

THE SESPE WILD

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

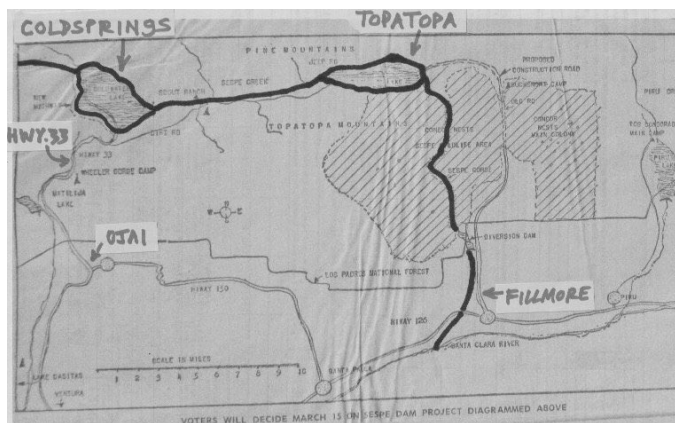
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SESPE DAMS VOTED DOWN - just - on March 15, 1966 DECEMBER 2020

March 15, 1966 went down in history as the date when voters on the Oxnard Plain voted down the biggest development project ever proposed in Ventura County - the Sespe Project, which was proposed by the United Water Conservation District, of Santa Paula, to construct two large dams along Sespe Creek.

Soon after KSWC got off the ground in the late 1980's, somebody passed along to us a scrapbook from 1966 that contained all the newspaper stories, campaign advertisements and brochures, detailing the various arguments used by both sides. Almost all local business interests, city councils and the County Star newspaper were in support of the project.



In this County Star map the Sespe is a dark line. The proposed Coldsprings dam, is just up from where Howard Creek joins the Sespe. This reservoir would have flooded Hwy. 33 past the popular climbing gorge a few miles upstream. The cross-hatched area (top right) is the Sespe Condor Sanctuary north of Fillmore, and at its top left corner sits the proposed TopaTopa dam site.

This reservoir would have flooded all the way from Alder Creek to the Hotsprings to the west. In this map, Sespe Creek's headwaters are beyond the top left, near the summit of Hwy. 33. The Sespe flow east in this map, until it turns 90 degrees to the south and heads through the Condor Sanctuary towards Fillmore, where the Sespe joins the Santa Clara River.

Sespe Project proponents talked up 27,000 acrefeet of new water supply per year, to be used to recharge the over-pumped aquifers beneath the Oxnard Plain, where seawater was already then intruding inland.

A new dam construction access road would be pushed north from the current "end-of-the-road" trailhead at Dough Flat north of Fillmore, all the way to the TopaTopa dam site close to the Alder Creek/Sespe junction.

This reservoir was proposed (along with the other reservoir at the Coldsprings site far upstream) to become a major recreation destination - with 1,550 camping spots, 950 picnic sites, 8 lanes of boat ramps, beach improvement, & 16.5 miles of access and other roads. Waterskiing was planned to be a big draw.

United Water estimated the cost to a homeowner on the Oxnard Plain would be about \$4 a year, "about the same cost as a magazine subscription or one gallon of gas per month."



The figure of United Water here has a dead condor around the neck. County Star, two days before the vote.

SESPE DAM OPPONENTS

The opposition to the Sespe Project worked hard against better-financed opponents. The City of Oxnard stood out locally in opposition to the dams - but only because they favored a scaled-down project instead.

Dam opponents, led by Gene Marshall and Doyle Hunter, argued that neither the federal nor state governments had approved the Sespe Project. And they critiqued dam cost estimates as unreliable, and therefore a "blank check" to be covered by local taxpayers.

They favored instead State Water Project supplies from the Feather River in Northern California, as being more affordable by far than the two Sespe dams' potential water supplies.

There was also suspicion about the geological foundation of the proposed TopaTopa dam site, which raised fears of another St. Francis dam break, which occurred with great loss of life in the Santa Clara River watershed in 1928.

THE VOTE APPROACHES

Only six days ahead of the election, a survey of voters, paid for by United Water, showed a margin of 6.5 to 1 in favor of the Sespe dams. About one half of then Ventura County voters were eligible to vote on this matter, which came to just over 50,000 residents of United Water's service area on the Oxnard Plain. On election day about 30% of those went to the polls.

On March 13, two days ahead of the vote, the County Star printed a full-page editorial in support of the Sespe Project. To quote:

"The Sespe Project is just about the biggest thing the people of this county have ever undertaken and it has a debate to match its size."

"One of the biggest issues that might have changed our mind was the "condor question", the belief that construction of dams may doom the prehistoric species to extinction. The condor may, in fact, be doomed but there is no evidence that the construction of the dams will hasten his demise."

"...the real issue of Tuesday's election is whether Ventura County can afford to allow the water from its last large water hole to waste into the sea."

The editorial concluded - "Because Tuesday's vote on the Sespe contract is in part a propaganda vehicle to convince Congress of local

support for the project, we think a large affirmative vote is essential - and we recommend it."

The Director of California's State Resource Agency, Hugo Fisher, weighed in late with a report on the Sespe Project on March 11, the Friday just before the vote.

The report questioned the dam project's impacts on condors - the Condor Sanctuary is only one mile away, and the access road would cross a corner of it. Also, recreation activities after the dam's construction would open adjoining areas to much more use than at present.

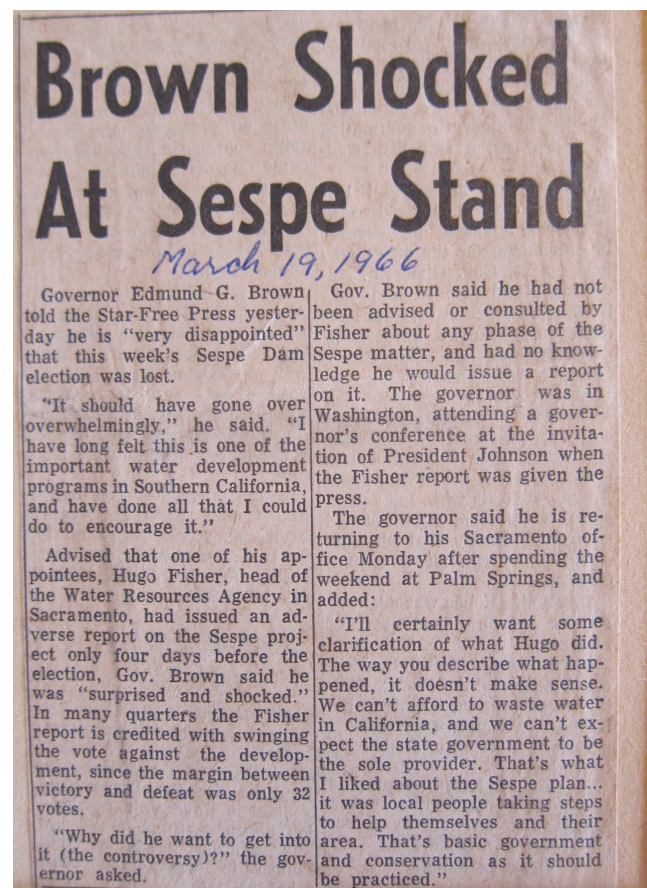
Then there was the matter of the potentially unstable foundation for the TopaTopa dam. And the financial and economic needs for the project were considered inadequate.

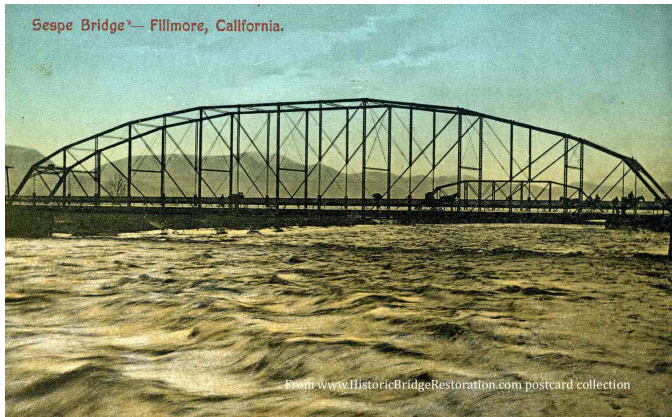
AND THEN THE VOTE!

The Sespe was saved from dam development on March 15, 1966 by a razor-thin margin, eventually settled at only 32 votes.

Oxnard voters were the key bloc of "no" voters, with a margin of around 2,000 more no votes than yes votes. Thanks, Oxnard voters from 1966! Oxnard strongly preferred a scaled-down and cheaper Sespe dam project.

Fillmore and Santa Paula were the strongholds of the yes votes for the Sespe dams.





An undated archival photo of Sespe Creek in flood, likely a century old, reaching nearly to the bridge west of Fillmore. Note the horses and their riders on the bridge, watching the flood waters, which could there be an estimated eight or ten feet deep in this picture.

UPDATE ON THE REYES PEAK FOREST THINNING PROJECT

Los Padres Forest administrators and planners say that the agency is still going over the public comments that they received about six months ago now.

They currently plan to release their proposed next steps in the first few months of 2021.

Meanwhile, Los Padres ForestWatch (LPFW) has filed an appeal with the U.S. Forest Service to seek the tree stand data upon which the agency based their drastic tree removal proposal for the Reyes Peak/Pine Mountain ridge line.

LPFW first sought this data from the agency in the early summer of 2020, but no response has yet been issued. Their current appeal for the tree stand data will be heard by the office of the Chief of the Forest Service in D.C.

THANKS FOR YOUR DONATIONS TO KSWC

Keep Sespe Wild Committee depends on your generous donations to cover our operating expenses.

In the first months of the pandemic, we elected not to request any donations, as we were financially secure without them, and we instead recommended your support for other organizations more in need of your help. We understand that many of you will be among those still struggling to survive under the pandemic restrictions. Our best wishes to you all.

UNITED WATER STILL KILLING STEELHEAD AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

United Water is still responsible for regularly killing steelhead at or near its Freeman Diversion dam on the Santa Clara River near Saticoy.



Here is a photo of a downstream-migrating steelhead smolt in August of 2020, found dead, and netted by United Water staff, just below the Freeman Diversion dam. Its passage to the ocean was likely impeded by the operation of the Freeman Diversion, so it had not enough water to migrate.

United Water does not have a federal “take” permit from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), under the Endangered Species Act, which would allow for very limited steelhead mortality.

The judge in the lawsuit in federal court in Los Angeles has chastised NMFS from the bench, for not doing more to hold United Water to account for the Freeman Diversion dam’s regular steelhead mortality incidents.

NMFS generally opens an investigation into each steelhead mortality incident - but then there seems to be no follow-up from their law enforcement staff. And United Water therefore suffers no repercussions.

What would the agencies’ and public response be, if it were endangered California condors that United Water’s operations were killing? On page one of this newsletter there is a newspaper cartoon from 1966 of United Water with a dead condor around its neck.

It is clearly time for an updated cartoon of United Water, with a string of dead steelhead as a necklace.

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MORE LOS PADRES FOREST NEWS

Los Padres National Forest has at last made the move of its headquarters office from Goleta up to Solvang. Of course, presently the staff are working remotely from home.

Los Padres Forest Supervisor Kevin Elliott has extended the forest-wide target-shooting ban which has now been in place for a few years. His intention is that this will eventually become a permanent ban.

SESPE T-SHIRTS: \$20 incl. tax & shipping.

Light Blue T-shirts - 5-color logo on front.

White T-shirts - 5-color logo on back, & small blue pocket logo on front.

State white or blue, plus sizes - S, M, L, XL, or XXL.

T-shirts are 100% organic cotton fabric.

**SESPE BUMPERSTICKERS:
\$2 each.**

**Mail orders to: KSWC, PO Box 715,
Ojai, CA 93024.**

Allow a few weeks for delivery.

There will be a public input period in January of 2021 for comments on the proposed Rose Valley Creek restoration project. The plan is to eliminate the Rose Valley Lakes (which were constructed in the mid-1900's as a water supply for the personnel stationed there then). This will allow for the natural channel of Rose Valley Creek - which flows from the falls and on into Sespe Creek - to be restored.

The "No Fees for Roadside Parking" sign was removed by concessionaire staff from the Paradise Road kiosk. Hopefully soon replaced.