

# OJAI VALLEY NEWS

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## The river finds friends before its untimely death

by Polly Bee

The Ventura River may have more friends than it imagined. And, they aren't necessarily members of the formal organization, Friends of the Ventura River, an environmental group formed to protect fish, plant, and wildlife along the meandering watercourse.

About 50 public officials and citizens showed up Wednesday night to voice grave concerns when the Casitas Municipal Water District (CMWD) held a public hearing on the adequacy of an environmental impact report (EIR) for a proposed agreement with the City of Ventura. That "Conjunctive use Agreement" guarantees Ventura 6,000 acre feet of water annually. To do so it changes the present set of operating criteria that has been in effect since Casitas Dam and lake were completed in 1959. Those criteria allow the first 20 cubic feet per second of water to flow down river — essentially keeping it alive — before any water is diverted into the lake via the Robles Diversion Canal.

UNDER THE NEW agreement, no water, other than excess flood water which the canal cannot physically handle, would flow downstream. About 30 downstream water users would be affected. Those users depend on the present water flow to replenish their wells.

A second public hearing on the EIR is scheduled for March 14, 7:30 p.m., at the CMWD offices in Oak View. Written comments may be submitted until March 30.

When the public review period is over, CMWD directors will consider all comments and determine if the EIR is adequate. Once that document is approved, CMWD and the City of Ventura will decide whether or not to enter into the Conjunctive Use Agreement.

Motivation for the pact stems from a long-standing debate between the city and CMWD over riparian rights in the river, a debate that could end up in court if it is not settled in another manner. The city, which draws water from facilities at Foster Park,

says its water rights are impaired by present CMWD operations in that water rightfully belonging to the city is diverted to the lake.

CMWD, on the other hand, believes that its present operation of the Robles Diversion Dam has provided sufficient water to meet requirements of all downstream users.

### THE EIR STATES:

"Although the city claims a large water right from the river, it lacks the storage capacity to develop a firm supply. Thus, the great disparity between the average annual yield and the yield in a critical dry year (5091 acre feet per year from 1961-1976; 1463 acre feet per year in 1951) makes the city's Foster Park water supply widely variable. In dry years, it must purchase supplemental water from CMWD.

"Because the years of below average runoff cause the city expense for supple-  
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mental water and cause CMWD long term drawdown on Lake Casitas storage, (both parties want to) increase the safe yield of the water supply in the Upper Ventura River system."

What happens to the water users other than the city who draw from the river flow is still up in the air, however. According to the EIR, "CMWD intends to negotiate a similar agreement with each user-if necessary....to provide them with a firm basic supply as an assurance that the proposed operation would not encroach upon the user's existing supply....Some additions to the CMWD distribution system would be necessary to deliver makeup water to these other water diverters."

**ABOUT A DOZEN** persons spoke Wednesday night to raise serious doubts about the adequacy of the EIR as well as conditions of the agreement. They also criticized distribution of the EIR, which is now available only at public libraries in Ojai, Oak View, Meiners Oaks and Ventura and at city halls in Ojai and Ventura.

CMWD General Manager Robert McKinney said 100 copies of the EIR, at a cost of \$20 each, had been printed, and all but a few had been mailed out to officials and involved parties.

Carla Bard, chairperson of the Los Angeles-Ventura Regional Water Quality Control Board, called the hearing "premature....since a copy of the EIR was received only 12 days ago and the RWQCB has not had a chance to study it."

"The EIR doesn't make clear that all the water in the lower river will be removed for good," she said. "The agreement will eliminate the river and affect the (Oak View sewage) treatment plant, which already has trouble meeting discharge requirements."

Bard said that affluent from the plant "will have no diluent most of the year" if the agreement goes into affect and warned that the Water Quality Control Board therefore may have to impose stricter standards - the cost of which would have to be borne by taxpayers.

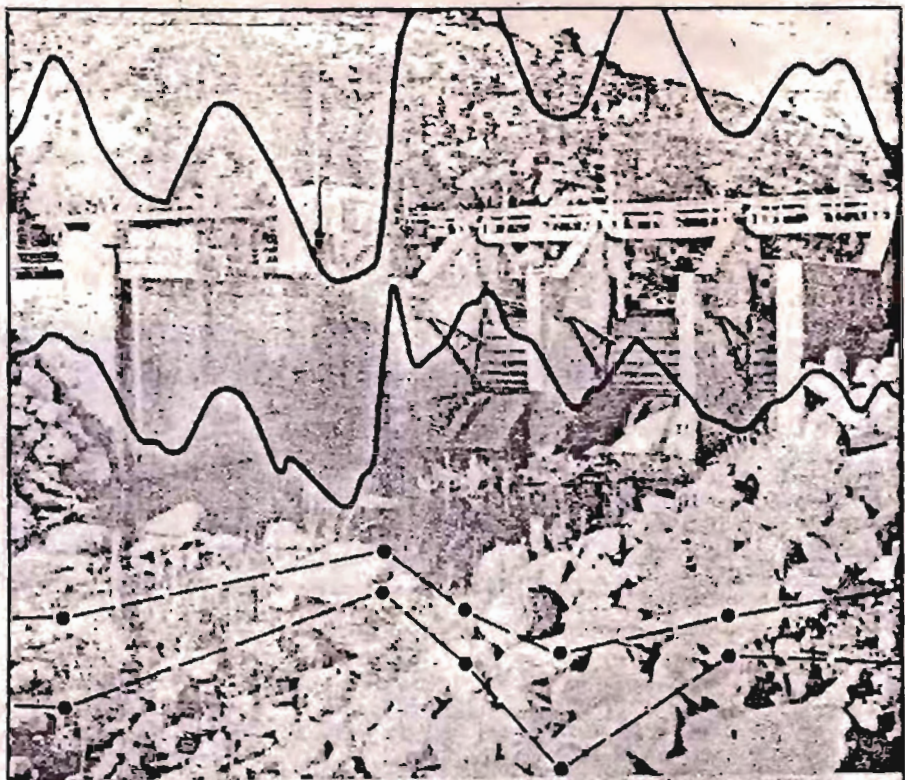
**GEORGE PURVIS**, former director of the CMWD, questioned what happens in drought years, when the lake could be lowered to its last 6,000 acre feet. "Will that water be reserved for the people of Ventura only?" he asked.

Purvis was told that when the lake falls below a certain level, water would not be released to Ventura at that time, but the city could make up the allotment another year when the reservoir had recovered.

Purvis also questioned the economics of possibly diverting water from the lake, then dechlorinating it for release into the river to aid failing steelhead and other fish.

"What will the cost per year per fish be?" he asked.

**Jim Hines**, vice-chairman of the Ventura County Fish and Game Commission, feared money that has already been spent to improve steelhead habitat would literally be down the drain. "I can only conclude



## Environmental Impact Report Ventura River Conjunctive Use Agreement

Casitas Municipal Water District and City of San Buenaventura  
**EDAW inc.**

THIS IS THE COVER of the EIR for an agreement between the Casitas Municipal Water District and the City of Ventura that could spell the demise of the Ventura River as it is known today. (

after reading the EIR that the steelhead and our efforts will be dried up, like the river," he said. "How do you replace a steelhead once it has gone? How do you put a price on it?"

His remarks were met with applause from the audience.

**Mark Capelli**, executive director of Friends of the Ventura River, challenged technical data in the report. "The EIR contains many errors in fact," he said. "Data is confusing and contradictory." Although he read extensive testimony into the record, he promised to return in March with additional material.

**John Norton**, planner with the State Water Quality Control Board, warned that "surface and ground water usefulness will be impaired for agriculture and fisheries and the long-term plan for water quality will be affected."

**Dr. William K. Fox**, biologist and educator at Ventura College, cautioned of serious impacts to the estuary at the mouth of the river. "That can't be mitigated by Rube Goldberg mitigations," he said. "I

don't believe killing everything in the last few miles of the river to solve water rights is an ethical way to solve the problem."

**THREE PERSONS** felt the river was a lost cause.

**Robert P. Jones**, who called himself a conservationist, said, "When you speak of trying to bring back something that died 30 years ago, you're wasting taxpayers' dollars....Don't worry about diverting water to keep an alleged live river alive. It can't be done."

**Walter Loban** said he has lived on the river "51 years....There was no flood control then and only a few steelhead came up....You will never bring the river back to what some people were told it was."

**Myrtle Imhoff** spoke of San Antonio Creek's flow into the river. "There was a time when we'd see San Antonio Creek run all summer," she said. "I always thought that is why the water was down there (in the lower river). I don't think the lake should be responsible for making up the deficiencies of San Antonio Creek."