

Carmel River NEWS

December 2015 Vol. I, No. 17

From the Carmel River Watershed Conservancy (CRWC)

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The Los Padres Reservoir where a smolt slide was recently installed to assist migrating steelhead in their downstream journey

The Future of the Los Padres Dam

Article by Sophia Kirschenman, MIIS Intern

Once hailed as the symbol of development, growth and progress, dams have become increasingly controversial in recent years. While they can provide electricity and help us to regulate water flows and supply, they can also have devastating impacts on the natural world.

In 1999, the Carmel River was listed as one of America's most endangered rivers due to dams, water withdrawal, and sprawl. Fortunately, a variety of stakeholders began to take action to restore the Carmel River Watershed. One of the most important restoration projects occurred this year with the removal of the San Clemente Dam. The dam no longer served its function to manage water supply and was a safety hazard. Its removal has led many to question the future of Los Padres Dam, the Carmel River's largest dam.

Carmel River Watershed Tours

Available year-round for student and community groups! If interested contact [Lorin Letendre](#).

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Situated roughly 25 miles upstream, the capacity of the Los Padres Dam is approximately 60% of what it was originally and it stands as a physical barrier to migrating steelhead. In recent years Cal Am, the dam owner, has considered many options including dam removal and dredging. At present, the Monterey Peninsula Water Management District is set to perform several analyses in order to determine the best course of action. In addition, the construction of a 900-foot long smolt slide is almost finished and was built to assist smolts in their downstream migration.

The future of the Los Padres Dam is a controversial topic. On the one hand, the dam has negative consequences for steelhead as they have to rely on trap-and-truck operations and fish ladders to even make it to the uppermost reaches of the river. Likewise, starting this year smolts will have to journey down a 900-foot long smolt-slide on their voyage to the ocean. In addition, the dam reduces sediment flows, which are necessary to re-enforce river banks and maintain the ecological health of riparian habitats. In short, the Los Padres Dam impacts the health of the entire watershed. On the other hand, many argue that Los Padres Dam is actually beneficial for steelhead as it can be managed to release water in drought years when there is little or no water flow. It is also beneficial for landowners who need to withdraw water year-round to support crops and the local economy.

So, what exactly is in store for the future of the Los Padres Dam? In the near future, the dam doesn't appear to be going anywhere. For now, Cal Am will continue to manage water flows and to mitigate the impacts to steelhead. Dam or no dam, one thing is for sure, the Carmel River has come a long way from being one of America's most endangered rivers. But there's still a long way to go.



The Carmel Lagoon

Lagoon EIR Upcoming!

Article by Lorin Letendre, CRWC Executive Director

A possible solution to the barrier beach and lagoon issues is about to be announced to the public in the County's Draft Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR). This solution involves the use of bulldozers to lower the barrier beach at the southern end and move that sand to the middle and northern ends of the beach. The southern end will be left at a level such that the lagoon water filling from rain runoff can overtop the beach and "naturally" breach the barrier beach. With the beach remaining lower at the southern end it is anticipated that the breaches will continue to occur at that end, to avoid the river running up against the State Parks parking lot and Scenic Road bluffs.

The Draft EIR is expected to recommend that the Scenic Road Protection Project (SRPP) move forward once funding is secured, to ensure that the parking lot and bluffs are armored against a possible northerly breach and high wave action that we have experienced in recent years. The originally proposed solution, the Ecosystem Protection Barrier (EPB), will be postponed until such time as the impact or effects of the lowered southern beach and the SRPP are fully evaluated. There is continued opposition to the EPB solution from the State Parks, the Carmel Area Wastewater District (CAWD), and some homeowners residing along the lagoon.

The Draft EIR is currently being circulated among the federal and state agencies that have authority over or an interest in the lagoon and barrier beach area. It will then be revised and released to the public in early 2016 for the required public comment period.



The southerly breach of the Carmel Lagoon earlier this year

Carmel River Creature Feature: The California Red-Legged Frog

Listed as threatened in 1996 under the Endangered Species Act, the California red-legged frog is endemic to the state and is thought to have inspired one of Mark Twain's famous short stories, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Appropriately named for the reddish colors found on the species' legs and belly, this creature can grow up to 5 inches long, making it the western United States' largest native frog. The Carmel River Watershed is known to be one of the most important remaining habitat areas for the species. As such, restoration efforts in this area are crucial to the survival of these amazing creatures. Several of the biggest threats to California red-legged frogs in the Carmel River Watershed are habitat loss due to agriculture, urbanization and water extraction among other things, and non-native predators, such as bullfrogs. Various restoration projects have been proposed to improve habitat conditions for the species and several projects that have already taken place, such as the San Clemente Dam removal, also improve this essential environment.