

Los Angeles Times

JANUARY 7, 2005

Citing Costs, U.S. Trims Critical Habitat for Santa Ana Sucker

by Janet Wilson
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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has eliminated critical habitat for the endangered Santa Ana sucker fish in Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, saying the economic benefits of the new plan outweigh the benefits to the fish.

The agency kept 8,305 acres of critical habitat for the Santa Ana sucker in Los Angeles County along the San Gabriel River and Big Tujunga Creek. Originally more than 20,000 acres, most of it along the Santa Ana River, had been designated under a court order last February.

The decision is the latest by the Bush administration to scrap critical habitat, which can complicate home and road building, dams and other development. Construction on critical habitat can require additional federal permits.

The Santa Ana sucker, a small brown fish once common in Southern California rivers, was declared threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 2000.

Like other sucker species, it sucks up algae and other organisms for food. Concrete riverbanks, dams and pollution caused by urban runoff have all played a role in its decline, scientists say, by either killing populations or gobbling up streambeds.

The tiny fish is found only in four rivers and their tributaries. The Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that protecting the species had cost transportation agencies, flood-control agencies and off-

highway vehicle users a combined \$4.1 million since 1999 in all the designated habitat.

Total prospective costs over a 20-year period are \$30.5 million, primarily because of extra costs to transportation projects, but also to water supply, flood control and residential and commercial activity, the service said.

The acreage excluded from protection under the new plan stretches along the Santa Ana River and its tributaries above and below the Prado Dam. Andy Yuen, deputy director of the service's Carlsbad office, which prepared the decision, said the acreage was cut because of other conservation programs along the river.

"We [do] consider those areas essential to the sucker," he said.

The Western Riverside County Multiple Species Conservation Plan covers scores of species, allowing development of some lands in exchange for conservation elsewhere. The Santa Ana Sucker Conservation Program was drawn up by a coalition of water and sewage districts, which said they were actually helping sustain the fish with highly treated effluent released from a sewage plant upstream that serves 160,000 people.

The agencies are contributing \$125,000 to the plan, in exchange for being allowed to proceed with flood-control, sewage and other projects along the Santa Ana River. The plan allows them to kill some sucker fish while contributing funds to save others.

The environmental group that originally sued to force the Fish and Wildlife Service to designate habitat criticized the cuts.

"This decision could result in extinction of the species," said David Hogan, urban wild lands coordinator for the Center for Biological Diversity.

He said the decision would be harmful because it would allow new roads and water treatment facilities: "That's the purpose of [those] programs, to get permission to kill the fish and destroy the habitat."

The new rule is effective Feb. 3, Yuen said.