

**Lawrence E. Hunt**

**CONSULTING BIOLOGIST**

David Pritchard  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
2493 Portola Road, Suite B  
Ventura, California 93003

5 June 1999

Dear Dave:

I wish to bring to your attention an opportunity to preserve a substantial amount of lower Ventura River floodplain that is currently for sale. These are two separate parcels that abut one another and are located on the western side of the floodplain.

**Parcel 1:** This parcel (Ferro Trust, owners), consists of approximately 105 acres, and is bordered on the south by Main Street, on the west by the Taylor Ranch (Cynthia Wood Trust, owners), on the north by the former SP Milling Company mine site (Cynthia Wood Trust, owners), and on the east by the flood control levee. Please note that the eastern boundary of this property encompasses the active channel of the Ventura River all the way to the levee.

This parcel was farmed for many years by lessees to Gus Ferro, the owner. The last leaseholder was Pure-Pak, Inc. of Oxnard, who grew organic fruits and vegetables on the land. They abandoned the site in 1997. In mid-1996, a "For Sale" sign was erected at the southwest corner of the property on Main Street. At this time I informed Brenda Buxton of the California Coastal Conservancy that this property was for sale and was an excellent candidate for riparian restoration. In 1998 I informed Patricia Healey (sp.?) at the Conservancy about this opportunity, but apparently nothing was done. Approximately nine months ago, the "For Sale" sign was removed and a farmer (John Welty, Jr.), began preparing the land for flower production, who told me he was leasing the property, but had an option to buy. Last month I called Capitol Commercial Real Estate and spoke to Fred Ferro about this property and was told the property was still for sale, selling price "under \$ 1 million dollars". Last week I was told that John Welty, Jr. was no longer working the property, but that his father, John Welty, Sr. was going to farm the property and that the property was now in escrow to him.

Even though we are past the "eleventh hour" on this matter, it is critical that the issue at least be explored. This parcel represents an excellent and unique opportunity to reclaim and restore the lower Ventura River floodplain. It not only includes the entire western portion of the floodplain in this area, but also extends all the way east to the flood control levee, including the active channel of the river. Perhaps some arrangement could be made with Mr. Welty, such that the Coastal Conservancy or other conservation agency could purchase the property and lease it back to him with the understanding that he would be allowed to farm it for the next 10-15 years or so. The extreme southeastern corner of this parcel is frequently flooded and could be restored immediately under this arrangement. The remainder of the property could be restored when the farming lease expires.

5290 Overpass Road, Suite 108 Santa Barbara, California 93111  
Phone: (805) 967-8512 Fax: (805) 967-4633  
e-mail: anniella@silcom.com

**Hunt - p. 2 of 3**

I have included a site map and an historical map, both taken from Ferren et al (1990), "Botanical Resources at Emma Wood State Beach and the Ventura River Estuary, California". As you can see from the historical map, this portion of the floodplain, as mapped in 1855, was completely covered with riparian forest, and had distributary channels of the river flowing through it.

**Summary:** Parcel 1 covers about 105 acres, asking price appears to be "less than \$ 1 million"; current leaseholder:

**John Welty, Sr.  
4526 Foothill Road, P.O. Box 1233  
Carpinteria, CA 93014  
(805) 684-3541**

**The real estate company handling lease to buy option:**

**Fred Ferro  
Capital Commercial Real Estate Company  
Ventura, California  
(805) 278-1400**

**Parcel 2:** This parcel consists of approximately 158 acres of the former SP Milling mine site. It is situated along the western floodplain of the lower Ventura River and abuts the northern boundary of Parcel 1 described above. This parcel is a sub-unit of the 10,000-acre+ Taylor Ranch, and I believe the eastern property line for this parcel would also extend to the flood control levee on the east side of the river. So, as with Parcel 1, purchase of this property would include the active channel and riparian corridor of the river. The western border of the restoration area ends at the bluff, the northern border extends almost to Shell Bridge (see accompanying site map).

SP Milling Company operated a surface sand and gravel mine on this parcel from about 1967-1992. Mining operations removed existing riparian vegetation from many areas of the active and former floodplain. Heavy storm flows in the early and mid-1990's reclaimed all of the former mine sites in the active channel. This situation created extensive areas of freshwater marsh habitat that have gradually been succeeding to willow riparian woodland. In 1996 and 1996, one, possibly two pairs of least Bell's vireos, a federally endangered bird, successfully nested and fledged young from willow woodland in former desilting basins on the old mine site. The upper floodplain adjacent to the west side of the Ventura River and contacting the northern edge of Parcel 1, was the site of material stockpiles and the former processing and washing facilities for the mine. This 17-acre site has been subject to a \$ 250,000 restoration effort, directed by myself, under SMARA requirements. SP Milling Company has been very supportive of their obligation to this restoration effort. The restoration goals are to introduce hardwood species diversity back into the riparian corridor by planting black cottonwood and western sycamore along those portions of the site adjacent to the existing riparian corridor, which is dominated by willow. The restoration site gradually increases in elevation to the west, so coast live oak and sycamore have been planted here, grading into floodplain scrub vegetation dominated by shrubs. Although soils in the restoration site were quite poor, the restoration effort has been very successful to date, with less than 10% mortality and growth rates exceeding 1 cm/day

Hunt - p. 3 of 3

for certain tree and shrub species.

The former SP Milling site is not currently for sale, however, SP's restoration obligation will expire in less than two years. The approved end-use of the site is open space, but this presents a real threat to the restoration effort. The uplands west of the floodplain are leased for cattle grazing and the leaseholder has told me that his lease includes the restoration site. SP Milling has had numerous problems with this leaseholder regarding stray cattle in the restoration site, which have cost thousands of dollars to repair. I and SP tried to work out a settlement to this problem whereby SP would pay for fencing to keep the cattle out of the floodplain, but I don't know if the leaseholder has repaired or maintained his fences. In short, once SP's obligation to the restoration site has been satisfied, the land could revert back to cattle grazing and this restoration effort would be lost.

Parcel 2 is not currently for sale, but perhaps the Cynthia Wood Trust could be approached to sell it. The current landowner is:

Cynthia Wood Trust  
Pierre Claeysens, Chairman  
Wood-Claeysens Foundation  
(805) 966-0543

The benefits of preserving these parcels are manifold. Together, these parcels constitute a 250-acre piece of the lower Ventura River floodplain, which if preserved, would allow unparalleled protection of the lower reaches of the river for the diverse array of sensitive species that are currently there, as well as providing an opportunity to restore not only the existing riparian corridor, but the entire former floodplain from the flood control levee on the east to the bluffs on the west. Gradually converting Parcel 1 from agriculture back to floodplain forest would solve many of the current problems associated with periodic flooding and damage to crops and human structures. As I have explained to the California Coastal Conservancy and the Friends of the Ventura River in the past, this opportunity should not be missed!

Please call me if you need additional information. I would be happy to assist you in this necessary and important undertaking.

Sincerely,



Lawrence E. Hunt

attachments

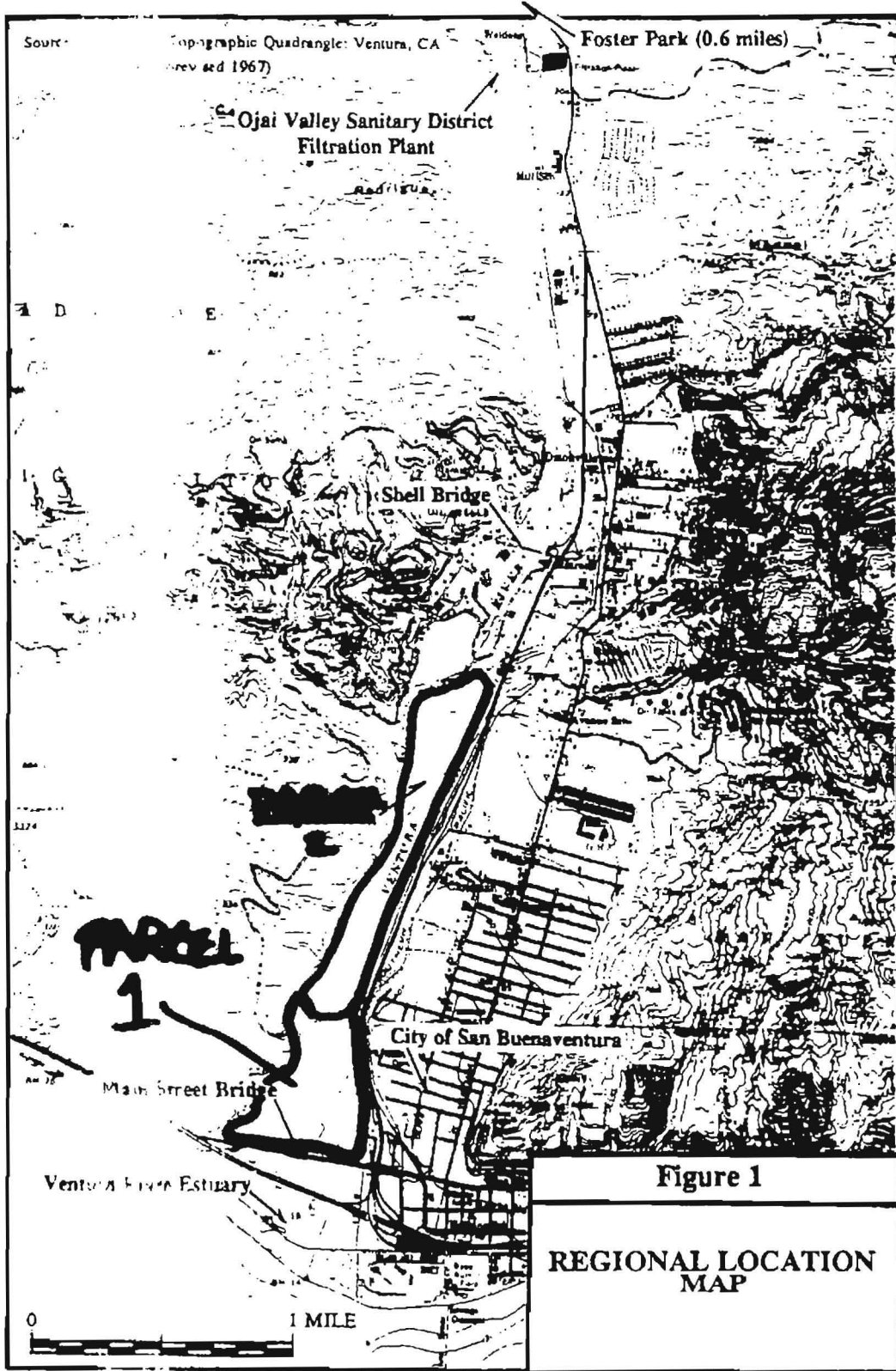


Figure 1  
REGIONAL LOCATION MAP

**PARCEL 2. FORMER SP MILLING SITE**