

Draining Carrizo



By an accident of geography, one of the most important natural habitat areas in the state is in San Luis Obispo County. The Carrizo Plain, the last large fragment of California's grasslands, preserved pretty much as they were circa 1850, is our most significant terrestrial environmental feature and an irreplaceable natural treasure.

As the National Monument proclamation put it in January 2001:

The monument offers a refuge for endangered, threatened, and rare animal species such as the San Joaquin kit fox, the California condor, the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, the giant kangaroo rat, the San Joaquin antelope squirrel, the longhorn fairy shrimp, and the vernal pool fairy shrimp. It supports important populations of pronghorn antelope and tule elk. The area is also home to many rare and sensitive plant species, including the California jewelflower, the Hoover's woolly-star, the San-Joaquin woolly-threads, the pale-yellow layia, the forked fiddleneck, the Carrizo peppergrass, the Lost Hills saltbush, the Temblor buckwheat, the

recurved larkspur, and the Munz's tidy-tips. Despite past human use, the size, isolation, and relatively undeveloped nature of the area make it ideal for long-term conservation of the dwindling flora and fauna characteristic of the San Joaquin Valley region.

As semi-arid grassland with eight inches of rainfall (in a good year) supporting the largest concentration of endangered species in California, it is also extremely fragile. Water and the question of what constitutes its sustainable use is becoming an increasingly important subject everywhere with each passing year, but in few places is it more crucial than in the Carrizo Planning Area of California Valley – dry farmed and never developed, its several hundred residents living with the reality of iffy and non-productive wells, some having to transport water from elsewhere.

It is in this context that the County has been approving applications for cannabis grows in the Carrizo Planning Area, over the Carrizo Plain, Rafael, and Big Spring Valley Groundwater Basins, with no studies or hard data on available water or its sustainable use, and no analysis of the potential cumulative impacts of all the proposed grows on the groundwater and the region's wildlife habitat. Rather, each grow and its level of estimated water use has been reviewed one at a time, in an environmental vacuum – a practice known under the California Environmental Quality Act as “piecemealing.”

This is occurring, it should be noted, despite the County's acknowledgment of the Carrizo Basin's limited water supply, and after County Planning urged that the Carrizo Planning Area be declared a no-go zone in the County's cannabis ordinance due to that limited water supply and what overdrafting it would mean for those endangered species and their habitat, which don't recognize boundaries created by lines on a map.

The permits the County has been approving, all with assurances of no likely environmental impacts, are guesswork. When it comes to water on the Carrizo, guesswork is all there is, going under the more official sounding title of “estimates.” Over the last 60 years, official estimates of “safe yield” have ranged from 600 to 59,000 acre feet of water per year. That's quite a range, and it speaks to the aforementioned absence of data. Estimates are not studies. No one knows if any underground streams aid in the basin's recharge. We do know that in drought years, when that “eight inches of rain in a good year” doesn't fall, the basin does not recharge. What absolutely no one knows, and the County is showing little interest in finding out, is what will happen to the water basin, California Valley residents, and the Carrizo's endangered flora and fauna if the County keeps approving cannabis grows there, all sticking straws into the same milkshake, all without a real study – not an estimate -- of the basin's safe yield,

Do you think the least the County can do for our greatest natural treasure is require that the approval of cannabis grows be informed by data based on such a study, and that the County should analyze the potential cumulative effects of all current and foreseeable future projects, require that the water use of all such operations in the Carrizo Planning Area be metered and monitored, and should not approve any pending projects until and unless all these things are done?

If so, you're in luck: There's someone you can suggest that to. Drop a note to Eric Hughes ehughes@co.slo.ca.us, the designated project manager for all such applications. When you do, cc his colleagues Jennifer Caffee jcaffee@co.slo.ca.us and Steve McMasters smcmasters@co.slo.ca.us, along with Supervisor Debbie Arnold darnold@co.slo.ca.us, in whose district this is happening.

Losing the Carrizo is an unthinkable thought. Watching it drain away, one permit at a time, is not a future anyone imagined when the national monument was created 19 years ago and we thought the Carrizo was permanently protected by lines drawn on a map.

It wasn't. It still needs to be protected. Pot's worth a lot; the Carrizo Plain is worth more.

Let the County know.