

# THE SESPE WILD

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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## JANUARY STORM RESHAPES THE LANDSCAPE OF LOS PADRES NATIONAL FOREST

MARCH 2023



*A photo taken immediately upstream of Devil's Gate, at the southern boundary of Los Padres Forest north of Fillmore, in early January, shows the raging Sespe Creek flows there a week BEFORE the storm of Jan. 10. (photo: Devlin Gandy)*

Sespe Creek and the Ventura River are among the local waterways that reshaped the landscapes of their respective watersheds during the high flows that came with the storm of January 10, which represented the largest stormflows seen since 2005. The rain gauge atop Nordhoff Ridge above Ojai measured

15.75 inches, Matilija Dam just a little less, in about 30 hours.

A second big rainfall event on Feb. 24 created further damage to infrastructure in the floodplains, and led to hundreds more landslides all across the landscape.

Seasonal rainfall totals by early March are helping to end local drought emergencies - at least for several years. Ojai's avocado and citrus farmers have for some years now been only one year away from having to take out some of their orchards, if greater cutbacks of irrigation water were mandated.

As of March 05, the rain gauge in Matilija Canyon has recorded over 55 inches of rain for the season so far. Lake Casitas has risen from around 30% capacity at New Year's to over 50% capacity, and is still rising.



*The rail bridge over Sespe Creek just west of Fillmore was damaged by the Jan. 10 storm flows. (photo: County Star)*

Across Los Padres Forest, damage to human infrastructure has been enormous. Of course, much of this stems from infrastructure having



been located in floodplains to begin with. But multiple road crossings have been wiped out, and landslides have damaged trails at hundreds of locations.

At a zoom meeting with administrators of Los Padres forest at the end of February, staff and volunteers listed the many locations across the four southern Ranger Districts of the forest (Santa Lucia, Mt. Pinos, Ojai and Santa Barbara) that will need repair work, which includes the removal of large trees that fell across forest trails. The current estimated total of damaged sites tops 3,000.



*At Rose Valley Falls Campground the creek forged a brand new channel right through the middle of the campground, and buried picnic tables and barbecue grills several feet under rocks and gravel in places. Some of the campsites are deeper under debris than those in this picture. Here it's not so much a matter of restoration as of starting over with new campsite locations. Nobody's going to be trying to move the creek back to its earlier channel. (photo: Los Padres Forest staff)*

Southern California creeks and rivers, when they emerge from their headwaters in steep canyons, naturally, over millennia, create wide floodplains.

In storm events the creek flows will naturally forge new channels within the broader floodplain. These are known as braided channels - moving the left bank in some storms, and maybe towards the other bank in the next big storm. Thus it is wise not to build campgrounds and other infrastructure within these flood-

plains, as the creek channel's future movements are guaranteed, but unpredictable.

This happened in Matilija Canyon in the Jan.10 storm - Matilija Creek, which was already flowing right next to the canyon access road, veered to the edge of the floodplain and took out some hundreds of feet of both lanes of the road.



*Here you can see where Matilija Creek took out several hundred feet of Matilija Road in the canyon. Many canyon residents and pets were evacuated by helicopter for several days, by when County of Ventura road crews were able to bulldoze dirt and rocks to complete a temporary access road.*

The current estimate for repairs to damaged sites in Los Padres Forest is around \$100 million. Federal disaster funds move slowly, and forest administrators expect that less than that will ever be coming their way. It may take as much as five years to complete needed repairs.

The forest was closed to the public right after the Jan. 10 storm, to enable staff and volunteers to assess the levels of damage. With their focus on the forest front country (meaning the few miles in to the forest that most visitors manage), assessments continue. With regard to the backcountry, it is estimated that those who venture on longer hikes are more experienced, and therefore able to decide what trail impediments they can safely maneuver around.

### **THE FOREST REMAINS CLOSED TILL 3/15/23**

To check for those parts of Los Padres Forest that will, for a variety of reasons, remain closed, you may visit Los Padres Forest's FaceBook page, where you can find the details you need.



*Highway 33 washout north of Ojai. (photo: CalTrans)*

Highway 33 north of Ojai is closed at this location, just uphill past the Matilija Canyon Road junction. CalTrans has no news as yet regarding a timeframe for re-opening where the Upper Ventura River undercut one full lane of the highway, so access up to Rose Valley and the upper Sespe Creek trails remains closed till further notice.

There are also one or more large slides further up Hwy. 33 between Rose Valley and the highway summit by Pine Mountain. Forest access there will remain closed until CalTrans completes at least temporary repairs at the location in this picture.

In Rose Valley, both car campgrounds - Rose Valley Falls and Middle Lion - are likely to remain closed for a long time, till debris can be cleared and new facilities installed. The storm also ripped a gully across Rose Valley Road where it is crossed by Howard Creek.

In other parts of the Ojai Ranger District, there has been damage to Dough Flat Road, and to the trails in Santa Paula Canyon. Trails in Matilija Canyon will also require repair work. On many trails, chaparral pushed down by snow has not bounced back, and needs to be cut.

### **MT. PINOS RANGER DISTRICT STATUS**

80% of the Pinos Ranger District is already under its usual 6-month winter closure till May 01. In April volunteers from the off-road community survey, clear and repair what they can of the dozens of miles of dirt roads accessed from Lockwood Valley Road. It is hoped that these areas will be open to the public on May 01, as usual.

### **SANTA BARBARA DISTRICT STATUS**

Major damage to infrastructure took place along Paradise Road, next to the Santa Ynez River. First Crossing has been wiped out.

The White Rock area suffered damage, being in the floodplain. The Sandstone Day Use area is gone. Half of Upper Oso Campground is gone and its access is damaged. Mono Campground, situated in the floodplain, is all gone.

Drastic changes to beloved recreation sites.



*Recent rockslide on Hwy. 33, just before Rose Valley Road. (photo: CalTrans)*

Sespe Creek will have been stripped clear of most of its floodplain vegetation, meaning much more open access for the creekbed hikers among us.

The high flows will also have washed away most of the remaining exotic tamarisk plants adjacent to the creek.

KSWC volunteers have been eradicating the invasive tamarisk for several decades now all along Sespe Creek, from Rose Valley to the forest boundary near Fillmore.

At the same time, many of the invasive, exotic fish species that have gained a strong foothold in the mainstem of Sespe Creek will have been washed downstream.

Native trout are skinny and sleek, and they can hold their place under rocks, facing upstream into the current during flood events.

The exotics, such as the bluegill, sunfish and catfish are not built to stay put in major storm flows. Some of them will remain, and eventually they will once again dominate their aquatic domain, but for a few years the trout will have some relief from the competition for space and food - and from direct predation.



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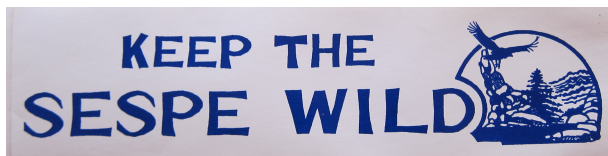
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### **NEW OJAI DISTRICT RANGER**

Tim Short comes to the Ojai Ranger District from Los Padres Forest's Monterey District, where he has been District Ranger for ten years. Ojai has had no permanent District Ranger since the retirement of Sue Exline in 2016.

With fresh funding from President Biden's spending package, there are plans to hire a new Recreation Officer (Charlie Robinson retired from that post some years back), an assistant recreation officer and a front desk staffer. Until recently, Los Padres Forest had planned to close the Ojai office and shrink

the forest's Ranger Districts from five to four. Fortunately that plan was cancelled, mainly because in a wildfire scenario an Ojai control base was deemed vital. We welcome Tim Short to his new Ojai posting.

### **THANK YOU FOR YOUR DONATIONS!**

KSWC is grateful for the generous response to the support plea in our Dec. newsletter. We rely on your donations to support our work on behalf of the Sespe watershed, its forests, wildlife and its endangered species. Donations are not tax-deductible. All the best to our supporters for the spring and summer ahead.