

NORTH COUNTY TIMES

JANUARY 30, 2005

San Luis Rey area target for protection

By Tom Pfingsten,
North County Times

Jan. 30--FALLBROOK ---- Several endangered species with local habitats are threatened by accelerated development in Fallbrook and improvements to Highway 76, but that won't stop the notorious road from being widened, says a county environmental official. "We're developing a system where development can take place with conservation, so that you would allow for the development to go forward," said Tom Oberbauer, an environmental coordinator in the county's planning and land use division. "At the same time, you would be setting aside the most important habitat areas in order to protect these species."

Oberbauer, who is chief of the county's Multiple Species Program Planning Division, said that widening Highway 76 "is probably going to have an impact on the least Bell's vireo and the Arroyo toad," referring to a small songbird and a well-known species of amphibian found near the San Luis Rey River.

"Our goal is to allow for the conservation of these species through mitigation so that they do not become a limiting factor for the development of the road," he said.

Often plagued with stop-and-go traffic for hours in the morning and evening, the two-lane stretch of Highway 76 between Melrose Drive in Oceanside and South Mission Road in Bonsall could be widened to four lanes by 2009, transportation officials have said.

The rest of the highway between Mission and Interstate 15 would also likely need to be widened within the next 10 years, amounting to a drawn-out sequence of construction projects adjacent to the sensitive river environment of the San Luis Rey.

According to David Hogan, a spokesman for the Center for Biological Diversity, sev-

eral endangered or threatened native species are found in the Fallbrook area, while others have not been found but are known to have suitable habitat nearby.

The San Luis Rey Watershed is home to the endangered Arroyo toad and three endangered or threatened species of birds, said Hogan. Populations of least Bell's vireo, California gnatcatcher and southwestern willow flycatcher have all been identified in the Fallbrook area.

He added that there are fewer than 500 known pairs of the southwestern willow flycatcher left on the planet, "a significant number" of which live in "dense stream-side forest vegetation, like willows and cottonwoods ---- the kinds of plants you see growing along the San Luis Rey River."

Two species of butterflies that were harmed during the 2003 North County wildfires ---- the Hermes copper and Thorne's hairstreak butterflies ---- have never been found in Fallbrook "because people don't look for them," said Hogan. But he said many locations in the Fallbrook area are considered suitable habitat for the endangered insects.

"Those species are individually important, but the larger picture is that these animals and plants provide valuable services to people in the form of a functioning native ecosystem," Hogan said. "Natural habitat lands are much nicer to look at than huge cut-and-fill scrapes for developments. They also prevent erosion, which protects downstream water quality, especially at our beaches."

Jane Hendron, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Carlsbad, said Friday that locally based federal officials are working with the county and the California Department of Transportation to expedite the process of widening Highway 76.

This includes avoiding places along the highway's route that are most sensitive to habitat destruction.

"Ultimately, the goal is to identify the areas where it's most appropriate to direct future development," said Hendron. "It's a way of balancing the conservation of native species and their habitats while ensuring that the county moves forward economically."

As development continues in the Fallbrook area, a conservation program being developed by the county's land-use department will help endangered species survive by setting aside large parcels of land, said county planner Trish Boaz.

Known as the North County Multiple Species Conservation Program Plan, it encourages developers who are required to set aside land for mitigation to do so within the boundaries of a designated wildlife preserve, Boaz explained.

"Before, you'd have these pockets of open space where species would just die off ---- we call them sinkholes," she said, noting that developers would simply cordon off an acre or two on their property. "By setting aside the conservation areas on a broader level -- -- an interconnected corridor ---- it's more valuable for the species; it allows them to breed and move around."

Boaz said that the San Luis Rey River area is being considered as one preserve where developers are asked to satisfy their debt of open space in exchange for the impacts that their projects will have on endangered species.