owners. ([Ref-003](#)) This district was never created, but the VCFD can send abatement notices under the Fire Hazard Reduction Program.

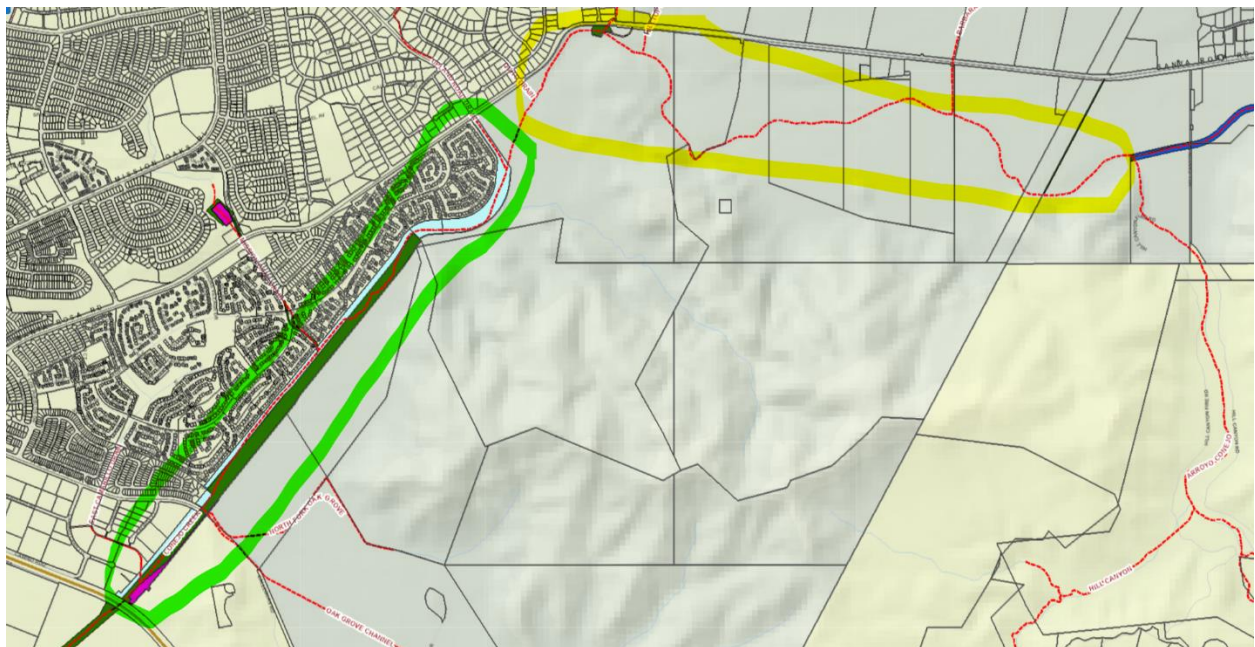


Figure 9. Ventura County Public Works Agency Map of Conejo Creek traversing county-owned (green) and private land (yellow). ([Att-004](#))

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This map from Public Works reflects the issue with the area that is the subject of the complaint to the Civil Grand Jury. The Civil Grand Jury learned that the portion of Conejo Creek adjacent to Leisure Village (approximately two miles, circled in green) receives routine maintenance from Public Works. Upstream of this area is approximately two miles of creek lying on private property that the county has no obligation or authority to maintain (circled in yellow). This upstream portion is also overgrown with Arundo. The Civil Grand Jury learned that any efforts to eradicate Arundo within this district-maintained portion of Conejo Creek would be fruitless unless the upstream private properties were dealt with first. (Ref-001, [Att-011](#))

### Funding Challenges for Mapping, Planning and Execution

As one agency lead pointed out, there is not much money out there for planning. The final Ventura County Arundo Task Force report from VCRCD in 2006 alluded to a disruption in funding due to a shift in priorities toward Homeland Security. ([Ref-004](#)) Funding for this effort comes and goes, but the expense of removing Arundo from waterways without a targeted eradication solution could be a forever problem, as shown in this graphic from the county Weed Management Area: ([Ref-015](#))

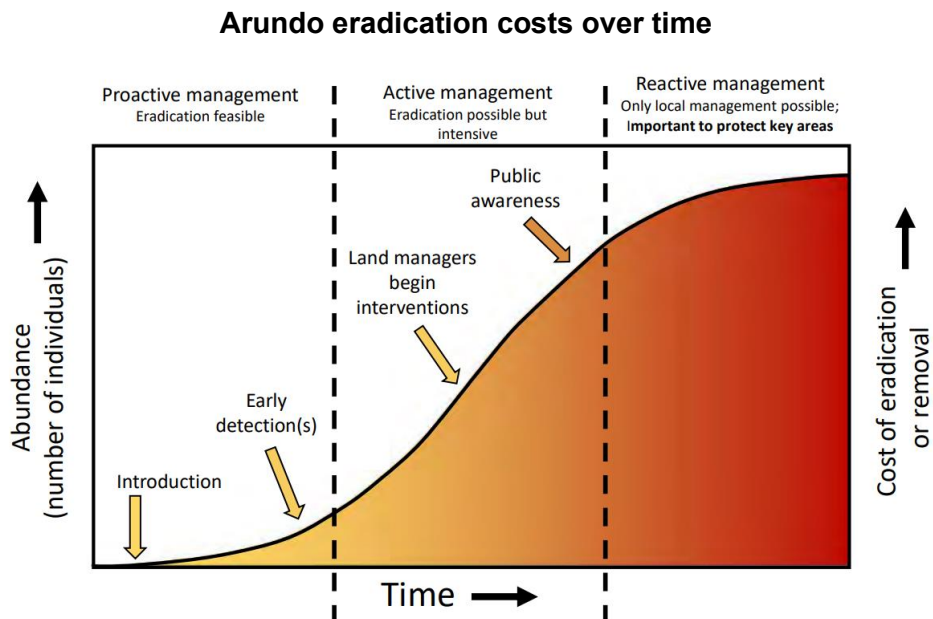


Figure 10. Graphic from Ventura County Weed Management Area / Cal-IPC 2025 Symposium Proceedings ([Ref-015](#))

Different groups in Ventura County have secured grant funding to remove Arundo from various agencies, including:

- In 2023, Cal Fire awarded the OVLC a \$2.05 million grant to eradicate Arundo from the Ventura River Watershed. The grant covers mapping, permitting, and a multi-year-funded plan to completely eradicate Arundo from the Ventura River Watershed. ([Ref-009](#))

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- In 2024 a grant was awarded to Ventura County Watershed Protection District from the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) under the Emergency Watershed Protection Program. The affiliated State Conservationist can declare a local watershed emergency and initiate program assistance in cooperation with an eligible sponsor. ([Att-005](#), [Ref-041](#))
- In 2025 the CDFA entered a three-year cooperative agreement with VCWMA for \$120,000 to implement the VCWMA's integrated weed management plan, which focuses largely on Arundo. (Ref-001, [Att-002](#))

With the updated Fire Hazard Severity Zone maps and the need to take proactive steps to reduce the threat of wildfires, the administrator of CAL FIRE grants in Ventura County recently spoke at the Santa Clara River Watershed committee meeting to promote assistance in securing additional funds for long-term eradication of this vegetative fire hazard. ([Ref-036](#))

With funding for eradication so limited, resource sharing among stakeholders becomes more critical to accomplish any eradication goal. The Civil Grand Jury learned that while one nonprofit (OVLC) was funded by CAL FIRE in 2023 to collect aerial maps of Arundo along the Ventura River ([Ref-035](#)), another nonprofit (Ventura Land Trust) was awarded funding from CDFA in 2025 for the same activity through the Ventura County Weed Management Area ([Att-002](#)). Both the OVLC and VLT are member organizations of the VCWMA, and the OVLC had already completed most of its aerial mapping by the time the CDFA grant was announced, so the Civil Grand Jury found that limited state grant monies are being spent redundantly.

### Cost vs. Benefits of Eradication

A robust study conducted in 2011 by the California Invasive Plant Council for the state Water Resources Board showed a conservative benefit-to-cost ratio for Arundo removal being approximately 2 to 1; that is for every \$1 spent on eradicating Arundo, \$2 is saved or gained. ([Ref-007](#)) Benefits quantified include:

- reduced fire impacts
- water savings
- reduced sediment trapping
- reduced flood damage to bridges
- habitat stability
- reduced beach debris

Benefits are lost if follow-up retreatments are not applied in annual succession until no new sprouts are observed. A Ventura River demonstration project in 2006 also confirms these estimates and highlights the long-term savings of using the cut-and-daub method and following best practices with offsite vegetation removal. ([Ref-008](#)) Funding for follow-up surveillance and monitoring is critical to any eradication program's success.

The 2025 updated fire hazard maps reflect the urgency required in reducing threats like Arundo in a meaningful, lasting way. Complex issues call for collaboration; expensive problems call for optimizing resource sharing across disparate groups so cost-effective solutions can be implemented quickly.

## FINDINGS

- F-01.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds no evidence of a long-term countywide coordinated Arundo eradication plan nor a budget line item to track spending on Arundo removal efforts, despite Ventura County Board of Supervisor's partial agreement with the 2015-16 Civil Grand Jury's recommendation to do so.
- F-02.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds multiple government agencies and nonprofit organizations are involved in Arundo eradication efforts, but no specific group has been empowered to create a coordinated countywide Arundo eradication plan.
- F-03.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds Public Works is not always following best management practices regarding Arundo removal, resulting in continued regrowth of an invasive weed.
- F-04.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that failure on behalf of the Ventura County Public Works Agency to observe best practices on invasive plant removal in a very high Fire Hazard Severity Zone has resulted in informal abatement notices from Ventura County Fire Department and public complaints to the Civil Grand Jury.
- F-05.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that the county agency in charge of controlling the growth of Arundo on county-owned land (Public Works) does not have the budget needed to observe best practices in eradicating Arundo.
- F-06.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that a clear understanding of Public Works' expenditures related to Arundo control was unavailable based on the lack of cost accounting for Arundo removal activities (vegetative removal project work is combined so Arundo-specific labor and expenses cannot be determined).
- F-07.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that programs to eradicate Arundo in the Ventura River and Santa Clara River Watersheds are actively funded and well-organized by watershed councils, Ventura County Resource Conservation District, Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, and many others.
- F-08.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds no active watershed council or Arundo eradication project exists for the Calleguas Creek Watershed.
- F-09.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds scant information (little web presence and no published archive of past meetings) about the activities of the Ventura County Weed Management Area organized under the Agricultural Commissioner.
- F-10.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that the Ventura County Weed Management Area has been operating for years with no strategic plan, despite all parties to the memorandum of understanding agreeing to develop one when the group was formed.
- F-11.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that a lack of coordinated information sharing among members of the Ventura County Weed Management Area has likely led to unnecessary redundancies in limited state grant awards.
- F-12.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that with a demonstrated benefit to cost ratio of Arundo eradication, lack of a countywide Arundo eradication plan results in wasted taxpayer money, groundwater waste, native habitat destruction, and increased fire hazards resulting in increased liability exposure to the county.

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- F-13.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury finds that the Ventura County Planning Division of the Resource Management Agency has not updated their Wetlands Permitting Guide in 20 years, presenting incomplete and outdated information.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- R-01.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Board of Supervisors resurrect the Ventura County Arundo Task Force and request participation from key stakeholders (Public Works/Watershed Protection District, Agriculture, Ventura County Fire Department, Ventura County Resource Conservation District, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Ventura County Weed Management Area, private landowners, etc.) to fund and develop a 10-year Arundo eradication plan specifically for the Calleguas Creek Watershed. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2026. (F-01, F-02, F-07, F-08, F-12)
- R-02.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Ventura County Resource Conservation District assume the role as lead agency of this task force based on its long history of leading watershed councils, success overseeing Arundo eradication projects elsewhere in the county, and ability to secure necessary permits and collaborate with key state agencies and other key stakeholders. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2026. (F-01, F-02, F-03, F-04)
- R-03.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Board of Supervisors reallocate funds from Public Works' operations and maintenance budgets that involve invasive vegetation removal, redirecting these funds to the appropriate task force or watershed council to support Arundo eradication following best practices. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2026. (F-03, F-04, F-05, F-06, F-07)
- R-04.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Board of Supervisors allocate necessary funds in its next budget to support existing Arundo eradication programs as requested by the Santa Clara River Watershed council. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2026. (F-01, F-02, F-12)
- R-05.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Agricultural Commissioner commit to improving the governance of the Ventura County Weed Management Area, expedite the creation of a strategic plan, and establish a basic website presence as soon as possible to publish meeting notices, agendas, and minutes to increase openness and transparency, promote information sharing among members and the public, and to highlight the important work it is doing around the county. This needs to be completed by October 31, 2026. (F-09, F-10, F-11)
- R-06.** The Ventura County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Ventura County Planning Division of the Resource Management Agency update their Wetlands Permitting Guide to conform with other recent efforts to streamline permitting processes. This needs to be completed by December 31, 2026. (F-13)

## RESPONSES

Responses required from:

**The following governing bodies within 90 days:**

Ventura County Board of Supervisors (F-01, F-02, F-03, F-04, F-05, F-06, F-07, F-08, F-12, R-01, R-02, R-03, R-04)

Ventura County Resource Conservation District (F-02, F-07, F-08, F-10, F-11, F-12, R-01, R-02, R-03, R-04)

Responses invited, but not required, from:

**The following appointed officials within 60 days:**

Agricultural Commissioner (F-01, F-02, F-07, F-08, F-09, F-10, F-11, F-12, R-01, R-05)

Public Works Agency Director (F-01, F-02, F-03, F-04, F-05, F-06, R-01, R-02, R-03)

Resource Management Agency Director (F-13, R-06)

## COMMENDATION

The Civil Grand Jury commends the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy for taking a proactive, educational, and collaborative approach to Arundo eradication. Their \$2.05 million grant from CAL FIRE will help to completely eradicate Arundo from the Ventura River Watershed; together with the Ventura County Resource Conservation District they secured permits to work year-round under a new “Cutting the Green Tape” Initiative from California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Through their Ventura River Watershed Riparian Resilience Program, OVLC’s vision and determination sets a strong example of what it takes to be successful in the fight against the formidable Arundo plant.

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- Ref-049. [CAL-IPC. Letter to Ventura County Board of Supervisors dated August 31, 2019](https://www.facebook.com/groups/38417209275/permalink/10158058603969276/). Accessed on June 2, 2026 from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/38417209275/permalink/10158058603969276/>
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**Ref-052.** Woods, Wes. [Ventura County nabs more than \\$1.4 million to lower risk of wildfires](https://www.vcstar.com/story/news/local/communities/ventura/2022/08/20/ventura-county-wildfire-prevention-cal-fire-california-grants/10334504002/). VC Star, August 20, 2022. Accessed June 1, 2026 from <https://www.vcstar.com/story/news/local/communities/ventura/2022/08/20/ventura-county-wildfire-prevention-cal-fire-california-grants/10334504002/>

## ATTACHMENTS

- Att-001.** Map of 2016-2026 vegetation-related brush fires generated by Civil Grand Jury from [data provided by VCFD](#) sent via email April 3, 2026.
- Att-002.** [California CDFA 2025-28 Cooperation Agreement with VCWMA](#). Sent via email March 30, 2026.
- Att-003.** Ventura County Civil Grand Jury. [Conejo Creek Photo taken April 8, 2026](#).
- Att-004.** Ventura County Public Works Agency. [Conejo Creek Map](#) sent via email March 27, 2026.
- Att-005.** Ventura County Public Works Agency. [Request for information](#) sent via email February 27, 2026.
- Att-006.** Ventura County Public Works Agency. [Chapter 2: Routine Maintenance Zone 3 Annual Monitoring Report, FY 2025-26](#). Sent via email February 27, 2026.
- Att-007.** [Ventura County Weed Management Area Blank Memorandum of Understanding](#). Sent via email March 30, 2026.
- Att-008.** [Ventura County Weed Management Area MOU showing signed groups](#). Sent via email March 30, 2026.
- Att-009.** Ventura County Public Works Agency. [Copy of CDFW Streambed Alteration Agreement](#) sent via email February 27, 2026.
- Att-010.** Stein, Eric; Begley, Amanda. [Santa Clara River Arundo Control Program, Update for Santa Clara River Watershed Committee](#), sent via email February 26, 2026.
- Att-011.** Ventura County Public Works Agency [email sent 3-27-26](#).
- Att-012.** Ventura County Public Works Agency [email sent 2-27-26](#).
- Att-013.** Ventura County Resource Conservation District [email sent June 1, 2026](#).
- Att-014.** Ventura County Agriculture/Weights & Measures [email sent April 1, 2026](#).
- Att-015.** Ventura County Fire Department [email sent April 7, 2026](#).
- Att-016.** Ventura County Fire Department [email sent April 8, 2026](#).
- Att-017.** Ventura County Agriculture/Weights & Measures [email sent March 2, 2026](#).

## GLOSSARY

<u>TERM</u>	<u>DEFINITION</u>
<b>Agriculture</b>	Ventura County Agriculture/Weights & Measures
<b>CAL FIRE</b>	California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
<b>Cal-IPC</b>	California Invasive Plant Council
<b>CDFA</b>	California Department of Food & Agriculture
<b>CDFW</b>	California Department of Fish & Wildlife
<b>CEQA</b>	California Environmental Quality Act
<b>Cut and Daub</b>	Method of killing invasive plants requiring cutting the stem near the ground and immediately applying an approved herbicide to the cut stump to prevent resprouting
<b>Cutting the Green Tape</b>	A CDFW program to increase the pace, scale, and quality of habitat restoration and native species recovery projects in California by improving environmental review and permitting efficiencies
<b>EDRR</b>	Early Detection Rapid Response
<b>EIR</b>	Environmental Impact Review
<b>FHRP</b>	Fire Hazard Reduction Program
<b>FHSZ</b>	Fire Hazard Severity Zone
<b>MOU</b>	Memorandum of Understanding
<b>O&amp;M</b>	Operations and Maintenance
<b>OVLC</b>	Ojai Valley Land Conservancy
<b>Public Works</b>	Ventura County Public Works Agency
<b>Riparian</b>	Relating to or living or located on the bank of a natural watercourse (such as a river) or sometimes of a lake or a tidewater
<b>SERP</b>	Statutory Exemption for Restoration Permit
<b>The C.R.E.W.</b>	Concerned Resource and Environmental Workers
<b>VCATF</b>	Ventura County Arundo Task Force
<b>VCFD</b>	Ventura County Fire Department
<b>VCRCD</b>	Ventura County Resource Conservation District
<b>VCWPD</b>	Ventura County Watershed Protection District
<b>VLT</b>	Ventura Land Trust
<b>Watershed</b>	An area of land that channels rainfall and snowmelt to a common outlet, such as a river, lake, or ocean
<b>WMA</b>	Ventura County Weed Management Area