

THE SESPE WILD

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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THOMAS FIRE EDGED INTO SESPE WATERSHED

MARCH/APRIL 2018

The Thomas Fire, which began just after dark on Monday December 04 last year in the Upper Ojai Valley, was pushed by strong winds towards the ocean. It did however cross north of the Nordhoff Ridge into the Sespe watershed, though it only burned a small percentage of it.

As you drive on Hwy. 33 north of Ojai, the hills are mostly black all around you, past Matilija Canyon and up to the Rose Valley turn off. At that point, much of the chaparral vegetation on the right side of the road was spared by the flames, and right after the Dry Lakes Ridge trail, as the road turns to the right where you enter the Sespe watershed, very little burn area is to be seen from here up to the summit of Hwy. 33.

There is a small blackened area by the road at the Tule Creek slide area - and some more by the Cherry Creek area, where the flames moved up from Matilija Canyon (which is all black).

In Rose Valley you can see the main burned area of the watershed. For the most part, the left side of the road here is unburned, but by far the majority of the landscape on your right, up to the Nordhoff Ridge, is blackened. No houses burned in Rose Valley (most are on the left of the road), but the campgrounds are devastated.

It is not known when funding for campground cleanup will be available, nor when these popular car camping sites will be re-opened. From

the road above Middle Lion campground, the long view up to the Nordhoff Ridge is all burned, but as soon as you head past there towards the Piedra Blanca trailhead, you see no fire damage at all as you look north.

The U.S. Forest Service may open some trails into the burned zones soon, but other trails will apparently need rebuilding where erosion occurred during the rains in January. The only Sespe trails currently open are Chorro Grande and Potrero John. Even though Piedra Blanca trailhead is unscathed, and the road to it is quite clear, the Forest Service has not yet opened it. This is a pity during peak springtime hiking season - apparently it has something to

do with federal funding for fire-related work. When the agency declares the Thomas Fire to be out, some funding opportunities dry up.

The forest should open soon. If you are on our email alerts list for local issues, we'll let you know when which areas of the watershed are re-opened. You may add your name to this alerts list by emailing us at: sespecoyn@gmail.com

Behind Santa Paula the Thomas Fire burned pretty much all the Santa Paula Creek watershed, though there was only a little burn over the

ridge top into the Sespe. This picture is of two planes dropping fire retardant on the hilltops west of Devil's Gate, just north of Fillmore.



The fire did burn from the west edge of Fillmore up past Devil's Gate where Los Padres Forest starts, but it not move far into the area west of Sespe Creek known as Bear Heaven.

WERT REPORT ON THE FIRE

The Watershed Emergency Response Team (WERT) is a federal and state multi-agency team that analyzed and prepared a 241-page report, published in late February. Their studies included the rain storm and debris flows from January 09.

The report states that 1,063 structures were destroyed by the fire in two counties. The fire burned a total of 281,893 acres, becoming the largest fire in modern California history. 54% of the burned area was within Los Padres Forest.

For their analysis, the WERT team divided the burn area into 19 separate geographic areas, by watersheds and communities.

The regional fire history shows that 66% of the Thomas Fire perimeter had burned at some point since 1983. The Wheeler fire that started up Hwy. 33 from Ojai in 1985 burned nearly 40% of the Thomas Fire area.

Oilfield infrastructure was also evaluated in the report. Some oilfield areas are at risk of future flooding and debris flows.

FIRE FUNDING FIX COMES FROM SEN. FEINSTEIN IN D.C.

Senator Dianne Feinstein has for several years attempted to fix the fire funding problem that has paralyzed much of the U.S. Forest Service's regular responsibilities.

In times of fire, past practice meant that the enormous bills for manpower, aircraft and support were required to come to such a degree from the current year's local budget, that often there was little left for any other regular operations. Many staff were laid off as local Ranger Districts simply had no money to pay salaries. Some operations, such as trail maintenance, are now basically in the hands of volunteer organizations.

The Ojai District Ranger - who is also District Ranger for Santa Barbara - told me recently that he has only seven personnel under his command at both district offices, and that in-

cludes the two staff that answer the phones. What's more, vacancies are not allowed to be filled (except for fire personnel.)

Nationwide - and this was before the Thomas Fire - 76% of the U.S. Forest Service's annual budget now goes to fires. That's also why zero road repairs were undertaken in 2017 in Los Padres Forest - there's no money.

Now some funding did come back from Congress to forests where fires had burned, but usually a year or so later, and with strings attached to what it could and could not be used for. Thus regular operations such as trail work, visitor services, environmental restoration, endangered species projects, all suffered from next to no dependable year-round funding, as is needed for full-time staff's paychecks.

Well this year was at last the right time for Senator Feinstein's fix, patiently waiting in the wings, to be enacted in a modified form. It is now law, as part of the federal 2018 Omnibus Appropriations Bill passed last month. This was negotiated by Senate Democrats, and Senator Chuck Schumer at the very end of negotiations on the appropriations bill persuaded a reluctant Speaker of the House Paul Ryan to support it.

The legislation provides additional funding for fire fighting for the next ten years for the U.S. Forest Service and for the Dept. of the Interior, which controls the Park Service and the B.L.M.

The language (see pages 1787- 1794 of the bill) sets aside \$2.25 billion a year for U.S. Forest Service and Dept. of the Interior fire fighting, only to be available after the agencies' regular annual fire fighting budgets are used up. The Forest Service alone spent a record \$2.4 billion fighting fires in 2017.

This change should lead to greater stability in local Forest Service operations other than fires.

OUR NEW NEWSLETTER HEADING

For many years, our newsletter heading was simply SESPE WILD. Then in 1996 Congress enacted the Recreation Fee Demo Program, (Fee Demo), which authorized the U.S. Forest Service and other federal public lands agencies to levy fees more or less at will, and to use them to bring down their multi-billion dollar backlog of maintenance expenditures.



Looking downstream from Second Narrows in the middle of the lower Sespe Gorge, summer 2017. You need to climb around, or swim this long pool.

The problem was, a large percentage of forest visitors, from hikers to hunters, mountain bikers to horseback riders, all came together to protest being charged to visit undeveloped public lands that they well knew had been supported by their tax dollars since the agency came into being. And fees led to few repairs.

Keep Sespe Wild was at the forefront of the fee protest movement for most of the twenty plus years that have now passed since 1996. And we changed our newsletter's heading to
KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE.

At long last the U.S. Forest Service has rolled back its fees in Los Padres National Forest, where fees are now levied at developed camping and day-use sites by the concessionaire operator. Trailhead access to our local forests is now free, with one exception.

The U.S Forest Service insisted on keeping the Piedra Blanca trailhead in Rose Valley as a fee site - the only Adventure Pass fee site in all of the Ojai Ranger District. Visitors may still use this trailhead without a fee, simply by parking on the side of the road before the small "Fee Area" sign as you enter the trailhead site.

So the newsletter is now **THE SESPE WILD.**

PLEASE SUPPORT KSWC WITH A DONATION

Your donations and purchases are our major source of funding. Malinda Chouinard, wife of Yvon Chouinard, the founder of Patagonia, does send us an annual contribution as well. Thanks as ever to those who send us checks in the remit envelopes inside our newsletters.

We also send out our newsletter by email to several hundred supporters, but since they don't get those little remit envelopes, we don't hear back from them very often. Donations are not tax-deductible.

UPDATE ON SESPE OILFIELD EXPANSION

The application by Seneca Resources to the Ca. Dept. of Conservation's Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources (known as DOGGR) to double the size of the Sespe Oilfield north of Fillmore is currently being reviewed in Sacramento by the State Water Resources Control Board.

From there it will move up to the federal EPA, Region 9, covering the Pacific Southwest, for a final approval. Public comments were taken by DOGGR last fall, although experience shows that DOGGR doesn't really change its course because of public comments. They are better known as an accommodator of the industry that they are charged with regulating.

Local opposition to the oilfield expansion is growing in and around Fillmore. CFROG, Ventura County's oil industry watchdog group, held a letter writing meeting in Fillmore in February that was attended by over 60 people, all of whom wrote letters, after a presentation.

The oilfield expansion is on paper actually to allow a larger area for the injection deep underground of oilfield waste water - which is the watery stuff that comes up to the surface, (where it is separated from the oil) plus whatever chemicals were in use to facilitate the oil production (i.e. fracking compounds).

But doubling the area for injecting waste water makes it very easy for Seneca to apply for permits to drill more wells across the entire enlarged area. Just when the world must cut back on greenhouse gas emissions from oil, here is a local operation wanting to expand.

KEEP SESPE WILD COMMITTEE

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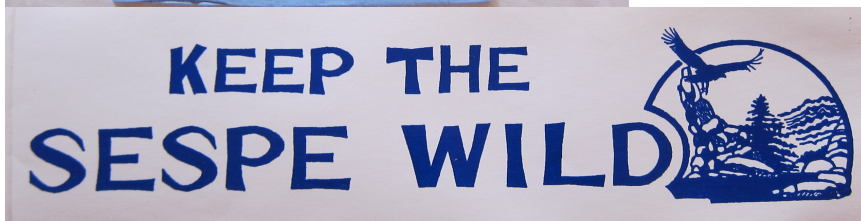


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SESPE SOUND RECORDINGS

Mike Dodge Weiskopf made some professional sound recordings during a hike to the Sespe Hot-springs in 2016. There's a 65 minute night-time recording and a 28-minute morning chorus.

Here's the link:

<https://shortwavemusic.bandcamp.com/album/field-recordings-from-the-sespe-wilderness-maricopa-ca>

They really bring the sounds of the Sespe into your home or your car. Recommended.

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KSWC continues to work with CFROG and Los Padres ForestWatch to halt the Sespe Oilfield expansion. A letter is going to our federal legislators to request their help. It has been signed by a dozen local, state-wide and national environmental groups, expressing concerns that the injected water may move into & contaminate the Fillmore Basin aquifer, the only local water supply for residents and farmers.