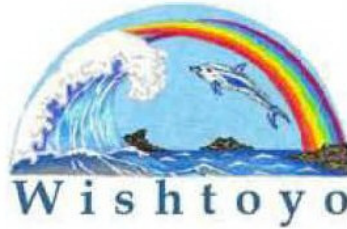




SCOPE
Santa Clarita Organization
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Environment



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Court Deals Severe Setback to L.A. County Newhall Ranch Project

LOS ANGELES— A superior court judge has confirmed a previous ruling that the California Department of Fish and Game’s approvals for the enormous Newhall Ranch project in Los Angeles County violated state law in numerous, fundamental ways. The ruling deals a severe blow to the sprawling development plan, which would create a new town of more than 60,000 residents on the banks of the Santa Clara River, west of Valencia.

A coalition of environmental and Native American groups challenged the Department of Fish and Game’s (now the Department of Fish and Wildlife’s) Newhall Ranch approvals in January 2011. This week’s comprehensive, 38-page ruling upholds the coalition’s claims that the Department failed to adequately protect endangered species, including the San Fernando Valley spineflower, unarmored threespine stickleback and southern California steelhead; improperly disregarded the project’s contribution to climate change; failed to adequately identify and preserve in place Chumash and Tataviam cultural resources; and erroneously rejected less environmentally damaging alternative development plans.

“Government agencies have so far failed to halt this irrational and destructive plan for massive development in and around the Santa Clara River’s floodplain,” said John Buse, a senior attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. “The Santa Clara is a

gem, and it's also one of the most endangered rivers in America. This ruling gives us hope that we can preserve Southern California's last major free-flowing river."

Los Angeles County approved the overall plan for Newhall Ranch in 2003, but the project required major additional permits for river development and endangered species from the Department of Fish and Game. As a result of the court ruling, these permits must be invalidated.

"It is very gratifying that this ruling will finally compel the Department of Fish and Wildlife and Newhall Land to address the project's devastating effects on endangered species and on the Santa Clara River as they never have been addressed before, and to seriously consider alternative plans that can avoid these effects," said Friends of the Santa Clara River Chair Ron Bottorff.

"The Department of Fish and Wildlife, charged with the protection of Southern California steelhead, must at the very least analyze all water-quality impacts of the project on migrating steelhead, including the discharges of copper that can disrupt migration and juvenile rearing even in low concentrations. Too many communities, including Chumash Native Americans, public interest organizations, watershed residents, and state and federal agencies have devoted considerable resources to the Santa Clara River steelhead restoration effort for the Department not to conduct an analysis as required by law," said Jason Weiner, attorney for Wishtoyo Foundation and its Ventura Coastkeeper program.

Mati Waiya, Chumash ceremonial elder and executive director of Wishtoyo, said: "We feel that our voices were heard by the court and that the law protected our culture, ancestors, and resources as the legislature intended. This case provides California Natives with a seat at the table in the planning process that is needed not only to adequately inform the state about protection of our cultural resources, but to preserve our people's culture, life ways, tradition and oral history."

If the project moves forward, the Department will need to revisit its decision to permit development in some of the last remaining habitat for the San Fernando Valley spineflower, a plant that was believed extinct until it was rediscovered in 1999. It is known to exist at only one other site.

"Maybe now the Department will listen to its own staff and botanical experts in preparing a defensible plan to ensure the survival and recovery of the San Fernando Valley spineflower and other rare species," said California Native Plant Society Chapter Council Chairman David Magney.

The first two phases of Newhall Ranch were approved by Los Angeles County in 2011 and 2012. These phases depend on the Department's approvals, so they face an uncertain future after these approvals are reversed.

"This decision will give both the Department and Los Angeles County the impetus and extra time they need to make a better plan for the Santa Clara River and for our community," said SCOPE President Lynne Plambeck.

The groups challenging the development's approvals included the Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of the Santa Clara River, Santa Clarita Organization for Planning the Environment (SCOPE), Wishtoyo Foundation, Ventura Coastkeeper and California Native Plant Society.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 450,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

Wishtoyo is a nonprofit, public-interest organization that protects Chumash culture, Native American culture, and the natural resources all people depend upon. Ventura Coastkeeper, a program of Wishtoyo, is dedicated to protecting the ecological integrity and water quality of Ventura County's inland and coastal waterways.