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PHOTOS BY ROB VARELA/THE STAR

Heidi Sockwell, a member of Ojai-based Concerned Resource Environmental Workers, helps clear arundo Monday from the Ventura River bottom, just west of the Main Street bridge.

River bottom is top priority

■ Invasive reed cleared out to aid native species

By Monica Lara
Special to The Star

Clearing the way for native plants and clean up-efforts, an Ojai-based group is doing its part to restore the Ventura River bottom to its natural habitat for public use.

About 15 people from non-profit Concerned Resource Environmental Workers are clearing arundo dorax, a

thick, nonnative grass, on the 9-acre swath of land situated between the Ventura Beach RV Resort and Highway 33 interchange and the West Main Street and Highway 101 bridges.

With the arundo overgrowth providing an area for homeless encampments, the area needed clearing to allow for the return of native plants and removal of waste from those who had lived on the land.

"We want to eliminate all the arundo," said Joaquin Echabarria, CREW lead supervisor. "It is a tremendous

and highly invasive species, and the people are destroying the area even further. We are trying to restore it to what the river bottom really is."

CREW was hired by the Ventura Hillside Conservancy, owner of the property as of this month.

The conservancy, a land trust, also owns and manages more than 16 acres of Foster Park Area Preserve between Ventura and Ojai.

The nine acres of Ventura River land was donated to the conservancy for public use,

See ARUNDO, 2B



Joaquin Echabarria, a member of Concerned Resource Environmental Workers, uses a chain saw as he helps clear arundo.

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ARUNDO
from 1B

and the organization plans to restore the property and establish small parks and pathways, according to Lee Sherman, the conservancy's development and volunteer coordinator.

"It's going to impact a few people negatively, but benefit everybody in Ventura in the long run," Sherman said.

Thus far, the Ventura River Parkway Project has cost the conservancy about \$20,000 in grants and donations. Using chain saws to cut down the overgrown reeds, the CREW has worked from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. for more than two weeks since mid-August. The arundo, a giant grass resembling bamboo, makes it difficult for naturally existing plants to flourish and does not provide food or shelter for animals, according to Baylie Hanrahan, CREW supervisor. Arundo can be highly flammable, as well.

"I am hoping, by us going in there, people will see how much of a problem it is and continue to do something about it," Hanrahan said.

The clearing efforts by CREW have helped remove more than 12 roll-off Dumpsters of the reed. The workers are chopping down the growth and trimming native plants for their survival and public safety.

The conservancy is clearing as much of the arundo as possible before Sept. 17, when more extensive removal and cleanup efforts will be led by the Ventura County Watershed Project District.

To that end, the conservancy will host its annual music festival to help raise additional funding. The Ventura Hillside Conservancy's Music Festival is set for Sept. 22 at Arroyo Verde Park and will feature Blues Traveler as a headliner.

Visit www.venturahillside.org for more information and tickets.