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Protecting Santa Ana sucker protects our water supply

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As a panelist on the federal congressional subcommittee hearing in Highland last week, I have to say the event was primarily a staged sham, designed to spread public fear about protections needed to save the Santa Ana River and its most famous denizen, the endangered Santa Ana sucker fish.

The topic of the hearing was a decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to designate a portion of the river as “critical habitat” for the Santa Ana sucker. The designation does not affect state, county or private parties, but bars federal agencies from harming the habitat area.

Such designations are routine under the Endangered Species Act. There are 642 of them and they protect well over 250 million acres of land and water spanning every state. California has over 100 of them protecting some 20 million acres of wildlife habitat. If you’ve driven to Los Angeles, Palm Springs or San Diego, you passed by, maybe even through, several federal critical habitat areas. I’m guessing you didn’t even notice.

You’d never guess this from the lopsided panel of handpicked speakers competing with each other to predict unprecedented gloom and doom.

Using invented “projections,” one after another proclaimed a future of catastrophically decreased water supplies and economic collapse.

Most puzzling was the claim that 250,000 acre-feet of water would be taken away from local water users at a cost of \$30 billion over the next 25 years.

You see, not only has the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service never suggested this should happen, much less be required, it has expressly denied there is any plan to do it. It’s an invented story.

Huge new water restrictions are not needed because the Santa Ana sucker lives in water that is already required by the state water adjudication process to flow downstream to downstream water users including the Orange County Water District. Following our own state water rules will protect the sucker.

Opponents claim, as opponents always do, that the decision to designate the Santa Ana River as critical habitat is not based on scientific evidence.

What they fail to mention, however, is that the original 2005 decision which excluded the river is an infamous case of political intervention by high-ranking Department of Interior officials in the Bush administration.

The new 2011 decision rightfully expanded the decision at the recommendations of scientists because the Santa Ana River is clearly essential to the recovery of the endangered Santa Ana sucker.

The sucker has lived here for many tens of thousands of years and continues to successfully reproduce in the Santa Ana River.

Everyone that relies on the Santa Ana River for drinking, recreational and agricultural use can rest assured that water flowing down the river, supporting Santa Ana suckers, is exactly what we need to maintain a clean, healthy and reliable water supply for ourselves as well.