



http://www.pe.com/localnews/inland/stories/PE_News_Local_W_sucker09.46f8d88.html

Santa Ana sucker fish may get more protection

Tuesday, December 8, 2009

By DAVID DANIELSKI
The Press-Enterprise

Federal wildlife officials on Tuesday proposed new habitat protections for a rare fish along its namesake Santa Ana River, which could make it tougher for Inland water providers to tap the river.

The U.S. [Fish and Wildlife Service](#), as part of a lawsuit settlement with environmental groups, is examining 9,605 acres of river and creek terrain in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties for designation as critical habitat for the Santa Ana sucker, a fish threatened with extinction.

Nearly 6,500 of the proposed acres are along the Santa Ana River and its tributaries from Anaheim to the San Bernardino Mountains.

Water supply concerns played into a 2005 decision by the [Bush](#) administration not to protect 12,824 acres of habitat on or near the Santa Ana River and its tributaries.

But four environmental groups -- California Trout Inc.; the [Center for Biological Diversity](#); Friends of the River; and the American Fisheries Society's California-Nevada chapter -- sued the government in 2007. They contended the administration disregarded science and didn't leave enough protected habitat for the fish population to recover as required by the federal Endangered Species Act.

In critical habitat areas, the wildlife service must be consulted before most projects can be done to be sure the fish are not harmed. Such projects could include diverting water for human use needed for fish habitat.

Phil Rosentrater, external affairs officer for Western Municipal Water District, said a 2004 study funded by local water agencies found that a critical habitat designation wasn't needed between the Seven Oaks Dam and the Riverside County line for fish to recover. The district is seeking a water allocation from the dam.

Rosentrater added that, if the wildlife service follows the rules in the Endangered Species Act, there will be enough water for the fish and for the water district's needs. The district serves about 24,000 customers in western Riverside County.

Jeffery Beehler, an environmental program manager for the Santa Ana Water Shed Project Authority, which manages the river's water resources, said the agency already takes care to protect the fish and consults with the wildlife service before projects are done in the river area.

He expects his agency to carefully review the new proposal and then submit official comments.

"This was a settlement between the service and Center for Biological Diversity, and we haven't been at the table," Beehler said.

Jane Hendron, a spokeswoman for the wildlife service, said the agency will consider excluding from the critical habitat designation areas from Tippecanoe Avenue in San Bernardino to as far down stream as Anaheim because of ongoing efforts by several agencies to protect the fish

The sucker is olive-gray, 3- to 6-inches long and has lips that protrude downward to slurp algae growing on gravel in pools. It also lives in the San Gabriel River and Big Tujunga Creek, both in Los Angeles County.

Listed in 2000 as threatened, the Santa Ana sucker is one of the few native freshwater fish left in Southern California creeks and rivers.

The text of the proposal and maps are expected to be published today in the Federal Register.

The Santa Ana River once had seven species of indigenous fish, including a species of trout. Four became extinct as the river was polluted, dammed and lined with concrete.

Comments will be taken until Feb. 8. They may be submitted through www.regulations.gov, or in writing to Public Comments Processing, attention FWS-R8-ES-2009-0038, Division of Policy and Directives Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 4401 N. Fairfax Dr., Suite 222, Arlington, VA 22203