

KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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MARCH 2017

SESPE FLOWS & STEELHEAD PASSAGE LAWSUIT



This archival photo by Hank Weishaar shows the peak flow of Sespe Creek just north of Fillmore on Feb. 12, 1992, when during a 20-minute peak, the Sespe was flowing at a rate of 53,000 cfs, meaning that 1.2 acre-feet of water was passing by every second! The wave smashing against the rocks on the bank in this picture was estimated at twelve feet in height.

The peakflow of Sespe Creek this winter, as measured in Fillmore at 8:00 p.m. on Feb. 17th, was near 35,000 cfs, or cubic feet per second. This is equivalent to 0.8 acrefeet/second – or a football field (without the end zones) 10 inches deep with water rushing by every second!

In Rose Valley about 8 inches of rain fell in the 24 hrs. ending at dawn on Feb. 18, and about 6 inches fell at Dough Flat north of Fillmore, in the middle of the Sespe's watershed.

We expect that this storm event will have cleared out most of the sediment that has sat in the lower Sespe's pools since the winter following Oct. 2006's arson-started Day Fire, which burned close to 163,000 acres of Los Padres National Forest, most of it in the eastern portion of the watershed of Sespe Creek. That was about 255 square miles of burned landscape.

The highly-erodible steep hillsides of our Southern Californian terrain can create a flow of sand and gravel particles that are very prone to cascade down into the nearest creek in rain storms, when the vegetation has burned off that usually holds the soil in place. This flow continues each subsequent rainy season, only diminishing when the hillside vegetation has grown back; this can take a number of years after a fire, to become dense enough to hold the soil.

This winter sediment flow has for nearly 10 years now largely filled up the Sespe's pools, which are the best summer habitat for the endangered native steelhead and rainbow trout. Five years of drought have meant that those sediment-filled pools have stayed much the same. It takes a good flushing flow, such as that on Feb. 17-18 this winter, to carry that sediment downstream and out to our ocean beaches.

The other change in the lower Sespe Gorge north of Fillmore this year will be that the many acres of native cattails that have hindered the passage of hikers will also have been mostly washed away.

As will most of those remaining tamarisk plants that KSWC has been eradicating with hand tools in the Sespe's watershed since 1991. Tamarisk is an exotic invasive tree species from central Asia that was introduced to the American West over a century ago. It is an extremely thirsty species that grows to become the dominant vegetation in any watershed it reaches. It has taken over the Grand Canyon, Lake Havasu and many other southwestern riparian areas.

Without our tamarisk removal efforts, lower Sespe Creek would by now be choked with tamarisk trees with trunks that can reach 18" or more in diameter, way too big to all be washed away in winter storms. Hiking on the creek would be next to impossible, as tamarisk branches criss-cross to block one's passage. Other native vegetation would be displaced, and the waterflow greatly diminished by thirsty tamarisk trees. Therefore the habitat for most native fish and animal species would also have been degraded.

Another welcome result of the recent heavy rains will be the diminished populations of many of the exotic fish species that now inhabit Sespe Creek. Most of these were once planted into the Rose Valley Lakes, which in wet years overflow into Howard Creek and thus they reached the Sespe. These exotics, including sunfish, bullhead/catfish, as well as bullfrogs, all eat young native trout and compete for the same habitat. But many of these fish are not sleek like trout, which can stay under rocks at high flows, so they may be washed downstream in peakflows.

FISH PASSAGE & FLOWS AT THE FREEMAN DIVERSION DAM ON SANTA CLARA RIVER

Two conservation groups submitted a letter to United Water on March 10, 2017, with comments on three fish passage alternatives at the Vern Freeman Diversion Dam on the Santa Clara River near Saticoy. This lies downstream of Sespe Creek, which joins the Santa Clara River at Fillmore.

These two groups had filed a federal lawsuit on June 06, 2016 against United Water Conservation District (United) over its operation of a dam that blocks runs of endangered steelhead on the Santa Clara River.

The Vern Freeman Diversion Dam, completed in the early 1990's, prevents virtually any steelhead from returning to prime habitat upstream, and degrades habitat downstream, according to the groups, the Wishtoyo Foundation, its Ventura Coastkeeper Program, and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Southern steelhead trout are federally protected, endangered fish that mature in the ocean but return inland to spawn in the streams they were born and raised in. The Santa Clara River historically supported steelhead runs averaging between 7,000 and 9,000 per annum. The 1,200-foot-wide, 25-foot-high Freeman Diversion Dam, located about 10 miles upstream from the Pacific Ocean, remains the main obstacle to steelhead migration. Its fish ladder is ineffective, and the dam now blocks almost all access to historic steelhead spawning areas upstream, including Sespe Creek. Southern steelhead populations have declined dramatically throughout their range, and the species now faces a high risk of extinction - for which dams are the major cause.

United's diversion of almost all of the river's flows, except for large storm events, harms not only steelhead but also endangered bird species downstream. Winter water flows downstream of the Freeman Diversion Dam are necessary for steelhead to swim upstream to get there from the ocean.

"Without changes in how the Freeman Dam is operated, steelhead and other imperiled wildlife in the Santa Clara watershed face a grim future," said John Buse, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity. "This lawsuit is aimed at getting fish upstream and water downstream at the right time."

"Not only is steelhead, vireo, flycatcher and cuckoo restoration possible, but it can be accomplished while providing enough water to maintain agricultural and municipal land uses in the Oxnard Plain," said Jason Weiner, general counsel at the Wishtoyo Foundation.

The lawsuit states that eight years after the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) – the federal agency responsible for the recovery of the endangered southern steelhead – completed their Final Biological Opinion on the operation of the Freeman Diversion Dam, that United still has not adopted the necessary measures to avoid unauthorized take (i.e. killing) of steelhead there. The Biological Opinion stated that United's operation of the dam increases the extinction rate of the steelhead, by reducing and at times eliminating their upstream migration opportunities.

The lawsuit further states that United has failed to obtain the required Incidental Take Permit from NMFS, which leaves them strictly liable for the take of steelhead caused by the operation of the dam.



Fisheries biologist Mark Moore with a 27" steelhead on the lower Sespe in April 1983 – when fish passage up from the ocean was not yet blocked as it is now by the Freeman Diversion Dam on the Santa Clara River near Saticoy.

FISH PASSAGE ALTERNATIVES AT THE FREEMAN DIVERSION DAM

The March 10 letter to United on fish passage alternatives at the Freeman Diversion Dam looked at three different projects at the same location that would at the same time improve steelhead upstream migration and allow for United to divert equivalent, reliable quantities of water, which is put back into the soil adjacent to the diversion dam to recharge depleted underground aquifers, or water tables.

The Damless Diversion alternative is favored by the two groups, as it would allow unhindered steelhead access, as well as the potential at high flows for United to divert twice the currently-permitted amount of water for aquifer replenishment.

The fishladder built at the Freeman Diversion site in the 1990's has never functioned properly, and fewer than 10 steelhead were known to be able to migrate upstream past it between 1994 and 2004. Steelhead migrating upstream to spawn can sense minor differences in the water pressure in the river, which acts to lead them to find ways around natural obstacles such as boulders. But the fishladder at the Freeman Diversion Dam has failed with its water flows to attract all but a few migrating steelhead.



A picture of the Freeman Diversion Dam while the Santa Clara River was running at a strong flow, May 2003. The structure is 1,200 feet across and 25 feet high. The diversion facilities and the defunct fishladder are out of the picture to the right.



Yes, a handful of steelhead have managed to attempt to access the Freeman Diversion fishladder in the past 20 years. This 28" specimen was assisted by fishladder staff in March 2009.

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THE SANTA CLARA RIVER PARKWAY

In 2000, the California State Coastal Conservancy proposed the establishment of the Santa Clara River Parkway, after discussions with river corridor landowners and local governments.

The primary goal of the Santa Clara River Parkway Project has been the acquisition, conservation, and restoration of floodplain lands within the Santa Clara River corridor. Governor Gray Davis provided initial funding of \$9.2 million, as appropriated by the legislature, to the Coastal Conservancy for land acquisition and planning. Land acquisition has since continued, with the non-profit Nature Conservancy taking the lead role.

While 95% of southern California's wetland habitat has been lost, the Santa Clara River is the last major waterway in this part of the state that has not had its main channel lined with concrete. The Nature Conservancy has already helped to preserve one third of the river's corridor within Ventura County, and their goal is to preserve 30,000 acres (that's 47 square miles) including the river's headwaters segments in Los Angeles County.

GOALS OF THE PARKWAY PROJECT

The Parkway was established to achieve three goals: (1) to conserve and restore aquatic and riparian habitats for native species, and the hydrologic and geomorphic processes that create and maintain those habitats,

(2) to provide enhanced flood protection for adjacent private land and public facilities, and

(3) to provide public access and environmental education, including the creation of a continuous public trail system along the length of the Parkway.

This incredible, ongoing conservation effort is for some reason not well enough known. That's why we are covering it in this issue of our newsletter.

Sespe Creek flows for about 51 miles from its headwaters up near the summit of Hwy. 33, down to Los Padres National Forest's boundary. From there it flows past the city of Fillmore for its final 4 miles, before joining the Santa Clara River just south of the Hwy. 126 bridge. What a wonderful vision, to see the Sespe eventually connected to the estuary of the Santa Clara River beside McGrath State Beach, in one continuous thread of protected riparian corridor, with native plantings replacing exotic vegetation, and with hiking trails and opportunities to connect with a wild, thriving, natural riparian environment.

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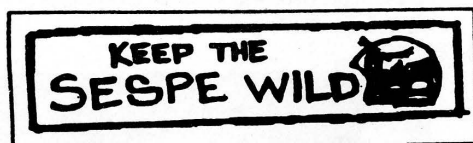
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**FILLMORE GROUNDWATER BASIN'S
NEW MANAGEMENT BOARD**

During the recent drought, California legislators required stakeholders of many groundwater basins around the state to set up management boards, for the first time, to prepare plans for the sustainable longterm use of the water in those basins. California had for some reason never had a statewide groundwater basin management program before this.

The County of Ventura has been instrumental in setting up boards for the Upper Ventura and the Ojai basins. In mid March, it was the turn of the Piru & Fillmore basins, which lie beneath the Santa Clara River there. Sespe Creek flows into the Fillmore basin, and then on down towards the ocean.

County Supervisor Kelly Long proposed that she represent the County on this new board, along with the City of Fillmore, United Water, and two farmers who pump from those two adjacent basins. This proposal allowed for no environmental representation on the new board. A proposal by Supervisor Steve Bennett was passed, to allow the County Board of Supervisors to select their own representative for this new board, and to replace one farmer/pumper board member with a representative of a local environmental organization. United Water stated to the Supervisors that they adequately represent environmental concerns. This is a stretch – United Water would hands-down win a contest for the least-environmental local agency in the county.