

OPINION

Power plant proposal threatens Santa Clara River

Mati Waiya | Special to the Ventura County Star

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The last free-flowing river in Southern California is under attack in our own backyard.

Protecting natural resources protects our communities — access to clean air and water, the quality of our neighborhoods, and an irreplaceable cultural legacy that gives sacred meaning to the places we live. The Santa Clara River, named Utom (“phantom river”) in Chumash, is one of those sacred places threatened by decision-making that prioritizes profits over our health, heritage and the future of our communities.

Calpine Corp. has applied to the California Energy Commission to build the Mission Rock Energy Center, a 275-megawatt, natural gas-fired power plant on the banks of Utom.

To prevent approval, the Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation, a Native-led environmental nonprofit, in partnership with Earthjustice has intervened. Wishtoyo and Earthjustice are working to ensure the animals, plants and people who depend on Utom are represented throughout the review process.

Utom is more than the stretch of open space off the side of Highway 126. It is a sacred place where Chumash people have lived since time immemorial, building villages, holding ceremonies and burying loved ones. Today, we still honor our river and remember a time, not long ago, when

Utom was healthy and abundant and people lived in reciprocal relationship with its resources.

The plants along Utom's banks are still gathered traditionally for baskets, medicine and other culturally significant purposes. The quiet and isolated banks provide a place for reflection, escape and appreciation of nature — the sound of clear, flowing water over the rocky river bed and thick beds of willow make you forget the existence of the highway.

Such a place is increasingly rare in a time when most inland waterways are confined to concrete channels surrounded by chain-link fences. Calpine's dirty power plant would permanently change the landscape of the Santa Clara River Valley and destroy Utom's ecosystem, destroying the ability of our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren to experience a pristine place in their own home.

You can smell Utom in the air. However, if approved, the power plant would emit a variety of harmful toxins, including 400,000-plus tons of carbon dioxide emissions, into the air every year. That's the same as burning over 400 million pounds of coal. The plant would likely be the largest source of toxic emissions in Santa Paula (which already fails to meet state and federal air standards and is a state-designed environmental justice community).

The health and success of populations of endangered animal species, like the southwestern willow flycatcher and the Least Bell's Vireo — riparian birds that nest along the banks of Utom near the proposed project site — would be jeopardized by pollution emitted from the facility and transmission lines built for it.

How can we stand by when a project threatens the health of our community and the survival of an entire species? At a time when California is moving toward clean, renewable energy, why would we knowingly take a step backward toward obsolete fossil-fuel infrastructure?

To protect Utom, the commission must deny Calpine's application, just like it recently did in Oxnard with NRG's application to build the Puente Power Project. Here, just like there, a power plant is unnecessary.

Wishtoyo and Earthjustice are committed to protecting Utom, but we can't do it alone. With the well-being of our communities and future generations' quality of life at stake, the risks are too great to stay silent.

Make your voice heard. Submit public comment about the CEC's Preliminary Staff Assessment at an upcoming public workshop in Santa Paula. Demand that the CEC deny Calpine's application to build this dangerous and unnecessary power plant. Join us in the fight to protect Utom.

Mati Waiya, a Chumash ceremonial elder, is founder and executive director of the Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation.

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