

# THE SESPE WILD

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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## REYES PEAK LOGGING PLAN - JUDGE TO RULE SOON

JUNE 2023

Environmentalists challenged the U.S. Forest Service's approval, in October 2021, of their proposal to log an unlimited number of large old-growth conifers, growing along the 7,000-foot elevation ridge line of Pine Mountain and Reyes Peak, six miles east of the summit of Hwy. 33 north of Ojai.

The project's 2021 approval was challenged in the federal courts by Los Padres Forest-Watch (LPFW) and Keep Sespe Wild, Earth Island Institute, American Alpine Club, Center for Biological Diversity, California Chaparral Institute, and Patagonia Works on numerous points, including violations of the National Environmental Policy Act.

LP ForestWatch, KSWC and Earth Island Institute are being represented by Santa Barbara's Environmental Defense Center, (EDC) who have had a strong record of wins for our shared environment for over 45 years.

Two municipalities have filed their own lawsuits against the U.S. Forest Service's logging plan - the County of Ventura and the City of Ojai. Their challenges will both be heard along with that from LPFW, KSWC and the other plaintiffs.

### **The U.S. Forest Service's proposal allows:**

- (1) mowing to the ground about 316 acres (half a square mile) of chaparral, and also
- (2) the removal by loggers of unlimited numbers of large and old-growth conifers across 423 acres, closer to Reyes Peak than the chaparral mowing.

The plaintiffs point out that 34% of the project area is proposed wilderness in legislation introduced by Rep. Salud Carbajal, which should not be logged.

U.S. Forest Service planners have never surveyed these rare "sky-island" conifers to determine their ages. Many are likely to be cen-

turies old; tree growth is slow at high elevation landscapes. At risk are ancient stands of big-cone Douglas Fir, sugar pine, white fir and Jeffrey pine.

The U.S. Forest Service has claimed that the logging is necessary to protect residences from forest fires, but there are no residences for miles around.

This logging and chaparral mowing proposal came in at priority number 150 out of Los Padres Forest's 163 fuels projects listed in their "Southern Districts Strategic Fuel Break Assessment".

What is clear is that orders came down from the U.S. Forest Service's HQ in Washington D.C. to log more trees in Southern California, where forests only grow at high elevations, and where forest access roads, like the one-lane road from Hwy. 33 to Reyes Peak, are few and far between. Are our local forests being targeted simply because a road runs by them?

We'll keep you posted when the judge's ruling is released - soon, or still some weeks away.

## **SOUTHERN STEELHEAD STILL LISTED AS ENDANGERED**

A five-year review of the status of the southern steelhead trout, listed as a federal endangered species in August 1997, finds that the species remains endangered, despite the implementation of numerous recovery actions over the last quarter century.

Besides the many migration barriers that prevent the steelhead, when returning from the ocean to spawn, from reaching their upstream breeding grounds, there have been extensive forest fires across the region that have led to denuded hillslopes, and heavy siltation of their spawning habitat.

The recent record drought has been particularly hard on the remnant population of southern California steelhead, reducing both the amount and quality of their potential spawning and over-the-summer rearing habitats.

If stream flows are reduced in dry winters, the ocean-maturing steelhead may not return to spawn upstream until there is a wetter winter. Low stream flows may also fail to break through natural sandbars at the mouths of Southern California's coastal rivers and streams.



*An adult native trout, West Fork Sespe Creek, July 2019.*

The heavy rains of the 2023 winter have helped to improve conditions for the steelhead. Accumulated silts have been flushed downstream, where they end up replenishing our sandy beaches. Local rivers and creeks are expected to maintain flows longer into the summer, which will assist the survival and growth of juvenile steelhead and resident native trout.

The juvenile steelhead that choose to head out to sea before returning to spawn in later years are protected as a federal endangered species in Southern California's watersheds.

Unlike salmon that die after spawning, steelhead can head back to the ocean, and may even return to spawn again in future winters.

The resident trout that live their lives in our freshwater creeks are not protected under federal law. However, a proposed Ca. state listing of southern steelhead would include both the resident and the sea-going migratory forms.

The five-year review, produced by the National Marine Fisheries Service, the federal agency responsible for the recovery of those endangered species, stressed the risk of "per-

manently losing the anadromous (sea-going) form of the species over the long term..."

The review lists the major recovery actions still required to enhance the southern steelhead's longterm survival:

- (1) the removal of man-made barriers to the steelhead's access to upstream spawning and rearing grounds.
- (2) the restoration of creek flows in rivers and their tributaries.
- (3) the restoration of estuary and riparian habitats.
- (4) the eradication of non-native invasive plant and aquatic species. The former take over native plants' riparian habitat, and the latter can prey on young trout, and introduce diseases.
- (5) the reduction of excessive groundwater pumping (which may reduce surface flows in rivers, particularly summer flows.)
- (6) protecting local remnant populations.

The five-year review also summarizes new research that the sea-going steelhead can be re-constituted from some populations of native trout, as well as from the dispersal of individual fish born and raised in other watersheds.

Climate change is affecting both the fresh- and saltwater phases of the steelhead's life history. The review emphasized that the species' recovery will require the continued collaboration of a wide variety of stakeholders, including governmental and non-governmental entities.



*Bruce Vincent in the Sespe Gorge in 1980, with his catch of 18-22" native steelhead.*

## **PLEASE DONATE TO KSWC**

Your donations help to keep our work going, protecting the watershed of Sespe Creek.

We thank all who donated since our March newsletter. Donations are not tax-deductible.



*Herman Keene with his catch of native trout in the Sespe Gorge north of Fillmore, in the early 1900's. A century ago, a road had been constructed from Fillmore up the west bank of Sespe Creek, to service early oil extraction facilities. The road went past West Fork Sespe, adjacent to Grassy Flats, where huts, tents and small cabins housed some of the oilfield workers.*

*This photo was taken some miles upstream of West Fork Sespe, so the road must have reached this far.*

*The Green Cabins oilfield, between Tar Creek and West Fork Sespe, was only demolished around 1947, with the designation of the 53,000-acre Sespe Condor Sanctuary, by Act of Congress, as a protected refuge for the then-dwindling population of the iconic wild California condor.*

## **UPDATE on WINTER STORM DAMAGE and TRAILS RE- OPENED in OJAI RANGER DISTRICT**

Hwy. 33 north of Ojai is still closed down from Matilija Canyon Road to Ozena (located down the north side of the summit of Hwy. 33 at the Pine Mountain turnoff). Currently expected to re-open in September or October 2023.

Check the [Caltrans website](#).

Santa Paula Canyon trail is open, as are Horn Canyon and Gridley trailheads.

Piedra Blanca Trailhead in Rose Valley (access to the Sespe River Trail to Willett and Sespe Hotsprings) is currently still closed, as it requires access from closed Hwy. 33.

Dough Flat Rd to the Alder Creek trailhead is now open.

Matilija Canyon trailhead is still closed.

Pine Mountain campgrounds and trailhead are inaccessible due to the Hwy. 33 closure.

Rose Valley Falls trailhead is closed for major storm damage repairs, perhaps for a long time.

All Ojai Ranger District car campgrounds are still closed.

In Lockwood Valley, access to Grade Valley and the Mutau Flat trailhead may re-open around the end of June.

Check Los Padres Forest's website - their homepage has a link in red ink for storm damage updates, listed by Forest Ranger District.

## **VENTURA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS TAKES HARD RIGHT TURN**

We have grown used to a liberal majority on the 5-member Ventura County Board of Supervisors in recent decades. A board that favored environmental protections, as well as social justice programs. That is all gone - for now.

The election last fall of Jeff Gorell to replace termed-out Thousand Oaks Supervisor Linda Parks changed the board's balance to a 3-2 conservative majority.

What may this mean for County residents? You may be sure that protecting the local oil industry will be atop the list. Supervisor Kelly Long (Santa Paula, Fillmore and parts of Camarillo) has been, for both her elections to the board, the recipient of very large donations from oil interests.

Large, that is, by historic standards for a Ventura County Supervisor's race. The oil industry interests spent \$800,000 on the three Supervisors' elections that were held in 2020 - largely to benefit Kelly Long's successful campaign.

This is important to KSWC as the Sespe Oilfield north of Fillmore is home to hundreds of active oil wells, and many more old and abandoned wells. Safely capping those old wells can cost many hundreds of thousands of dollars per well, and the oil industry will oppose attempts to hold them accountable for those necessary costs. The industry has also opposed earlier efforts by the previous Board of Supervisors to enact sensible buffer zones between new oil wells and schools and homes.

*(contd. on back page.)*



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Many citizens and environmental groups are rallying behind newly-announced Supervisor candidate Gabino Aguirre, of Santa Paula, a Democrat who grew up as the child of cotton-picking immigrants in Texas. He has a doctorate from UCLA, he served on the Santa Paula City Council from 2000 till 2010, and he has a long history of community service.

With the oil industry ready and willing to spend big to back their candidate once more, this will be a hard-fought campaign.

The stakes could not be higher. Do Ventura County's voters want a Board of Supervisors

which will support the oil industry's every wish? Or is it imperative, in a time of fast-increasing global heating, to speed up our transition from drilling for and burning fossil fuels, to safer and greener and cheaper energy sources?

Los Angeles and Santa Barbara Counties are already enacting restrictions on oil drilling in their own jurisdictions.

Isn't it time for Ventura County to follow suit? California's oil production is already less than half of its peak in 1985.

It's time to close down oil facilities statewide for good, for the sake of a stable climate for all.