

Jason Weiner: Saving the Santa Clara from wasteful diversion

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For thousands of years, communities have grown alongside the Santa Clara River, dependent on its water for drinking, watering crops, recreation, swimming and fishing. Yet, the Santa Clara is now one of the most endangered rivers in the nation.

A combination of poor water management and drought are threatening the communities that line its banks, and its native plants, fish and animals. To sustain the Santa Clara's ecosystem, Ventura County's agricultural economy, the groundwater basins of the fertile Oxnard Plain and the people of Ventura County for the long run, we must step into our responsibility to sustainably manage the river's water resources.

United Water Conservation District provides water to the agricultural and municipal entities in the Oxnard Plain via diversion of Santa Clara River flows at the Vern Freeman Diversion Dam for direct surface water delivery and groundwater recharge.

The Oxnard Plain groundwater basins are facing dangerous water level declines due to inefficient diversion of water at United's dam, the growth of water-guzzling unsustainable luxury crops, and the wasting of water from the widespread failure to use best-available farm and municipal conservation efficiency and reclamation practices.

These inefficient and wasteful practices threaten to extinguish the plain's groundwater supplies and cause seawater to intrude from the coast that may contaminate the region's fresh groundwater necessary for drinking and growing crops.

Here are the roots of these problems: United draws large amounts of water from the Santa Clara year-round at its diversion dam, more often than not sucking more than 10.5 miles of the Santa Clara dry instead of strategically taking, storing and infiltrating large amounts of river water during very wet rainy seasons or outside of the peak of heavy rainfalls when the total suspended solids in the river drop to levels that would allow for such diversion.

United could allow for needed river flow during drier periods by taking its legal historic diversion amounts from the Santa Clara when there is more than enough available for in-stream, agricultural and municipal uses to exist side by side.

In addition, decades of irresponsible water policy and management have stalled measures to secure the county from drought, and have created incentives for growers to switch from less water-intensive tree crops, to more water-intensive and highly profitable luxury crops like strawberries.

United's inefficient and cheap extraction of water from the Santa Clara is delivered at prices three to 70 times less than water prices throughout California and in the same Oxnard Plain region.

Santa Clara River water is priced so inexpensively because United has not invested in high flow diversion infrastructure and off-stream storage, such as reservoirs, to store the Santa Clara's flows during very wet periods.

A consequence of these cheap prices is that many farmers and municipalities have ignored taking simple water conservation measures through the use of widely available technology, exasperating the strain on water supply.

Grower and board testimony before the local Fox Canyon Groundwater Management Agency, which has impermissibly allowed wasteful water use and overpumping of the plain's groundwater basins, demonstrate that traditional county crops can all be grown with much less water currently being applied to farms, and water prices must be raised to fund additional water supply infrastructure.

California's great rivers are held by the state in trust for the public, meaning they exist and must be protected by the state for the benefit of all its people, not select big-business interests. The communities of Oxnard, Ventura, El Rio, Saticoy, Santa Paula, Fillmore and Piru have thrived alongside the Santa Clara for generations, but many are now suffering economic hardship.

Yet, most locals are barely aware that the Santa Clara exists for their benefit. This is because rising diversion of water since the 1940s has unnaturally weakened the river's flow downstream of United's Freeman Diversion Dam, limiting and impairing the Santa Clara's recreational, economic, cultural and ecological uses.

Wishtoyo, CAUSE and the Center for Biological Diversity have filed a public trust complaint with the State Water Board against United for its wasteful and unreasonable diversion and use of water from the Santa Clara.

We are urging United to take the necessary steps to improve our region's resilience to drought, protect Ventura County's beautiful environment, enhance the economic and job growth associated with live rivers and allow families and youth to enjoy this natural resource — all alongside a healthy agricultural economy. A copy of the complaint can be found at www.wishtoyo.org/pdf/SCR_PT_SWRCB_Complaint.pdf.

