

# KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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## LOS PADRES FOREST TO CLOSE OFFICES

Los Padres National Forest is in the process of evaluating the closure of two or more of the five Ranger District offices across the forest, thus potentially erasing with the stroke of a pen several of the public access points intrinsic to their mission.

This process has so far been taking place with no public participation whatsoever. An outside consultant is currently preparing recommendations on where and how deep to cut. Numerous staff positions are also to be eliminated – in a forest with only a small fraction of the employees it had several decades ago.

The word is that this is coming about because of budget shortfalls in Los Padres Forest's funding, but a perusal of U.S. Forest Service budget allocations by Congress shows no sudden reduction in funding. Though there have been no modest budget increases to keep up with inflation, the budget allocations for facilities, operations and for recreation & wilderness have stayed pretty stable for several years.

### FIRES TURN OUT TO BE THE PROBLEM

When a fire takes place in Los Padres Forest – or in any other National Forest – the fire suppression costs must be paid immediately. Contractors' and staff pay cannot be put off till later. Congress requires the forest to pay these unbudgeted costs out of their annual appropriations. This left a \$3 million hole in Los Padres' bank account, which is only repaid many years later. And here is the catch – the refunds are prohibited from being used for regular operating expenses, even though that is where they were borrowed from when the fire was raging. This is nothing more than a bureaucratic accounting problem that should be able to be straightened out higher up the Forest Service chain of command, or by Congress. But don't hold your breath for an easy fix.

While a full 50% of Forest Service budgets nationwide now must go to fire costs, and for Los Padres alone this can take up 75% of their annual funding, there may not be a prompt solution from Congress, where the House of Representatives stalled action.

### SENATOR FEINSTEIN HAS A SOLUTION

Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) has an answer for this mess. She has proposed treating fires like other natural disasters, and paying for their costs in the same way that FEMA pays for other disaster expenses. She blames outdated budget rules for requiring the Forest Service to divert its regular operating funds to fight fires. The appropriations bill from the U.S. Senate in 2015 proposed a simple solution – let the Forest Service access a separate stream of federal funds to combat large wildfire events. This plan has bipartisan support in Congress and from the Obama administration. But it got dropped in negotiations between the House and Senate on finalizing the appropriations bills.

The Senator called in an L.A. Times opinion piece in February 2016 for Congress to enact legislation to fix this fire funding problem right away. This proposal should be supported by forest advocacy groups across the nation, and promptly. Otherwise we'll be seeing Ranger District offices and drastic staff cutbacks across the Forest Service in areas where large fires are becoming more common.

Ranger District offices are where locals and visitors find out where to hike and camp, where they pick up required permits, where they find out about closures, and hunting seasons and regulations. Where will we be without them? Ojai's Ranger District office is always busy with a stream of visitors asking basic questions. It is perhaps unusual in being located in a tourist city; the Santa Barbara and Frazier Park Ranger District offices are quite out of the way by comparison.

After enquiries on this matter from staff from local Congresswomen's offices, Los Padres administrators have belatedly agreed to include the public in the process of evaluating office closures. One option is to shrink the number of Ranger Districts on Los Padres Forest – currently five – and make each one larger in area.

## LOS PADRES FOREST HQ MOVING AWAY

In a similar vein, Los Padres Forest's HQ office in Goleta is losing its lease in about a year from now, and the agency is seeking to relocate to a less expensive location outside of the Santa Barbara urban core. For some reason, Los Padres Forest's consultants have come up with the Santa Ynez Valley as the best new location for their HQ building.

Apart from the fact that this area is about as far away from Los Padres Forest's public access points as you could get, this is a crazy idea for many other reasons. A Santa Barbara urban location provides access to information for local forest users and tourists, who as in Ojai can see Los Padres Forest as a backdrop from all over town, and who naturally wish to explore it. Remember, Santa Barbara's Ranger District office is tucked away on Paradise Road, miles out of town over the Cachuma Pass.

Then there are the dozens of local volunteers, including many from UCSB, which is close to the current Los Padres HQ in Goleta, who will now be looking at a lengthy round-trip drive to meetings and training sessions at a Santa Ynez HQ location. What may be a good location for less-expensive real estate is not going to be a good location with respect to carbon emissions from much longer commutes by visitors, volunteers and staff.

## COULD THEIR BE A FOREST HQ ON THE CHUMASH RESERVATION?

Perhaps the strangest proposal was one mentioned where Los Padres Forest would move its HQ to a location on the Chumash Reservation in the Santa Ynez Valley. This has not been eliminated by Los Padres administrators, though the actual decision on the Forest HQ's new location is to be made by the General Services Agency (GSA), a federal agency that does just this sort of thing – locating buildings for federal agencies to lease or buy.

The Chumash possibility is bizarre because the Chumash Reservation is by definition a sovereign territory. How can one operate a National Forest HQ on non-U.S. soil? Could a forest law enforcement officer even make an arrest at his own HQ in this situation? We sincerely hope wiser heads prevail with respect to this option for a new Los Padres Forest HQ.

Look for a decision on this matter quite soon – Los Padres' lease in Goleta is up in a year from now.



## ACCESS TO MATILIJIA FALLS IS CLOSE

KAMFO, Keeping Access to Matilija Falls Open, is a coalition of local groups and individuals that has been working for a number of years to secure a permanent right of access to Matilija Falls, seen above in a postcard from 1910.

A private property owner, Buz Bonsall, owns about a mile of the creek ending a short distance down below the base of the falls. KAMFO filed a court case in 2015, claiming long-standing access rights to the falls. A court-required mediation process began a few months ago and has led to a solution that all parties are close to agreeing on.

While we naturally cannot disclose any details at present, the proposed agreement will meet KAMFO's goal of permanent public access across this stretch of Matilija Creek to the falls.

We thank all those who have contributed to this effort for a number of years.

## VENTURA SUPERVISORS HEAR ABOUT OIL DRILLING IMPACTS ON CONDORS

In mid-December, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors held a public hearing to look into the impacts to the endangered California condor from oil drilling operations adjacent to the Condor Sanctuary and the southern fringe of Los Padres Forest.



As you can see from this picture, courtesy of Los Padres ForestWatch, condors are in no way scared of investigating an industrial oil facility near Los Padres Forest. Los Padres ForestWatch and CFROG had brought up condor impacts in 12 separate appeal filings on oil well approvals in recent years.

One problem is that old Conditional Use Permits (CUPs), that never considered condor impacts when Ventura County originally approved them, are hard to attach new operating conditions to, at a later date. This is known as the vested rights doctrine under California law.

Condor Recovery Program staff stated that there are 66 California condors in Ventura & Santa Barbara Counties. 19 condor chicks died between 2001 & 2014; the largest number, 6, from ingesting trash. Trash ingested was 47% glass, 25% metal, 24%

plastics, and 4% ceramics & fabric. 26% of condor mortality is categorized as “missing”, meaning no body was found to be examined for cause of death.

Adult condors can fly 100 miles away from their roosts to forage. Seneca, the oil company operating 98% of the Sespe Oilfield north of Fillmore, has a good track record of implementing the condor protection measures proposed by the Condor Recovery Team, which is part of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Jeff Kuyper of Los Padres ForestWatch testified that all the Sespe Oilfield wells have some condor activity – many have thousands of condor visits per year. An earlier USFWS report calculated that oil activity in the Hopper Mtn. area north of Fillmore had reduced condor habitat by 63%. He recommended fencing oil well sites in condor areas, as this reduces the space they need to take flight. He also showed slides of microtrash collected from oil sites in the Sespe Oilfield – comprising hundreds of tiny items that could contribute to condor mortality.

Seneca certainly seems to have earned plaudits for its actions to minimize condor harm from their oil activities in the Sespe Oilfield. They have implemented all 23 recommendations from the USFWS, even on their older CUP well sites.

## BASEBALL TRAINING IN ROSE VALLEY

Rose Valley’s 200-acre Rancho Grande was bought by the Beach City Baseball Academy, for around \$5 million, in July 2015. Their website mentions plans for 20-team tournaments, building cabins, hosting weeklong camps, and more.

Their landscape designer’s former projects include the Reagan Presidential Library and Disneyland’s Jungle Cruise.

Naturally, as so often happens, the developers failed to consult Ventura County planners to ascertain what the property’s zoning would allow, before their purchase. The site is in Open Space zoning, which would be OK for 50 campers, with a maximum of 20 sleeping in cabins (including staff)

So the owners will either be seeking a variance to the zoning rules, or to change the rules to suit themselves. We’ll keep you posted.

## HELP SUPPORT KSWC, PLEASE!

Your support is our only support. Thanks, as ever, for your non-tax-deductible contributions.

**Keep the Sespe Wild**  
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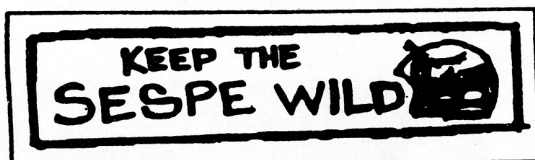
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**MORE ON THE PSHB TREE-KILLER BEETLE**

A working group is now established in Ventura County to address the threat posed by the polyphagous shot-hole borer (PSHB), an Asian pest that kills over 3 dozen Southern Californian tree species, including such common riparian species as sycamores, willows and cottonwoods.

This group is headed by the County Agricultural Commissioner, with the Ca. Avocado Commission, County staff, University of California Extension Service staff, tree specialists, Agromin mulch manufacturers, and others, including KSWC.

The toughest task is to limit the movement of fresh mulch into Ventura County from L.A. County,

which is already infested with the PSHB. State law prohibits limitations on the transportation of municipal mulch.

The group is next month to request funding from the Board of Supervisors for more traps to be placed in locations near Santa Paula & Ojai's Baldwin Road, where the PSHB has already been found locally, to ascertain their spread from there.

KSWC is producing a color flyer for residents and tree workers, to list the affected tree species and the best control practices – which are to chip wood trimmed from susceptible trees down to one inch pieces, then to tarp it (and also firewood) for 2 months in summer, or 6 months at other times.

**DON'T TRANSPORT MULCH/FIREWOOD!**