

CHATSWORTH NATURE PRESERVE COALITION

Working Together to Save a Crucial Wildlife Habitat in Los Angeles-San Fernando Valley

A Meadowlark Needs a Meadow to Sing

July 9, 2015

Marcie L. Edwards, General Manager
Los Angeles Department of Water & Power
111 North Hope Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012-2607

Dear Ms. Edwards:

In 2012 the Chatsworth Nature Preserve Coalition (CNPC) was formed by representatives from local conservation and community organizations to address the concerns about protecting the Chatsworth Nature Preserve (CNP) as a nature preserve as intended by Los Angeles City Ordinance 169723, effective June 12, 1994 (attached.)

Prior to that time the DWP worked with the California Department of Fish and Game (now Fish and Wildlife - CDFW) as far back as 1971 or earlier to mitigate for the adverse impacts on waterfowl from draining of Chatsworth Reservoir residual water. The expected impacts were/are documented by Charles Weston then acting as a consultant for DWP. (A similar action took place contemporaneously at the Van Norman complex in Sylmar.) In addition, grassland regions of the CNP were to be seeded with barley to provide feed for the visiting waterfowl.

The Ecology Pond has since developed over more than a period of 40 years as a vital body of water and fringing marshland for migrating, and resident, birds, in the Pacific flyway region 5, as well as all wildlife in the western region of San Fernando Valley-Los Angeles City; include adjacent unincorporated areas of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. This relatively small pond, has, therefore, taken on importance that far outweighs its size. This is, in part, due to the historic systematic draining of water from the San Fernando Valley for the purposes of enabling construction. Ponds and marshes that previously existed as late as the 1950's no longer exist. As General Manager of DWP, you must be aware of such historical facts.

For over 50 years the SFV Audubon Society (SFVAS) has conducted field studies, such as a part of the National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count (CBC), and recorded over 200 species of birds, both migrants and local residents at the nature preserve. This year the CBC conducted in the CNP confirmed the presence of the Canyon Wren. Virtually every CBC at CNP has counted wintering Oregon subspecies of the Vesper Sparrow, recognized by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife as a "species of special concern." Among the other species of special concern that make direct use of the Ecology Pond are the American White Pelican, Tricolored Blackbird, Osprey, Western Pond Turtle (currently under consideration for Endangered Species Act protection), and others.

The Southwestern Herpetologists Society has monitored the amphibians and reptiles in the CNP and recorded their findings through the years. CNP is known widely as the last bastion of survival regionally for many species of amphibians and reptiles, including a finding of the Western Spadefoot Toad, listed as a threatened species, for the first time in more than twenty years.

Larger animals from rabbits, coyotes, raccoons, and occasional bobcats, mountain lions, and mule deer, rely on the CNP as a natural wildlife sanctuary. The CNP habitat is a rare ecosystem in southern California combining oak woodlands, including a rare Valley Oak woodland, savanna, chaparral, grassland, seasonal wetlands, and the Ecology Pond. A complete list of bird species, amphibians-reptiles, and native plants is posted at: www.savechatsworthpreserve.org, the CNPS web page.

The CDFW advised CNPC that because of storm water flow into and out of the Ecology Pond via channels, they have the authority to evaluate the impact of tampering with or altering the Ecology Pond bed, bank or channel, or discontinuing supplemental water with impacts to nesting birds.

LADWP built a heliport landing pad in the CNP for firefighting suppression of wildfires in the area. Helicopters “snorkel” out water from the Ecology Pond when needed for supplemental fire suppression water. It is a LADWP requirement that the Ecology Pond is filled as needed to a proper level, maintained, for both wildlife needs and community fire suppression. Ron Nichols, former DWP General Manager stated, in writing that DWP would continue to provide water for that purpose. With the drying of the pond, even that commitment is not being honored. Any modifications to the pond, including draining, should be preceded by an Initial Study within the meaning of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Failure to do so is a violation of law enforceable by legal action.

There have been many threatened attacks on the CNP: Proposed land use changes such as a golf course, resort hotel, and youth sports fields. A modification plan stemming from Republic Services (formerly BFI) Sunshine Canyon Landfill mitigation requirement will cause destruction to existing grassland, used by foraging raptors, seasonal wetlands which produce large numbers of native amphibians and provides additional habitat for migratory water-associated birds. The plan also threatens a historic Native American archaeological district, while transfer of land to the Department of Recreation and Parks (RAP) for future management and recreational usage, such as hiking trails, equestrian trails, and other intrusive human activities, threatens further damage to the ecosystem.

DWP's past neglect of responsibilities to maintain the CNP as a Nature Preserve range from maintenance crews damaging oak tree branches, mowing down the oak tree understory, which supports wildlife and new seedlings, use of second generation toxic poisons that cause non-target animals to become sick and/or die, and lack of management to maintain proper Ecology Pond water level. All of the proposed land use changes and mismanagement activities are devastating to the habitat, and wildlife.

In the past few years there have been DWP management changes. We've seen an egregious lack of commitment to properly maintain the CNP, a vital asset in Los Angeles City and County. Years of scientific nature studies have been suspended in the past few years. Instead of resistance and disruption of the studies, a program should be established now to ensure protection of wildlife and habitat.

The CNP Ecology Pond needs to have established water level seasonal targets, including fluctuations that preserve the viability of the pond as a wildlife sanctuary. Water wasting invasive tamarisk (salt cedar) and other invasive plants need to be surgically removed in an ongoing program of monitoring and periodic removal. A biological study, within the context of an Initial Study, referenced above, is needed to determine the least damaging alternative for removing accumulated sediment from the Ecology Pond including consideration of a multi-year program.

The drought condition isn't a new phenomenon for Southern California yet the City government continues to allow the building of large scale developments in urban, suburban and exurban areas creating greater population density and loss of habitat; DWP's role should be to stop promising to provide water for these unwise developments. It's more than crucial that the supporting watershed areas in the Simi Hills and Santa Susana Mountains are protected. These seasonal and blue stream canyon creeks feed the CNP groundwater and L. A. River. It's the responsibility of DWP, local municipalities, elected officials, and other public agencies to protect the watershed, native plants and trees, and wildlife.

We would like to meet with you to provide a blueprint of what DWP can do to protect not only the CNP but the surrounding watershed. It is critical that we move forward to reverse the neglect and indifference to one of the most important assets in LA City.

Page 4: Edwards

Sincerely,

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