



PHOTOS BY JUAN CARLO/THE STAR

Patagonia volunteer Julia Wright and Derek Poultney, protection coordinator for Ventura Hillside Conservancy, help cut arundo near the Main Street bridge.

# Back into the clear

## ■ Nonprofit preps new land for public use

By Arlene Martinez  
amartinez@gvcstar.com  
805-437-0262

In an era when Ventura was more cow country than scenic beach community, members of the Willoughby family were ranchers, running a dairy farm on the west end of town.

But the Willoughby men had dreams that extended far beyond city limits, and in the late 1800s, James Russell Willoughby headed to West Point. His father's death meant an abrupt change of plans, and he returned two years later.

His son William, though, enlisted in the Army, and in 1940 left Ventura, never to return.

The Willoughbys' property was sold off except for a small patch — 8.74 acres, to be exact — between the



Bruce Livingstone, a volunteer from Patagonia, helps cut arundo near the Main Street bridge in Ventura. The Ventura Hillside Conservancy has accepted a donation of land from descendants of a local ranching family. The property is considered an important piece in reclaiming the river and finding permanent housing for the homeless population.

Highway 101 and Main Street bridges and next to the Ventura River.

The property soon will fall to new ownership, the Ventura Hillside Conservancy. The nonprofit plans

to one day turn the donated land into a place for picnics, walks and a connector for the length of the river.

See HILLSIDES, 3A

## HILLSIDES from 1A

"We're hoping to first restore the habitat and then open it to the public," said Lee Sherman, Ventura Hillside Conservancy development and volunteer coordinator.

A coalition of social service agencies, environmental groups and government officials sees it as a significant piece in a much larger and difficult puzzle — permanently clearing the river bottom of homeless camps.

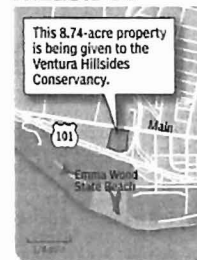
"There's a lot of illegal activity on that property," said Peter Brown, Ventura's community service manager. "We now have an owner that is going to be attentive to that illegal activity."

In the decades since the Willoughbys left Ventura, nonnative arundo plants have overtaken the property. The thick reed can grow up to 30 feet tall, and it did, providing the perfect cover for a community of homeless people who have set up more or less permanent residence.

"This area is a key to what goes out into the ocean. There's a huge human component and a huge environmental component, and they're very closely tied together," Project Understanding Executive Director Rob Orth said.

The property is sur-

## VENTURA HILLSIDES



rounded by land owned by state, city, county and private entities, including the Wood-Clayssens Foundation/Taylor Ranch. As they have forced out homeless people and cleared 45 acres of arundo as part of the effort, some of the homeless have moved to the Willoughby property.

How to assist with permanently relocating the homeless is the mission of a working group that is tentatively being called the Ventura River Illegal Camp Relocation Project. Groups including Salvation Army, Turning Point, Friends of the Ventura River and Catholic Charities are involved, along with police and the Ventura County Sheriff's Office, as well as state, county and city officials.

The Ventura Hillside Conservancy also will be part of the process. If it's



JUAN CARLO/THE STAR

Volunteer Matt LaBarge helps clear the arundo near the Main Street bridge in Ventura.

successful, the conservancy pictures its new property as being part of the Ventura River Parkway plan being developed by the Trust for Public Land and the state Coastal Conservancy to reclaim the river for recreation.

"We know there'll be challenges, but overall it's a great opportunity," Sherman said.

On Wednesday, the conservancy held its first cleanup, enlisting the help of Ventura-based outdoor apparel company Patagonia to clear arundo.

As the Patagonia volunteers chopped down stalks of the bamboo-like arundo, Jeremy More called down

from his location on the Main Street bridge.

"If you guys could just stop what you're doing. You're banging into my wall right there," More said.

The volunteers moved to a different location and continued chopping.

More has lived in the river bottom for a year and a half, he said, having lost his job and home. He knows he will have to move, and is debating joining his sister in Missouri.

Orth knows there will be a lot of people like More, all with different experiences, all with different problems.

"This is what's coming," Orth said. "This area's go-

ing to get cleaned out, and (they're) going to have to step up to the plate and think about a life change."

When William Willoughby died in the 1970s, his son William inherited the property. In 2009, the conservancy contacted him to see if he'd be interested in getting rid of it.

He was indeed, provided the land remain open space in perpetuity.

"It's been kind of a hobo jungle. If there were a local responsible entity to take charge of it, I think it could be put to good public use," he said from his home just outside Cleveland. "I'll feel much better about it."