

THE SESPE WILD

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

P.O. Box 715, Ojai, CA 93024

(805) 921-0618 www.sespewild.org

LOCAL WILDERNESS BILL PASSES HOUSE IN D.C.

MARCH 2021

Congressman Salud Carbajal's (D. Santa Barbara) public lands protection bill, H.R. 973, passed the House of Representatives in Washington D.C. on February 26th.

Named the Central Coast Heritage Protection Act, the legislation aims to designate 287,500 acres of federal public lands as new wilderness areas across Ventura County, Santa Barbara County, San Luis Obispo County and western Kern County. It also designates 159 miles of rivers within these counties as new additions to the national Wild & Scenic Rivers system.

The legislation did not need to go through committee hearings in the House this year, as it had already done so in the previous session of Congress. It passed the House by a vote of 227-200, with a show of bipartisan support. Rep. Julia Brownley is a co-sponsor of the bill.

It now awaits action in the U.S. Senate, where it will require a committee hearing before coming to the Senate floor for a vote. It is expected to proceed through the Senate this spring or summer.

The new wilderness areas are at various locations within Los Padres National Forest and the Carrizo Plains National Monument. A trail of 400 miles, to be designated the Condor Scenic Trail, runs from near Lake Piru in the south, up to Big Sur.

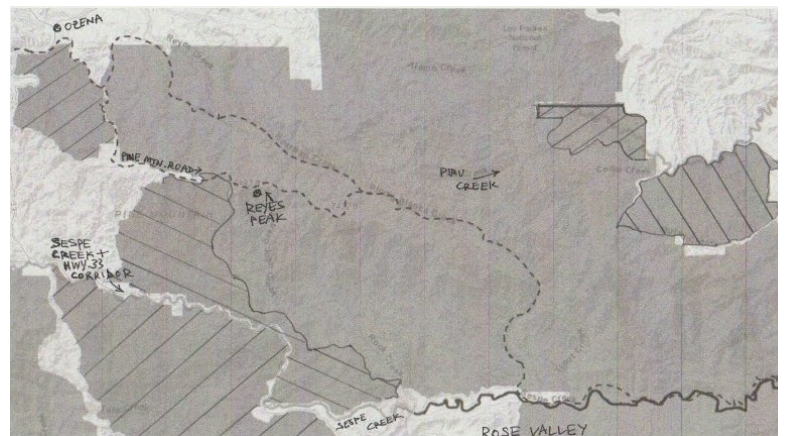
Locally, the proposal adds 14,313 acres to the 220,000 acre Sespe Wilderness - (a) the east side of Hwy. 33 north and west of Rose Valley and east of the Chorro Grande Trail (the Reyes Peak unit, 6,566 acres); (b) down to Ozena from the Pine Mountain Road (the Boulder unit, 2,636 acres); (c) the Fishbowls unit (1,324 acres, in Grade Valley), and (d) the Mutau unit, west of Mutau Flat (3,784 acres).

Also to be protected is the balance of Sespe Creek, which saw 31.5 miles protected as a

Wild & Scenic River in 1992. This bill adds to that the 20 miles of the Sespe's headwaters, and one mile north of Devil's Gate, down to Los Padres Forest's southern boundary near Fillmore. This last mile was left out of the 1992 legislation, the Condor Range and Rivers Act, to allow for a potential future Oat Mountain reservoir to flood that one mile.

Fortunately we discovered at that time that the proposed Oat Mountain dam site (south of the forest boundary, and close to the north end of Goodenough Road) was located exactly where the San Cayetano earthquake fault, running east-west, crosses Sespe Creek.

This fault has been studied by the U.S. Geological Survey, is still active, and is capable of a 7.2 quake on the Richter scale. Not a very plausible location for a tall dam. Also, that potential reservoir would have silted up fast, as did the reservoir behind Matilija Dam, north of Ojai, which was built in the late 1940's.



Map of proposed Sespe Wilderness additions, shown with hash marks. Current wilderness areas are also dark. Top left is the Boulder unit (2,636 acres); center left is the Reyes Peak unit (6,566 acres); center right is the Mutau unit (3,784 acres), left and above that, the Fishbowls unit (1,324 acres) Bottom left is the proposed Matilija Wilderness northeast unit addition (12,896 acres, not shown in its entirety) below the Sespe Creek/Hwy. 33 corridor. The dotted line marks the Condor Scenic Trail.

Map adapted from Los Padres ForestWatch original.

Other proposed wilderness areas of Ventura County's Los Padres Forest in H.R. 973 extend the current Matilija Wilderness:

- (a) the southern addition, down towards Lake Casitas, at 9,960 acres;
- (b) the southeastern addition that borders the Ortega Trail at its east edge, at 3,488 acres;
- (c) the northeastern addition that borders Hwy. 33 at its east edge, at 12,896 acres, and
- (d) the northern addition, west of Hwy. 33 and south of Potrero Seco, at 3,833 acres.

This totals 30,184 proposed new wilderness acres for the Matilija Wilderness' additions, doubling its current wilderness of 29,648 acres.

Also proposed are 14.5 miles of Matilija Creek as a Wild & Scenic River - over 7 miles down from the central source (the fork where the falls are located), and over 7 miles downstream from the North Fork Matilija Creek's source, both segments ending at the forest boundary.

Piru Creek will be protected from its source to the upstream end of Lake Piru, 56.5 miles.

There are also proposed additions to the Chumash Wilderness north of Lockwood Valley Road, at the northern edge of Ventura County. This wilderness, currently at 37,700 acres is slated to have another 23,670 acres added - 17,900 acres to the south of Apache Canyon, and 5,763 acres to the south, down to Lockwood Valley Road.

The greatest easily-seen wilderness increase in Ventura County sits along the Hwy. 33 corridor between Matilija Canyon and Ozena. This is where the proposed wilderness comes close to the highway almost all the way - except for a squarish segment south of Pine Mountain Road, west of Chorro Grande trail and east of Hwy. 33 (*center left in map on page 1*).

The new wilderness additions along this Hwy. 33 corridor will total 31,400 acres, or 49 square miles.

SESPE CREEK DISCOVERED?

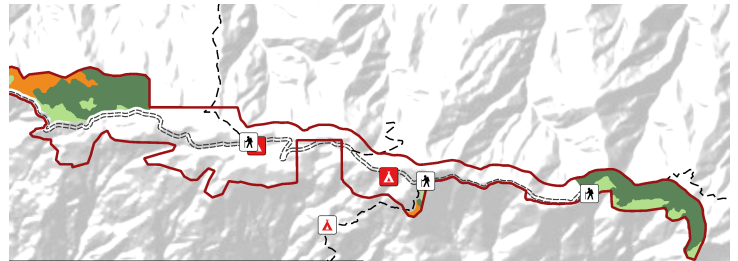
Since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, many thousands of hikers have been drawn to Rose Valley's Piedra Blanca trailhead, access point to the upper Sespe watershed, which has remained open for visiting. Last week we thought it would be quiet on a Monday afternoon. Wrong! There were over 100 cars and horse trailers parked there. Fortunately in the few miles we strolled there was negligible trash.

REYES PEAK LOGGING PROPOSAL

There is still no word from Los Padres National Forest (LPNF) planning staff on the next steps with their proposal to log 15,000 old-growth "sky island" conifers along the ridge at the northern edge of the Sespe watershed, north of Pine Mountain Road and west of Reyes Peak.

The public comment period ended in the summer of 2020, but there has still not been any announcement from the agency as to what they plan to do next. We would hope that they will require at the very least proper dating of the trees they propose to log, to confirm their age.

There is some overlap between the logging and chaparral removal areas of LPNF's plan, and the new proposed wilderness areas in Rep. Carbajal's legislation, H.R. 973.



Map courtesy of Los Padres ForestWatch.

The above map shows where the proposed wilderness areas overlap parts of LPNF's proposal, at the western and eastern ends (the dark, shaded areas). The wilderness proposals cover about 30% of the area set aside for the old-growth conifer logging project.

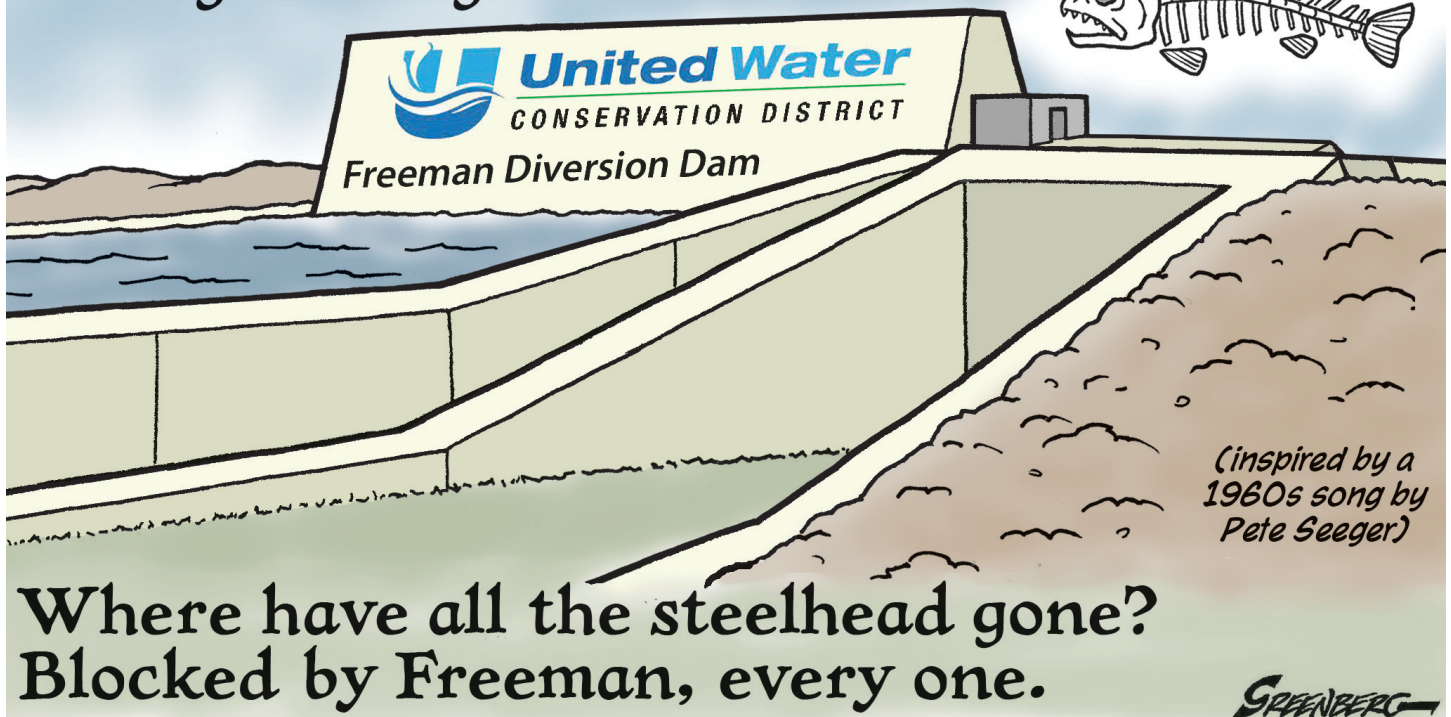
So far LPNF planners have used a special loophole to avoid performing the normal environmental analysis for such a logging proposal. Logging may still take place in a wilderness area, but in that case proper environmental analysis will definitely be required.

That means, all acres being equal, 5,000 trees may be more readily saved from logging there, if the analysis shows they are old-growth trees.

THANKS FOR YOUR DONATIONS

KSWC relies on your kind donations to cover all our regular expenses. Nobody gets paid - we are an all-volunteer watershed advocacy organization. Donations are however not tax-deductible. Thanks for all your recent contributions to KSWC.

Where have all the steelhead gone,
Long time passing?
Where have all the steelhead gone.
Long time ago?



A timely visual representation of the ongoing, decades-long killing of migrating steelhead at the Freeman Diversion dam owned and operated by United Water on the Santa Clara River, downstream from Fillmore.

The southern steelhead are a federally-listed endangered species, and the Santa Clara River system provides one of the finest opportunities and habitat for their recovery.

Sespe Creek is located a few miles upstream of the Freeman Diversion dam, which prevents almost all adult steelhead returning from the ocean to access their traditional spawning grounds both in the Sespe and in other tributaries to the Santa Clara River.

The dam also manages to kill young steelhead migrating to the ocean, by diverting so much water that often not enough remains in the downstream river channel to support their passage down to the ocean at McGrath State Beach. They run out of water and die.

So far United Water has faced no repercussions for causing over decades the continuing mortality of a listed endangered species, the southern steelhead. This should change.

NEARLY HOME by Frank Felt

The trail is long and the ridge is steep,
The fleecy white in the drift is deep;
The lead horse heaves with a heavy load,
As pack bags sway and the cinches goad.
Up from the sage to the pine clad heights,
Heading a frosted breeze that bites;
The horse shoe bend - and the top at last,
Down to the flats and the worst is passed.
Seems like an age since I've been gone,
Fighting the trail since the early dawn.
And somebody's thinking of me today,
Somebody's anxious when I'm away;
But around the point and I'm nearly home,
With a "loud halloo" to the rocky dome -
For somebody listens to hear me shout -
To hear the echoing hills ring out;
Then somebody knows that I've crossed the
snow, Passed the slide and am out below:
And somebody's heart will be glad again,
For somebody knows that I'll soon ride in.

Frank Felt homesteaded at what is now Chorro Grande near the summit of Hwy. 33, before that road was built, for several decades a century ago. His access was what is now the North Fork Matilija trail up to Cherry Creek.

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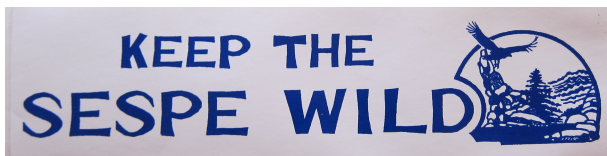
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A snowy day hike on the Cherry Creek trail from Hwy. 33 up to where one can see the view down into Matilija Canyon, on January 31st. this winter.

Benjamin is taking the lead here.

As the elevation increased to the trail's summit, the fresh untrod snow got to be a good ten inches deep.

There was the constant sound of snow melting off the tree branches in the warm afternoon sun and sloughing in clumps to the ground below. Apart from that, silence.

