



SIERRA CLUB
SAN GORGONIO

Palm and Pine

A publication of the San Gorgonio Chapter of the Sierra Club
Serving Riverside and San Bernardino Counties
Protect America's Environment For our Families . . . For our Future
Volume 52 Number 3 | May - June 2022

Settlement with City of Fontana to Address Environmental Injustices in Warehouse Development

Under pressure from the San Gorgonio Chapter of the Sierra Club, the citizens of Fontana, and the State Attorney General, the City of Fontana agrees to substantial mitigation measures and stringent new environmental standards for future warehouse development.



Photo courtesy of AG Rob Bonta's office

LOS ANGELES – California Attorney General Rob Bonta today announced an innovative settlement with the City of Fontana to protect vulnerable communities from pollution associated with industrial development where they live, work, and go to school. Today’s settlement, once entered by the court, will resolve allegations that the City of Fontana violated the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in approving the Slover and Oleander warehouse project in south Fontana. As part of today’s settlement, developer Duke Realty will be required to adopt substantial mitigation measures to minimize the impacts of the Slover and Oleander warehouse project to the surrounding community. More broadly, the City of Fontana last week adopted an ordinance, as required by the settlement, setting stringent environmental standards for all future warehouse development in Fontana.

“For years, warehouse development in Fontana went unchecked, and it’s our most vulnerable communities that have paid the price,” said Attorney General Rob Bonta. “South Fontana residents shouldn’t have to choose between economic opportunity and clean air. They deserve both. Today’s settlement demonstrates how innovative solutions can be used to address environmental injustices, without hindering development. Because when we build, we must build responsibly. Most importantly, the impacts of this settlement are not limited to mitigating the impacts of a single project. As a result of our lawsuit, the City of Fontana has adopted the most stringent environmental standards in California for new warehouse projects.

In This Issue

Warehouse Settlement Press Release
1 - 2

Trail Talks
3

Climate Justice Lithium Valley
4 - 5

Political Team Election Endorsements
6

Outings Highlight
7

Volunteer Leader Feature
8

Chapter Elections
9

Group Updates
9-11

Court Victory in Church of the Woods Case
12-14

Joshua Tree
14-15

Salton Sea
16

This ordinance should serve as a model for other local governments across the state to build upon. We must ensure that future development does not repeat past mistakes.”

“For over a decade, Sierra Club volunteers have been challenging warehouse developments throughout San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, resulting in mitigations and community benefits, including 3 previous lawsuits in Fontana,” said Mary Ann Ruiz, Chair of the Sierra Club San Gorgonio Chapter. “The difference this time was the voice of the community, led by Liz Sena and South Fontana Concerned Citizens Coalition, gaining the attention of Attorney General Bonta. We appreciate the partnership and leadership of the AG’s office in reaching this agreement to improve the project and set a standard for all future projects in Fontana.”

“For years, Fontana residents have voiced their concerns regarding the rise of air pollution associated with the increase of warehouse development but have been disregarded,” said Liz Sena, South Fontana resident and founder of the South Fontana Concerned Citizens Coalition. “And for this reason, The South Fontana Concerned Citizens Coalition recognizes Attorney General Bonta’s leadership and partnership in filing a lawsuit against the City of Fontana. The settlement is the first of its kind, and will help protect us by minimizing the impact of future warehouses surrounding our community, where our families live, learn, and work.”

Over the past five years, Fontana has approved several dozen warehouses totaling approximately 16 million square feet in southern Fontana alone. The Slover and Oleander warehouse project is a 205,000 square-foot project that shares a border with a public high school and is located in a low-income neighborhood that suffers from some of the highest pollution levels in all of California. On July 23, 2021, Attorney General Bonta filed a lawsuit against the City of Fontana challenging its approval of this project. In the lawsuit, Attorney General Bonta argued that the City’s limited environmental review of the project and its failure to appropriately analyze, disclose, and mitigate the project’s environmental impacts violated CEQA.

The Sierra Club separately filed a lawsuit, and today’s settlement resolves both cases.

Today’s settlement required the City of Fontana to adopt the most stringent warehouse ordinance in the state with dozens of new requirements for warehouse projects in its jurisdiction. These include site designs to keep trucks away from sensitive sites such as schools, hospitals, and day cares, promotion of zero-emission vehicles for on-site operations, landscaped buffers, installation of solar panels to meet 100% of energy needs for larger warehouse projects, and use of environmentally friendly building materials. The ordinance also includes a number of provisions to boost economic development and protect the health and safety of construction laborers, warehouse workers, and truckers.

The settlement also requires the developer, Duke Realty, to implement new measures to mitigate the Slover and Oleander warehouse project’s environmental impacts on the surrounding community. Mitigation measures include design changes and other protections for nearby residents, reduced emissions from equipment used during construction and operation, solar power, and more. Duke Realty will also establish a \$210,000 community benefit fund that will be used to enhance landscaping buffers at Jurupa Hills High School, which shares a border with the project, and to purchase and distribute a five-year supply of high quality air filters to up to 1,750 households in the surrounding community.

Finally, the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) has announced a process to revise its CEQA guidance for analyzing cumulative air quality impacts. The Attorney General’s lawsuit challenged the City of Fontana’s reliance on SCAQMD’s existing guidance in its approval of the Slover and Oleander warehouse project. SCAQMD staff have proposed a groundbreaking approach for new guidance that would consider existing burdens associated with nearby pollution sources and, where warranted, quantify for the first time cumulative air quality impacts and the effects on human health. Not only would this approach address flaws in its current guidance, it would also consider the impacts of concentrating polluting land uses, like warehouse projects, in disadvantaged areas, thereby encouraging local governments to site future projects in areas where they will have the least impact on human health.

Palm and Pine

May Trail Talk

Trail Talk: Nearby Nature

For 30x30

May 18, 2022 | 7:00 PM



Join us for another round of local experiences outdoors - nearby locations and hikes to fill that need for getting outdoors. We all know that nature provides many benefits, and we all need access to open spaces without the need for extensive travel. We will look at opportunities in and around our more urban areas in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. We will also explore our nearby mountains and deserts for recreation opportunities close to home.

Many of you have heard us talking about the 30X30 campaign to protect 30% of our lands and waters by 2030. This can include areas near where we live. Think about open spaces near where we live, and how we can connect them to provide more natural habitat and wildlife connectivity, as well as more protected open space for much needed respite in nature. We will provide some examples of places we and our partners are working on conserving, keeping equitable access to nature as our guide. We would also love to hear from you - where are some spots that you can think of that can be added to an existing county park, or connect open space along the Santa Ana River or other watersheds?

We hope you will join us as we map out a plan with the state of California to conserve 30% of lands and waters by 2030. RSVP at the outings tab on our chapter's website

June Trail Talk

Trail Talk: River Rafting 101:

Multi-Day Raft Trips

June 15, 2022 | 7:00 PM



“Wild and Scenic Rivers” is an intriguing designation for many of the rivers in iconic landscapes. These rivers crash and wind through some of the most inaccessible and beautiful canyons, deserts and mountains in our continent. Multi-day raft trips through these river watersheds are one of the best ways to experience these special places.

Our June Trail Talk will be presented by Mary Ann Ruiz, an Outings Leader and our Chapter Chair. Sierra Club National Outings schedules many raft trips throughout the year to rivers from Alaska to Florida. Come along on one such trip to the River of No Return; the Main Salmon River in Idaho. For a different view, we'll also see a trip along the San Juan river in Utah. Raft trips can be enjoyed with little or no experience, as they are led by experienced Sierra Club leaders and managed by professional guides.

For a wilderness experience much like backpacking to remote places, but without the walking and carrying part, consider a Sierra Club National rafting trip. Raft trips include camping gear, rafting gear, and all your meals cooked by guides who pride themselves on providing tasty and nutritious food. Novices can ride on an oar raft, and often more experienced river runners will paddle individual inflatable kayaks. In this Trail Talk, we will see some beautiful scenery as we learn about how to participate in one of these trips.

RSVP at the outings tab of our chapter's website.

Climate Justice at Lithium Valley

First published in Desert Report March 2022 edition, Sierra Club California and Nevada Desert Committee. Reprinted with permission.

BY MARIELA LOERA

Residents fight for their voice to be heard

If we expect lithium to be a part of our just transition and our energy future, we must protect and prioritize the health and well-being of the existing local community.

We will not accept a climate solution that exploits working-class people of color who already experience the climate crisis at a higher degree. We will not accept false promises of economic prosperity. Residents know better and demand an equal voice at the table. No excuses, community engagement is vital and not the kind where you check the box, but the real kind that works alongside the community in equal partnership through this energy transition.

Lithium in our energy future

Lithium extraction is a fast-approaching reality in the southern border region of California, but up until now, it has been unclear how this will impact residents and the environment surrounding the Salton Sea.

Shared Economic Prosperity?

A lithium reserve with the alleged potential to meet one-third of today's global lithium demand was discovered near the southeast corner of the Salton Sea, dubbed "Lithium Valley." It is expected to be an economic asset with the potential to make "green" industries in the United States top producers in the global lithium market.

While the proposed lithium extraction is centered in Imperial County, environmental justice problems are not limited to this man-made boundary. Communities all around the Salton Sea are united under a shared experience of being communities of color that face several socio-economic issues and cumulative environmental impacts.

Through the years, communities across the region have worked together to advocate for the health and sustainability of the region as a whole.

The interconnection of the region is seen in the composition of the Lithium Valley Commission, a state appointed body with members representing communities from both Riverside and Imperial county.

If water resources, air quality, and the Salton Sea are affected by the proposed lithium extraction, communities all across the region will feel the impact. This is especially true if lithium extraction leads to future industrial developments like a proposed localized supply chain.

We've been told that low-income desert communities will also benefit from the economic prosperity that lithium extraction will bring through employment opportunities. But thus far, promises of prosperity are just promises as we await the facts and enforceable commitments that will ensure that economic development is shared, collaborative, and equitable.

If our energy future is to be transformative, it must also be inclusive.

Shared Environmental Benefits?

We live in a digital age that looks to lithium-based technologies as necessary for our gadgets and as a solution to the climate crisis. These attempts sometimes come at the cost of communities already disproportionately impacted by different environmental burdens and socio-economic factors. We need to ensure that lithium exploration in our back yard is a real long-term climate solution and not an experiment that risks the well-being of environmental justice communities.

It is important for the United States, and especially California, to take a few steps back and ensure that this new era of energy production does not repeat the same environmental injustices we witness around the world. Lithium extraction and processing will certainly change lives, especially those in close proximity to these facilities and infrastructure.

Continued on page 5. . .

Negative environmental impacts - be they relatively large or small - can and will be detrimental to a community and region facing existing cumulative environmental burdens such as unreliable electricity, poor housing infrastructure, a receding Salton Sea, and contaminated water and air that continue to devastate public health every day. It is especially important to prevent further harm to the Salton Sea region, and there is little information as to how Lithium extraction will impact the Sea, its future, and its surroundings.

Community partnership for a “just transition”

Regardless of the potential benefits of Lithium Valley, a true just transition that places the local community at the forefront of a transparent, meaningful, and democratic collaborative process is crucial.

In this region, in particular, community voices have historically been erased and continuously dismissed in decision-making processes. In order to achieve an equitable just transition, community voices must be centered and respected through a meaningful engagement effort. This is what residents across the region have been requesting since the formation of the Lithium Valley Commission. And yet, the community has only been invited to ONE event, a public forum held in November 2021 hosted by the Lithium Valley Commission. During this ONE event participants expressed their disappointment in seeing the majority of time allocated towards the commission while residents’ time to share concerns and feedback was limited.

Despite this, participants made their concerns clear that day: to be informed about the potential environmental impacts, water use, sustainability, mitigation efforts, impacts to the Salton Sea, employment opportunities, and more. Public health was highly emphasized.

Participants demanded there be a public health representative on the commission and stressed that “public health is not negotiable.” They adamantly stated that the community could NOT accept lithium extraction if their questions are not answered.

During the past year, local residents have demonstrated great interest in this issue and have requested to be meaningfully engaged and informed in a transparent way, but have not yet been meaningfully included.

Is this the future of energy production in environmentally sensitive communities?

Climate justice at work

The first step is for the California Energy Commission, Lithium Valley Commission, and Assembly member Eduardo Garcia to develop a community engagement plan in collaboration with community leaders, and then implement this plan to engage the community.

This plan will help create spaces for fluid and consistent collaboration between local residents, elected representatives, industry, public health experts, and researchers through an accessible, respectful, and transparent process.

These types of conversations will help all stakeholders better understand the complexity of the issue as a whole and make better-informed decisions. And, assuming that community concerns expressed in these conversations are seriously considered, this will better prevent additional harm to the environment and health of communities in the region as well as ensure that consequent benefits provided to these communities fit their needs and lifestyles.

There is no more room for mistakes when working towards solutions for the climate crisis. To ensure success in a new era of energy production, we must learn from past mistakes, such as not engaging properly with communities around sites of extraction, which we repeatedly see leading to devastating consequences for the health and environment of those communities.

Lithium extraction and processing is a complex and substantial project with many unknowns including potential negative and positive impacts. This becomes even more difficult to predict when discussing a localized supply chain. Given the magnitude of this business venture, it is essential to put residents first via a substantial and collaborative community engagement process.

We can’t save the planet without all the voices at the table. Do you agree?

Mariela Loera is a policy advocate with the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability. She works with communities in the Eastern Coachella Valley to voice their concerns on Lithium Valley.

Sierra Club Political Team Announces Endorsements

San Bernardino and Riverside County candidates who care about the environment and our air, water and health know a Sierra Club endorsement is important to their campaign. Our members and others who care about the future of our planet look for our endorsements when they cast their ballots.

After careful vetting by our political team, Sierra Club endorses the following candidates for office:

Assembly District 50- Eloise Reyes
Assembly District 42- Christy Holstege
San Bernardino Supervisor District 2- DeJonae Shaw
San Bernardino Supervisor District 4- Connie Leyva

The Sierra Club San Gorgonio chapter works with its multiple groups in conducting thorough reviews of candidates. Grassroot volunteers examine each candidate's record and distribute questionnaires to candidates who meet our criteria. A committee then interviews and submits recommendations for endorsement. To be a part of our process, please reach out to us at political@sangorgonio.sierraclub.org.



Thank you to all who have mailed us your generous donations from the March Fund Appeal. Your support keeps us going - we will keep you updated on chapter work. If that letter is still on your desk, I hope you'll take a moment to open it, review what our chapter volunteers are working on and consider sending your support.

Palm and Pine

Outing Highlight: PCT Section B: Cedar Spring to Hwy. 74

Date: Sat, Jun 18, 2022; 8:00 AM

Location: Highway 74, Anza, Calif.

Rating/Distance: Strenuous. 14 miles

Hike Leader: David Melton, Tahquitz Group

Contact: dmelton61@yahoo.com

Hike Registration: Register at sangorgonio2.sierraclub.org

About the Hike

This is one of the favorite segments of the Pacific Crest Trail Section B. Starting at 5400 feet, hikers climb 1400 feet on the Cedar Spring Trail to a saddle, then follow the PCT south toward Hwy 74. After the first ascent, the trail generally descends in rolling country to the ending elevation of 4800 feet, for a total descent of 2000 feet. The hike requires a short shuttle on paved roads.

The hike is rated strenuous due to the 14-mile length and elevation changes. Meet at the dirt parking area at the signed PCT crossing of Hwy 74, 1.0 miles east of the Paradise Valley Café, which is at the Hwy 74/Hwy 371 junction. Bring the ten essentials, layered clothing, sun protection, lunch, and 4 liters of water.

About the Leader

Dave Melton has been a Sierra Club member since 1986, and has served as a hike leader on both national and chapter outings. As a member of the Knapsack Subcommittee – a volunteer group of backpacking Sierra Club leaders – Dave has been leading curious explorers into California’s wilderness areas since 2006 and now serves on the Knapsack Quality Improvement Committee. Within our San Gorgonio Chapter, Dave volunteered as the Big Bear Group’s Outings Chair and now fills that role for Tahquitz.

After logging so many trail miles, Dave says it’s hard to choose a favorite trip, “but I definitely like Section B of the PCT, where this hike takes place.”

Sierra Club hikes range from easy to strenuous and are held throughout the Inland Empire and beyond. Find more upcoming hikes on the [Outings and Events](#) page of San Gorgonio Chapter website.

View from the Pacific Crest Trail, Section B. Photo by Dave Melton.



NEW: Volunteer Leader Feature

by Dania De Ramon, San Gorgonio Chapter
Digital and Social Media Assistant

This NEW monthly feature will feature a different volunteer leader in the San Gorgonio Chapter each month. The aim is to amplify and showcase the work our amazing chapter volunteer leaders do to further the Sierra Club's mission to explore, enjoy, and protect the planet. April's featured volunteer leader, **Mary Ann Ruiz, San Gorgonio Chapter Chapter Chair.**



Pictured: Mary Ann Ruiz and Dania De Ramon at Art and Science Cultural Center's Women's History Month Award Banquet.

Brief intro about yourself:

I've lived in Southern CA my entire life, first in the city of Bell, and the last 33 years in Chino. After a 45 year career in industrial fabricated metal distribution, I retired in 2016 and feel very fortunate to be able to divide my time between family, friends and Sierra Club volunteering. I've also been able to do some exploring of our western states and all they have to offer. My three adult kids and their families live in Portland, Davis and Huntington Beach, and we visit as often as possible.

How did you get involved with the Sierra Club?

As a kid, I heard about the Sierra Club from my parents. Each summer we went camping, then backpacking, and we learned about the Sierra Club during trips to Yosemite. Over 20 years ago, I joined the Sierra Club to find hiking friends. I quickly learned there was much more to it than hiking, and after becoming an Outings Leader, working on environmental issues became my focus. When I retired in early 2016, I was able to devote much more time.



What are some things you do in your volunteer leader position?

In the last week, I've helped with a webinar presentation about the Salton Sea to recruit volunteers; worked on thanking our donors, helped with our next newsletter publication, answered many questions from various volunteers, and began preparing agendas for my two Executive Committee meetings next week. I've worked on our 30x30 campaign, participated in several zoom meetings, and helped with candidate endorsements for environmental champions. I've also been in communication with other community groups and activists primarily about warehouse issues in our region.

What is your favorite part about being involved with the Sierra Club?

I've met and worked with so many wonderful people, both volunteers and staff. I have friendships going back those 20+ years, and still love to hike and take trips with Sierra Club's National Outings program.

Favorite part about the outdoors?

Whether it's nearby at Prado Regional Park, our amazing deserts, or in my favorite place, the High Sierra mountains, being in nature brings back that sense of wonder and gratitude for our natural world I remember as a child.

**Follow @scsangorgonio on
Twitter and Instagram or
like us on Facebook to see
next month's feature!**

Chapter Elections 2022 - Leaders Wanted!

This will be a big year for our Chapter Leader election here in San Bernardino and Riverside County. Three of our very experienced leaders, including our Chapter Chair, will be termed out after this year. We are actively searching for new leaders who can help our chapter grow. This is an opportunity for you to share your leadership talents with us, as well as gain experience serving on a volunteer board managing our Chapter and Group activities and finance. We hope you will consider joining our leadership team.

Here is a short description of the Chapter Executive Committee functions:

The day-to-day governance of San Gorgonio Chapter is provided by 9 elected at-large members plus one representative from each group. The board, called the executive committee or ExCom, is responsible for managing our finances, ensuring that the organization is financially sound, including by raising funds for the organization, setting priorities and plans, supporting our groups, committees and staff, and organizing our efforts towards environmental justice and conservation.

Email chair@sangorgonio.sierraclub.org for full election schedule.

Last Date for Nominations:

- **Chapter & Los Serranos, Mojave, Tahquitz, and Mountains Groups:** Sept. 30
- **Big Bear Group:** Sept 5
- **Moreno Valley Group:** August 25
- **Santa Margarita Group:** Sept. 5

Deadline for Petition Candidates:

- **Chapter & Los Serranos, Mojave, Tahquitz, and Mountains Groups:** Oct. 17
- **Big Bear Group:** Sept. 20
- **Moreno Valley Group:** Sept. 2
- **Santa Margarita Group:** Sept. 20

Minimum Signatures for Petitions:

- 15 for all
- 10 for Mountains, Los Serranos, Tahquitz Groups

Big Bear Group Update

by Ellen Kesler, Group Chairwoman

With Spring here, things are “blossoming” up here in the mountains for our Group. We will have our second General Meeting on May 19th with Ed Wallace, our Conservation Chair, presenting our Pebble Plains ecological preserve and history. At the June meeting we are hoping to get an update on the Replenish Big Bear Project; using reclamation water to supplement the lake and aquifers. Our meetings are held the third Thursday of each month in the Bridges Presbyterian Church, Big Bear Lake.

The Outings program has been active since February with hikes in various locations. Check our San Gorgonio Chapter website for the schedule. We are seeking new Hike Leaders for our Group, especially those who live in Big Bear Valley. Contact Judy Atkinson, Outings Chair, at judy5723@gmail.com if interested. We would love to have you join us!

For more information on the Big Bear Group, visit www.sierraclub.org/san-gorgonio/big-bear

Happy Spring!

Palm and Pine

Moreno Valley Group Update

by Ann McKibben, Group Secretary

We hope everyone is enjoying the spring season as our weather bounces back and forth between low temps and high temps. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the Moreno Valley Group News was not included in the March/April digital edition of the Palm and Pine. But we were able to distribute our first email version of our group news to our local members. We would be happy to forward that version of our group news to those who may want to read it. Please send your request and email address to us at movalleygroup@yahoo.com



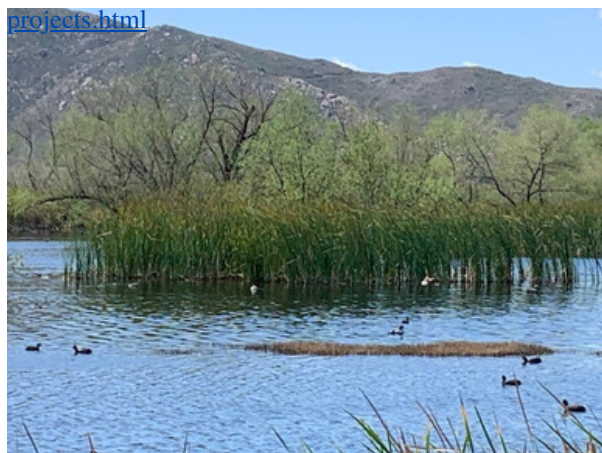
Here are some of the new issues we are following:

The city of Moreno Valley is working to approve a number of warehouse projects in the Edgemont area of Moreno Valley:

- Already Approved—Old 215 Industrial Business Park (mitigated negative declaration, <http://www.moval.org/cdd/pdfs/projects/old-215/NOIA-MitigatedDeclaration.pdf>);
- Edgemont Commerce Center (notice of preparation for draft environmental impact report, <http://www.moval.org/cdd/pdfs/projects/edgemont/EdgemontNOP.pdf>). Our concerns range from environmental justice issues to siting warehouses adjacent to homes.

There are plans to update Moreno Valley Mall. You can find more information at this link:

<https://www.moval.org/cdd/documents/about-projects.html>



We continue to follow:

- 1) Already Approved—Arco AM/PM Service Station;
- 2) Moreno Valley Business Park—In Litigation;
- 3) Pilot Travel Center/Truck Stop—Going to city council;
- 4) Moreno Valley Trade Center—Going to city council;
- 5) Compass Danbe Centerpointe Warehouse—In Litigation;
- 6) Moreno Valley General Plan Update—In Litigation;
- 7) Heacock Street Commerce Center.

Thank you for your donations to our Moreno Valley Group, which work to hold these projects accountable for their impacts on the environment and peoples' health.

Please take time to check out our Moreno Valley Group Facebook page at:

<https://www.facebook.com/MorenoValleySierraClub> for more information about our group and the variety of issues that we are following here in Moreno Valley. Our Moreno Valley Group web page can be found at:
https://sangorgonio2.sierraclub.org/groups/moreno_valley

Photos by George Hague

Palm and Pine

Santa Margarita Group Update

by Pam Nelson, Group Chair



The Santa Margarita Group has been busy engaging the local communities. We appreciated Louie's Nursery for providing information and plants for our Native Plants Garden Team. An elementary school science fair in March at CSU San Marcos provided us with hundreds of little learners and parents. We provided native plant garden guides, displays and props (Caren Hanson's handiwork) about rodenticides (borrowed from Wildlife Research Institute), animal camouflage techniques, and native plants with insects. Pam had an interactive wildlife crossing demo and animal tracks activity. In celebration of Earth Day, we tabled at the City of Menifee Earth Day event on April 22, and the Soboba Reservation on April 28th. We will be tabling again on May 14th at Louie's Nursery in Menifee. Come visit and/or help at our table!

Additional News:

- Pam and her granddaughter set up an Earth Day display at the Temecula City Library that remained for a month.
- Caren Hanson's Native Plant Garden team is now working on a new Temecula City Park garden (Voorburg). Intern Tracy Hill will be working on this project as well. They're hoping to create an interactive plan to educate families and school children as they move through the garden.
- Our Ex-com and friends are meeting via zoom and in-person. We have met at various parks and recently at Group Chair Pam Nelson's house. We've included walks and tours before we settle in for our meeting.
- Our speaker series continues to have fascinating speakers. Elisa Henderson, doctoral candidate at UCR, told us about her research on hummingbirds in April. We'll hear about lemon lilies, a unique plant in Idyllwild, from Dave Stilth in June.

For more information on the Santa Margarita Group activities, email sierraclubsmg@gmail.com

Photos (left to right): (1) The Santa Margarita Group booth at CSU San Marcos by Caren Hanson, (2) Group Chair Pam Nelson and her granddaughter created this Earth Day display for the Temecula City Library by Pam Nelson, (3) The SMG group table at the CSU San Marcos Science Fair for elementary school children by Caren Hanson.



*SMG members enjoy a pre-meeting hike
by Catherine Peterson*

Palm and Pine

Church of the Woods? Don't believe it. (The Court certainly didn't).

by Steven Farrell

Twenty years ago, the Mountains Group of Sierra Club San Geronio Chapter learned of an unconscionably ill-sited, environmentally destructive proposal for a sprawling Church campus on a forested 37-acre private parcel in our area (near Rimforest.) Surrounded by National Forest, the project was going to destroy acres of trees and vegetation by leveling a hill on the property and burying a proximate watercourse and habitat by "re-arranging" 395,000 cubic yards of earth. That's the equivalent of scraping 20 feet of dirt off the top of 10 contiguous football fields (approx. 13 acres, 20ft down) and dumping it somewhere else. The Church called it landscaping. We called it misguided and wrong.

The project defied General Plan policies as well as state and federal environmental laws. Ballfields, multistory buildings, and parking lots would destroy rare and riparian habitat, and would block a critical wildlife corridor.

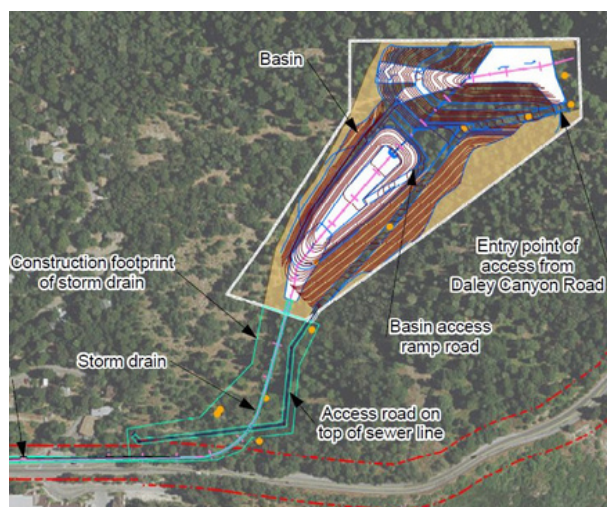
Church of the Woods was the proponent; an earnest but blinkered congregation eager to destroy their own forest in the pursuit of new attractions. It was a mind-numbing dissonance.

Somehow, in 2004, County Planning approved the project! Without even requiring the obviously needed analysis of an Environmental Impact Report (or EIR.) they effectively dismissed all the damaging effects as simply non-significant.

It was a decidedly low performance point for our Planning Commission.

But fortunately, that's when activists like our Sierra Club members enter the picture, isn't it? The Mountains Group, along with many other community activists, raised strong objections to the approval, including the clearly needed (but missing) requirements of the California Environmental Protection Act (or CEQA.) Realizing their mistake (and under threat of easily winnable litigation), the Church agreed to step back from the approval and committed to do the proper analysis and CEQA review.

For nearly seven years they worked on the various elements and studies needed, going back and forth with the County, with analyses that would be acceptable and still position them for approval. They downsized the project a bit, hoping it would help. In 2010, they released a modified project, and a draft EIR to go with it. Over two thousand pages. It wasn't nearly enough. Again the Mountains Group and others reviewed the proposal and raised strong and compelling objections, identifying inconsistencies and still unaddressed impacts. (Traffic, habitat destruction, special species unreviewed, evacuation adequacy, etc)





They persevered. We suggested they find a more appropriate, alternative site; that this location was unlikely to ever be compatible with their hoped for project goals. We understand they did review some alternatives but decided against them.

For another eight or so years, the Church continued to work on a new revised draft of their EIR. After so long, many in the community thought the project was dead. But in 2019 the new draft was released, and the process of review and comments by the public started again.

By this time, something else had been added to the mix. The Church had sold off about a third of their land to the County. Ironically, this was the area that held most of the perennial stream and springs on the property that in the 2003 project version was going to be preserved as undeveloped open space.

Now the County was going to use it for a water retention project to prevent flooding downstream in the community of Agua Fria and below. It was a public safety project that was very concerning because of the impacts the new basin(s) would have on the stream and habitat. But because it was for safety, beyond commenting extensively on it, hoping to improve the resulting project, the Mountains Group did not protest or litigate. It was approved in 2017.

But this just made the campus project even more of a problem, and its impacts more critical. And confusing.

The two projects were strangely intertwined because the basin project was going to rely on a very large diameter reinforced culvert on the church property that would be buried using fill from the Church project. We asked, and never got an answer, "What would happen with the culvert if the Church project didn't go forward?"

In case you are wondering, the flood project has not yet started.

More alarming was the Church was now claiming that the majority, if not all, the critical habitat impacts of their project were moot because the County would be destroying them anyway. We pointed out that the flood project was committed to restoration of that habitat.

Round and round. The Church at this point wanted to move forward no matter what, and produced a Final EIR hoping for another approval from the County Planning Commission. Which they gave. We appealed that decision to the County Board of Supervisors. It is a normal process for anyone concerned about a Planning Commission decision, to ask for the Supervisors to review with additional public input. It is also a process requirement if litigation is a possibility, which of course, the Mountains Group was prepared to do, as we have done with several other harmful projects in our area. Each was successful.

The Supervisors approved it in 2020, and together with Save Our Forest Association and San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society, we filed our litigation. It was the first time in 20 years that the project would be subject to legal review. Hearings were delayed multiple times, but in March, the court issued its final ruling.

Continued on page 14. . .

We won! We won with a significant majority of our objections. The court ordered the County's project approval reversed, and the EIR to be de-certified, as inadequate.

Of course, we don't know if it's truly over, but it was a very good outcome. Based on history, the Church of the Woods will either appeal to the State Appellate Court in an attempt to reverse the local court's judgment, or it will go back to the drawing board and try to address the project's shortcomings, as affirmed by the ruling.

In the meantime, thanking all who helped and contributed with so much of their time and donations, the Mountains Group is taking a well-deserved, well-earned, breather.

Why Joshua Trees are Endangered



The iconic western Joshua Tree (*Yucca brevifolia*) has recently benefited from being temporarily listed as an endangered species under California law. Despite this protection, the western Joshua Tree continues an uphill battle to save itself from both anthropogenic (human-made) activities and droughts, fires, reproductive challenges and other climate change factors. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) is compounding the problem by recommending the removal of current western

Joshua Tree protections at a time when this beloved species is in grave peril. Please advocate for keeping the western Joshua Tree protected under the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) by providing public comments at a meeting of the California Fish and Game Commission (Commission) on June 16th in Los Angeles.

Continued on page 15. . .



In their report that ultimately suggests withdrawing the western Joshua Tree from CESA protection, the CDFW admits that the population size and rangeland occupied by the western Joshua tree has “declined since the European settlement largely due to habitat modification and destruction, a trend that has continued to the present.” Additionally, the CDFW report points to development, climate change, and wildfire as primary threats to the western Joshua Tree. Based on these findings, we would think that the CDFW report would ultimately recommend the western Joshua tree for listing under the CESA.

Unfortunately, the CDFW findings stop short of that. According to the report, CDFW claims that protection under the CESA is not warranted in this case due to the western Joshua tree’s abundant numbers and widespread existence across various terrains. However, we believe that the above-mentioned pressures will create an environment with a high probability where swaths of western Joshua trees would be terminated.

The western Joshua tree (*Yucca brevifolia*) is a distinct species and has a different range from the eastern Joshua Tree (*Yucca jaegeriana*). We have seen the impact of climate change combined with human activities on the eastern species. The recent devastating Cima Dome fire of 2020, caused by a combination of climate change and human activities, eradicated 1.3 million eastern Joshua trees. In one fell swoop, 25% of that contiguous Joshua tree forest burned.

We have also seen fire ravage the western Joshua Tree forest in the national park, with the 1999 Juniper Complex fire that burned 13,894 acres of slow-growing California junipers, Joshua trees and pinyon pines. Non-native grasses, brought in by previous years of grazing as well as park visitors, intensify wild fire in the desert.

Furthermore, the CDFW report claims that they “do not have the data to determine the extent to which climate changes that are expected to occur in the foreseeable future are likely to affect western Joshua tree range within California within this timeframe.” Not only is a lack of data an inadequate justification for advising against further protections, but it is a significantly compelling reason for the Commission to reject the CDFW’s recommendation.

Fortunately, the California Fish and Game Commission will be considering the issue on June 16th at their public meeting in Los Angeles where you can join us in asking the Commission to provide permanent CESA safeguards for this iconic, sacred and medicinal species -without us, the Joshua Tree as we know it will continue to lose its ground and chance at survival. For more information and to stay updated, reach Moises Cisneros at moises.cisneros@sierraclub.org

Salton Sea Summit Draws over 200 Supporters

by Kim Floyd



Picture of volunteer activist Joyce Floyd tabling at the Salton Sea Summit 4/6/2022

Sierra Club is proud to join other organizations sponsoring the recent Salton Sea Summit. On April 6-7, 2022, UC Riverside Palm Desert hosted over 200 hundred attendees both on campus and virtual. Day One was filled with reports from several experts who are currently conducting scientific studies at the Sea. The scientific report topics included hydrology, ecology, air quality and public health. On Day Two, a variety of Salton Sea related topics were discussed by industry and community leaders. The topics included community and economic development; lithium mining and geothermal energy; Salton Sea mitigation projects; possible water importation; and long-range planning for the Sea's future.

A very full two days. The video content of this year's Summit will be made available at www.saltonseasummit.org

Please consider joining our efforts to further encourage both state and federal government agencies to expedite efforts to mitigate occurring air pollution caused by exposed playa. These emissions are causing extreme health problems for the local communities made up largely of underserved and low-income residents. Contact Kim Floyd (he/him/his) at 760-680-9479 or kimffloyd@fastmail.com