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IN BRIEF | Oct. 4, 2018

Oct 3, 2018 | Chris O'Neal, In Brief, News, Oxnard, Ventura, Ventura County | 0 🗨️ |



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A win for Santa Clara River steelhead protections

A long court battle has come to an end with a victory for conservation groups arguing that United Water Conservation District's Vern Freeman Dam has harmed recovery efforts of the endangered steelhead trout in the Santa Clara River.

The legal battle, brought by the Wishtoyo Foundation, its Ventura Coatkeeper Program and the Center for Biological Diversity, ended with a court ruling stating that the District violated



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protections set forth by the Endangered Species Act, “clearly causing past, ongoing, and future harm to steelhead as a result of the dam’s barrier to fish movement and diversion of water,” according to Jason Weiner, general counsel and water initiative director for Wishtoyo, and that United “dragged its feet” on working toward finding a solution to the problem.

“By eliminating physical barriers to steelhead passage, we are not only protecting an endangered species, but we are also overcoming barriers that have interrupted the continuity of our ancestral traditions,” said Mati Waiya, a ceremonial elder of the Santa Clara River Turtle Clan and executive director of the Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation. “Steelhead hold a central and honored place in our culture. Restoring instream flows to the Santa Clara River allows steelhead access to their spawning sites, and also allows restoration of our ancestral connection celebrating the seasonal return of the steelhead through our shared waters.”

The ruling requires that United ensure adequate flow along the 10.5-mile stretch of the Santa Clara River that the steelhead traverse to and from the ocean and have a design for a fully functioning 400-foot-wide notch and also a ramp alternative that will allow the fish to migrate beyond the dam by January 2020, and to construct the preferred alternative two years after agency approvals (namely the National Marine Fishery Services, among others).

Otter numbers down from previous year, but still above average

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