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Southern California's Magnificent NATIONAL FORESTS

AT RISK

Ten stories of the growing threats they face and
how we can protect them for a generation to come.

AT RISK: Southern California's Magnificent National Forests

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Forest Service Leadership Needed to Meet 21st Century Threats and Better Serve the Public

Each year eight million people visit southern California's magnificent national forests – the Angeles, Cleveland, San Bernardino and Los Padres. As the amount of open space beyond forest boundaries dwindles and our population grows, protecting the unspoiled scenic beauty and recreational opportunities provided by the four forests is of ever growing importance.

These forests are where many of our children play in snow for the first time, see their first pinecones and deer, and wade in their first sparkling creek. Families and friends crowd picnic areas on summer weekends and camp beneath the stars. Urban dwellers get a chance to make a spiritual connection with the land and its wildlife or just enjoy a break from the daily grind. For millions of residents, a personal link with our natural world begins and is sustained on the four forests.

Stretching from Monterey to Baja, the forests range over a spectacular variety of landscapes. From rivers running into the ocean along the Big Sur coast to the alpine peaks of the San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mountains, from desert slopes to deep pine woods, the forests preserve a vast natural heritage in the heart of one of the world's great urban areas.

As this report documents, our four southern California forests face new and rapidly growing threats to their long-term health and natural beauty. It is no longer clear that the forests will remain unspoiled for future generations to enjoy unless the U.S. Forest Service takes action now and changes the way it manages these forests. Forest Service officials need to act decisively so that future southern Californians will have a natural legacy worthy of them.

It's no secret that these recreational forests are strapped for cash and staff. Every day our many outstanding Forest Service employees are pressed to do more with far less than is needed. The failure of

Uncontrolled off-road vehicle use is damaging our forests and disrupting the experience of other forest users.



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In its final management plans the Forest Service needs to adopt a more balanced approach that better serves the vast majority of forest visitors.

the Congress to adequately fund the forests is beginning to deprive southern Californians of world-class recreational experiences in their own backyards. Visionary leadership on the part of the Forest Service can help turn that around, gain it new supporters, and lead to tangible improvements for both visitors and forests alike.

Inside you will see how rapid population growth and increasing sprawl around the four forests has led to a rash of proposals for development on and around the forests. Our forests face bizarre schemes to flood a popular recreation area for a private hydroelectric plant, build a toll road through wilderness as a temporary patch for failed urban planning, drill for oil in condor habitat, and build massive new power transmission lines. Major new developments are encircling our forests, threatening vital wildlife migration trails and increasing the risk of fire.

In many areas uncontrolled off-road vehicle use is damaging our forests and disrupting the experience of other forest users. Areas like the East and West Forks of the San Gabriel River on the Angeles National Forest stand out as an example of where lack of investment provides a less than quality recreational experience for the 95% of forest users who come to hike, picnic, fish, mountain bike, and enjoy scenic vistas.

The Forest Service has another chance to provide 21st Century

leadership for protecting our four forests for a generation to come in its upcoming final management plans for our southern California forests. These plans will set the priorities for what should happen on these public lands for the next 15 years or more. How well the forest management plans deal with the threats explored in this report will provide a crucial measure of their success or failure.

The draft forest management draft plans released by the agency over a year ago were headed in the wrong direction. Their main recreational focus was on expanding trails for motorcycles and other off-road vehicles in our forest backcountry, offering little for the vast majority of forest visitors. Protective zoning that would forestall development on the forests was reduced. The agency recommended a scant 2% more unspoiled backcountry for wilderness protection that would help shield more of our forests from ever increasing development pressures.

In its final forest management plans the Forest Service needs to adopt a more balanced approach that better serves the vast majority of forest visitors and provides a vision where the health of our forests will improve each year, harmful development will stop, and damaging off-road vehicle recreation will be limited.

The many people appearing in the ten stories in this report, from Francisco Cruz and his family to hang glider extraordinaire Mike

Our forests face bizarre schemes to flood a popular recreation area for a private hydroelectric plant, build a toll road through wilderness and drill for oil in condor habitat.



Just west of Lake Elsinore in Riverside County, the Santa Ana Mountains abruptly rise 3,000 feet above the valley. If you stand on the edge, the sky seems to go on forever eastward, beyond the sprawling development below and out to distant desert ranges.

At your feet Ortega Highway snakes along thin as a string as it shuttles commuters and forest visitors making the haul to and from Riverside and Orange Counties. But up here it's oak trees, fresh air, and dizzying views.

This part of the Cleveland National Forest, known as the Trabuco Ranger District, draws hundreds of thousands of people each year who hike, hunt, camp, picnic, and explore its canyons, streams and peaks.

That thrill of being on the edge draws hang gliders to the cliffs overlooking Lake Elsinore, a world-class gliding site. When conditions are right, you can watch one person after another walk to the edge, test the wind, and suddenly run out past the edge and soar into the blue.

A little ways south, hikers come to explore the lush oak forest of Morrell Canyon, climbing into the adjacent wilderness or just lounging among the boulders and grassy fields by the popular trail along the creek.

Both of these special places would be lost forever if an energy company gets its way.

Power VERSUS People

**Proposed Dam and Powerlines
at Morrell Canyon,
Cleveland National Forest**

**"FOR HANG GLIDERS, THEY'RE TRYING TO BUILD
PLANNED, THAT'LL BE THE END OF OUR ABILITY**

The Nevada Hydro Company has proposed building 190-foot-tall transmission towers for miles through the Cleveland National Forest, right across the glide path of the Elsinore hang gliders. These high-voltage transmission lines would connect with a hydroelectric project that the company is proposing for Morrell Canyon and its oak forest.

"For hang gliders, they're trying to build basically a 500,000-volt bug zapper," said Mike Hilberath, vice president of the Elsinore Hang Gliding Association. "If the line goes through as planned, that'll be the end of our ability to use and enjoy this forest. Hang gliding would just stop. There's no way it can be safe with power lines here."

"Places like this are extremely rare," added Hilberath. The Elsinore site is world-famous for updrafts to 9,000 feet, and the sport's first soaring hang gliders were tested here. "There are better ways to improve the transmission of power that don't rob people of their enjoyment of their public land."

“Morrell Canyon is a special part of the Cleveland, full of gorgeous oak trees, brooks and little waterfalls, and with easy access for families and children, instead of this oak canyon you’ll see a giant concrete wall. The worst part is, there is really no public benefit, it would only make money for one company, and the public would have to pay for it by losing the canyon.”

—Robin Everett, a Sierra Club volunteer.

Morrell Canyon also is threatened by an ill-advised power project. Nevada Hydro Company wants to flood the canyon, a popular hiking spot next to San Mateo Wilderness, in order to generate electricity. The scheme is to pump polluted Lake Elsinore water 1,600 feet uphill every night, trap it behind a 180-foot dam, then release it during the day to create hydroelectric power to sell at daytime peak rates.

Consuming more energy than it produces, the project has been widely decried as a profit-making scheme free of the burdens of common sense. For a net loss of power, the canyon, its creek, and its rare southern coast live oak forest would be drowned under two million gallons of polluted water.

“Morrell Canyon is a special part of the Cleveland, full of gorgeous oak trees, brooks and little waterfalls, and with easy access for families and children,” says Robin Everett, a Sierra Club volunteer who hikes here. But if the dam is built, “instead of this oak canyon

you’ll see a giant concrete wall. The worst part is, there is really no public benefit, it would only make money for one company, and the public would have to pay for it by losing the canyon.”

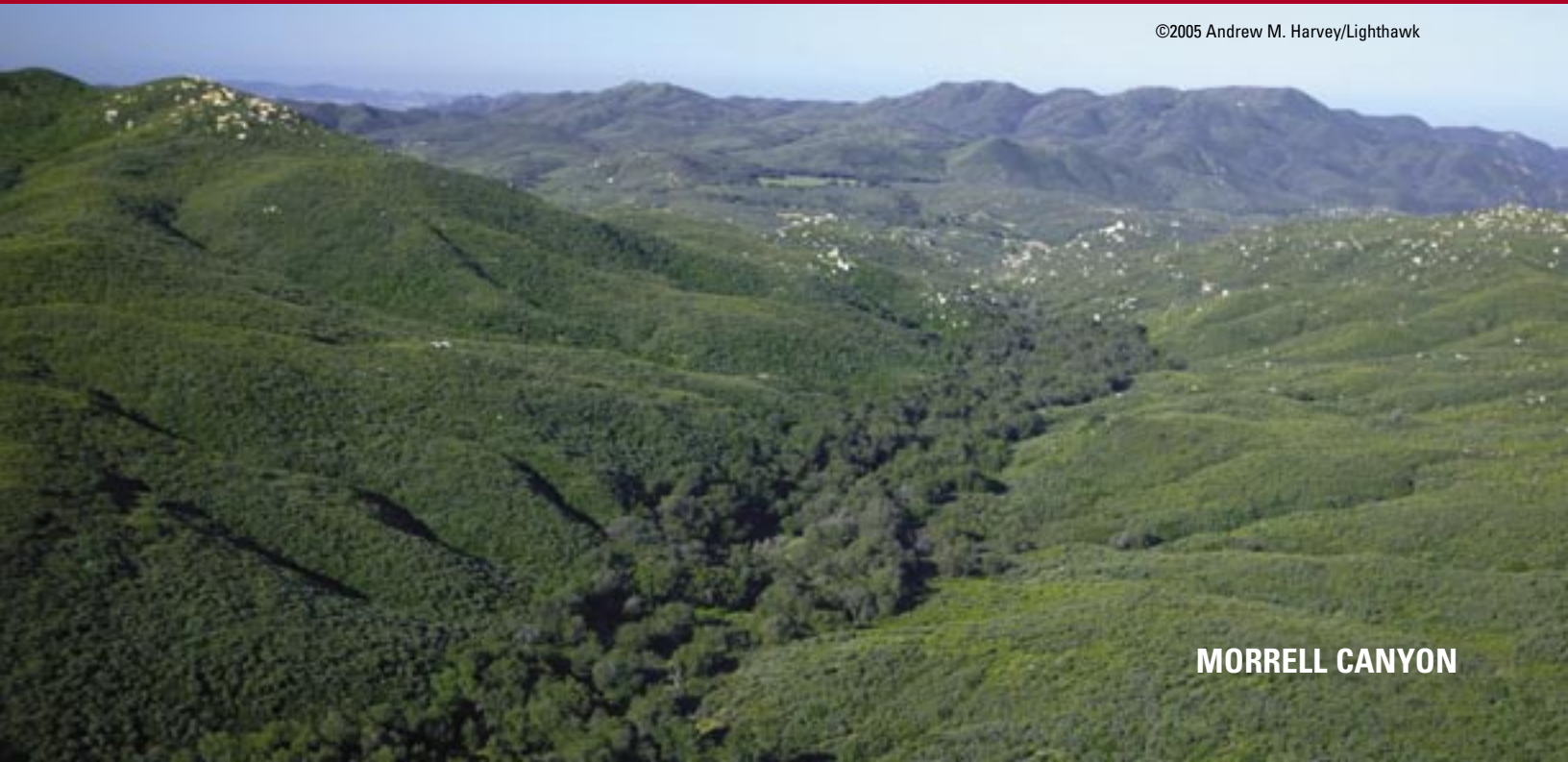
Risks from the project abound. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has found that the project has a high downstream hazard of flooding and requires an Emergency Action Plan to evacuate residents. Lake Elsinore is state-listed as “impaired” by sewage and toxics, and spillage of its water would pollute the much cleaner San Juan Creek watershed. Pumping and releasing the water would raise and lower Lake Elsinore by at least six inches a day, potentially disrupting nesting of the lake’s wild birds.

Wisely, the Forest Service proposed Morrell Canyon for wilderness protection in last year’s draft management plan for the Cleveland National Forest. A key test of the final plan, to be released this fall, is whether the Forest Service will retain that recommendation or decide to sacrifice this wild place to flooding for profit. The analysis of possible transmission lines in the region continues. The Forest Service should strongly defend the important recreational and environmen-

BASICALLY A 500,000-VOLT BUG ZAPPER. IF THE LINE GOES THROUGH AS TO USE AND ENJOY THIS FOREST.”

— Mike Hilberath, vice president of the Elsinore Hang Gliding Association

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MORRELL CANYON



Basic Needs Neglected in L.A.'s Backyard, the Angeles National Forest

Within a 90-minute drive for 10 million people, the Angeles National Forest is the quintessential urban forest and a vital recreational resource for park-starved southern California. More than 70 percent of the open space in Los Angeles County is in this forest, giving us all a chance to hike and picnic with friends and family, to watch wildlife, enjoy scenic vistas, and splash in the water on a warm day.

On your average summer weekend more than ten thousand visitors are alternately delighted and frustrated by their experience along the San Gabriel River, about 20 miles north of Azusa. The area is a gateway for thousands of mainly working-class Latino families who visit the river's East and West Forks each year.

You can also find river visitors like Gloria Ayala of Los Angeles whose church group was visiting the river for the first time to baptize six members. Judy Cain of Duarte was there, too, "Showing my mom around. She's from Pennsylvania, and has never seen mountains like these."

What frustrates San Gabriel River visitors is that the Forest Service's recreation facilities and staffing fall short of their needs. There aren't enough restrooms, picnic tables, camping areas, or trash cans. River access can be steep and unforgiving absent trails or grading.

The experience of Long Beach resident Francisco Cruz is typical. He visits the East Fork twice a year to camp with his church group. "We got here on Thursday and couldn't set up until we had picked up all the trash – there was so much of it everywhere. I'd like to see more restrooms since we have to walk far to go to one, and I'd like to see better trails leading down into the river," says Cruz.

There are few educational materials, especially in Spanish, to help forest visitors find facilities or protect the environment. Trash washes into streams, and graffiti mars boulders on the riverbank. Important campgrounds and picnic areas, such as those near Crystal Lake, remain closed for years in the wake of fire damage as the Forest Service looks for funding to make needed repairs.

Help from forest rangers is hard to find. One hard-pressed staffer acknowledged that on the San Gabriel River the Forest Service "has few permanent employees, almost everyone is a temp or a student worker." The agency estimates it needs almost \$2 million more per year in personnel just to meet the needs of San Gabriel River users and to protect the forest in this concentrated use area. That's almost as much as the Forest Service now spends across the entire forest for visitor programs and safety.



Recreational demand is expected to grow with population – 15 to 30 percent over the next 15 years – yet recreation budgets have remained stagnant. In 2002, the most recent figures available, the Angeles spent \$2.3 million supporting public use by 3.5 million visitors – less than a dollar per visitor, for safety, law enforcement, educational materials, interpretive services, and visitor center management. Interpretive and educational services get only about \$300,000 per year – about 9 cents per visitor.

Problems on the San Gabriel River are a microcosm of recreational issues across the entire Angeles National Forest, where most visitors come to picnic, camp, swim, and enjoy other non-motorized activities. Only about 5 percent of visitors engage in motorized recreation, such as riding motorcycles or all-terrain vehicles in the forest backcountry.

In new management plans expected this fall, the Forest Service is to say how it will meet the recreational needs of most forest users. But in its draft plans the agency fell far short of the mark, with a recreational plan for the Angeles placing an “emphasis on providing additional off-highway vehicle experiences.”

“We were disappointed the draft forest plans didn’t make that kind of commitment to expanding trails for hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians, or opening more campgrounds, adding picnic tables, or improving recreational facilities in East and West Fork,” said Don Bremner, head of the Sierra Club’s Forest Committee that deals with Angeles National Forest issues. “The plans are very weak on improv-

ing the experience of 95 percent of forest visitors.”

The emphasis on expanding off-road vehicle recreation is even more surprising since it would require high levels of staffing for education and law enforcement – staffing the Forest Service is unlikely to have – in order to educate riders, keep vehicles on designated trails, and resolve the inevitable user conflicts generated by ORVs.

When its final management plans come out in the fall, will the Forest Service step up to the plate and state clearly how it will improve the recreational experience of the majority of visitors to our backyard forest? Francisco Cruz, his family, his church group – and three million



River access can be steep and unforgiving absent trails or grading. Other areas need similar attention.

“We got here on Thursday and couldn’t set up until we had picked up all the trash — there was so much of it everywhere. I’d like to see more restrooms since we have to walk far to go to one and I’d like to see better trails leading down into the river.”

– Francisco Cruz of Long Beach, who comes to the East Fork San Gabriel River twice a year to camp with his church group



Off-Road and Out of Control

Illegal Off-Road Vehicles Overwhelm Recreation and Homeowners on San Bernardino National Forest

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Lately in the San Bernardino National Forest – the most populated in the nation – it can feel like the machines are taking over.

On bad days, the hike up 8,500-foot Butler Peak seems more like a NASCAR pit – engines roar, wheels skid past, watch your step or you might end up as roadkill. At Lake Arrowhead, the North Shore Campground is denuded by dirt bikes and all-terrain vehicles. And pretty Miller Canyon near Lake Silverwood becomes an illegal racetrack.

“If you go on a weekend, forget it, you might as well take your health insurance card because they’ll run right over you,” says Judith Granger, a 30-year resident of Lake Arrowhead and head of the local group Christians for the Earth. “They just won’t stay on designated roads.”

It’s illegal to ride off-road vehicles (ORVs) on most roads and trails in the San Bernardino National Forest. The machines are permitted on designated ORV routes only.

But illegal ORV riding is increasingly ruining the forest for the 95 percent of forest users who don’t use the machines. Hikers, equestrians, and mountain bikers are run off narrow trails in near-collisions. Homeowners and families are plagued with illegal riders literally in their backyards. The forest silence is shattered for miles.

Residents and forest users have cried out for more balance in the Forest Service’s lax management of the machines. The Forest Service

lacks the money or staff to monitor and enforce its ORV trails system, relying instead on handouts from the State of California’s Green Sticker program and on a posse of weekend volunteers. Illegal riders know they’ll virtually never be caught.

Now the Forest Service is at a critical decision point. In new land management plans expected this fall, the agency can tackle illegal off-road vehicle use. Yet in draft plans released last year, the Forest Service proposed to legalize illegal routes and disperse ORV use deeper into the forest, asserting that this approach would somehow reduce the serious problems that the agency acknowledges are caused by ORV proliferation. ORVs increase soil erosion, pollute streams with gas and oil, churn meadows and streams into mud bogs, and smash or scatter wildlife. They also cause forest fires, including the 2003 Playground Fire and, investigators say, probably also the 2003 Grand Prix Fire.

“The current management plan says the Forest is supposed to close ORV routes which are damaging or unmanageable. But they’re not doing that,” says Tom Walsh, a longtime resident of Lake Arrowhead, where ORV lawbreakers have rattled homeowners for a decade. “Instead, they’re talking about adding new routes they know they can’t manage.”

Deep Creek, a wilderness jewel between Cedar Glen and Green Valley Lake, increasingly suffers from excessive ORV traffic, illegal off-trail riding and stream crossings through the pristine native trout stream. “They drive their jeeps in the creek and use them as a div-



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ing board, they try to see if they can get their ORVs to float,” says Granger. “It’s completely out of control.”

A nearby archaeological site is battered by ORV riders who carve illegal spur trails off designated routes. “The first time I saw the place,” recalls Walsh, “these ancient Indian grinding holes were full of beer cans. The Forest obviously needs to protect places like this, but they are just not doing it.”

Homeowners too are increasingly harassed by ORVs. In Lake Arrowhead, Trail 3W12 has become a notorious ORV superhighway. Neighbors complain of deafening noise from dawn to dusk, illegal riding through their property, and illegal campfires.

“I’ve often thought we will just have to sell the house and leave,” says John Henderson, whose home sits 100 yards from a raucous trail junction. “But I’m a retired guy, I put my time in, and we’ve been here 27 years, before the motorcycles. I think it’s affected our health, and our peace of mind, and that’s just wrong.”

Ironically, the 2004 wildfires gave residents a reprieve, since the Forest Service has temporarily closed trails in burned areas. “We’ve had a year of peace,” says Henderson. “It was hell with the motorcycles and it’s heaven without them.” Now many are asking the Forest Service to close these areas to ORVs permanently.

In addition to long-lasting damage to the forests, ORV riders’ disruption of other people – the local residents, the other 95 percent of forest users – should move the Forest Service to close illegal trails and toughen law enforcement.

All of these issues need to be addressed in the final forest management plan, which should focus on keeping ORVs on existing legal routes, not expanding a program that is already out of control. In the final plan, the agency also should recommend Deep Creek for Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River status, and designate it a Critical Biological Zone to protect fish and wildlife.

“Noise alone is a huge issue. Noisy machines can drive threatened, endangered and sensitive species from habitat they need to survive....Noise can pit users against each other or users against homeowners; it’s maybe the biggest single source of social conflict we have when it comes to outdoor recreation.”

– U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth on unmanaged off-road vehicle use.



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Too Close for Comfort

Runaway Development Crowds the Angeles National Forest

It's often hard to tell where southern California's national forests begin and end – especially in the foothills where private and public lands mix. In many areas, homes and subdivisions are crowding forest boundaries, transforming how our national forests are managed.

More frequent fires, lost public access, disrupted wildlife, and increased off-road vehicle damage are just some of the problems the forests face from nearby development, when local planning and federal land management don't mesh.

In the Antelope Valley, one of the fastest-developing areas in the nation, two enormous subdivisions are being built adjacent to the Angeles National Forest, on former ranchlands west of Palmdale: the Anaverde development of 5,000 houses and the Ritter Ranch development of 7,200 houses. Three more big developments are

proposed on the forest's boundary, at Haskell Canyon near Santa Clarita, Hasley Canyon near Castaic, and the proposed Centennial superdevelopment of 23,000 houses and commercial areas near Interstate 5.

These developments worry District Ranger Cid Morgan, who stewards the Angeles National Forest from the San Gabriel crest to Interstate 5. More and more, she says, managing the forest means fielding problems that come from developments right next door.

"The more people you've got, the more fire starts," warns Ranger Morgan. "Fires come off the forest and threaten homes, and fires started in the developments are burning the forests. Grinding, welding, lawn mowers, cigarettes – people think they're in suburbia, they're not used to being in a fire environment."

Off-road vehicle noise and damage increase too. "We get a lot of user-created trails out of people's backyards causing erosion problems," Morgan says. "And we get tons of illegal OHV use — it's a huge

problem in the Acton-Agua Dulce area which is rapidly developing, and I assume it will be the same with Ritter Ranch.” Illegal riding also increases the risk of wildfire.

Foresters are increasingly saddled with fire risk around developments. Property owners get county approvals to build a home within 100 feet of the forest, only to find that insurance companies require flammable brush clearance for hundreds of feet. Worried homeowners then pressure the Forest Service to clear public land, but the agency cannot afford to do the work. The dilemma happens because of a flawed planning and approval process.

New developments will also increase demand for large-scale fuels management projects on the forest, like fuel breaks, tree thinning, and brush crushing, says Don Feser, chief of fire management on the Angeles. “The Forest Service does not have the resources to protect new structures right on the forest boundary, when developers have the option to build defensible space into the communities. We’d like to work with developers to design tracts with greenbelts, where brush can be cleared between homes and the forest. Counties and cities should require at least a 200-foot setback, so there is no need to encroach on the forest. And the developments should organize fire-safe councils, and educate home buyers about fire safety and fire-adapted ecosystems.”

Otherwise, says Morgan, “On both sides of the boundary, you’re putting more people in the path of fires: homeowners and firefighters.

Everybody wants a fire engine parked at their house – but every year there’s more houses. I tell all our staff: There is no bush, no tree, and no house that is worth their life.”

Development is also causing the loss of public access into the forest. Many forest visitors, accustomed to informal public easements, find access suddenly blocked by fences and gates. The dispute over hiking trails promised but never built through the La Viña development above Altadena exemplifies the challenge of protecting public access.

In the Antelope Valley, one of the fastest-developing areas in the nation, two enormous subdivisions are being built adjacent to the Angeles National Forest

Adjacent development also cuts off the forests from nearby open space, endangering wildlife. When these habitat linkages are lost, plants and wildlife become isolated and more vulnerable to extinction (See Preserving the Wildlife Connection,” page 16).

Coordinated city, county and Forest Service planning can go a long way to help keep our national forests healthy, safe, and great places to visit. This can be accomplished by requiring sensible buffer zones between structures and wildlands, and stronger policies to preserve public access, open space, and wildlife habitat corridors.

The Forest Service certainly recognizes the threat of runaway development. Its leadership needs to step forward and more vigorously and publicly sound the alarm, providing a vision for how natural landscapes can be preserved and how communities can be safely built adjacent to our forests. Its final management plans for the four southern California national forests need to clearly make the same points.



“The more people you’ve got, the more fire starts. Fires come off the forest and threaten homes, and fires started in the developments are burning the forests. Grinding, welding, lawn mowers, cigarettes – people think they’re in suburbia, they’re not used to being in a fire environment.”

– Cid Morgan, District Ranger, Angeles National Forest.

Tunnel Vision

Highway and Tunnel System Proposed through the Cleveland National Forest

Riverside County's astounding pace of development shows no sign of slowing.

With more houses than jobs, the result is predictable: legions of commuters spend hours each day traveling to and from jobs in Los Angeles and Orange County. More than a quarter-million vehicles travel between Riverside and Orange counties daily.

Now county officials are looking at options to deal with the traffic that poor planning has created. Unfortunately, nearly all these options ignore smarter traffic alternatives to focus on building more traffic lanes — either along the Riverside Freeway (91), or the Ortega Highway (74) to the south, or worst of all, straight through the Cleveland National Forest.

For years, civil engineer and former Irvine mayor Bill Vardoulis has touted a plan to tunnel a new highway under the Santa Ana Mountains, through the heart of the national forest's Trabuco Ranger District. The Metropolitan Water District also has considered a tunnel to move water from Lake Matthews in Riverside County to Orange County.

At first the proposal was for a long, continuous tunnel, running over ten miles from Riverside County to the intersection of the 133 and 241 toll roads in Orange County.

The problem is that there are engineering limits as to how deeply a tunnel can bore through these mountains. The project will actually

require a series of shorter tunnels connected by sections of freeway through the national forest.

Even the most ardent tunnel proponents, including Vardoulis, have been careful to note that surface roads would ruin the forest, by destroying wildlife habitat, polluting creeks, killing animals that get onto the road, and severing habitat linkages on the forest.

Jay Matchett, co-chairman of the Sierra Club's Santa Ana Mountains Task Force, said, "We support solutions for the 91 corridor, and oppose anything under or through the Cleveland National Forest. We need better planning to solve the imbalance of housing and jobs between Riverside and Orange counties." The Sierra Club has urged planners to consider light rail, busways and reversible lanes as smarter alternatives.

The tunnel idea got new life this May when the Metropolitan Water District voiced support. Transportation officials in Orange and Riverside counties recently received nearly \$20 million in federal money to study toll road and tunnel options. In July they identified four alternative routes, one of which could run through pristine Ladd Canyon which is a proposed wilderness area. Final recommendations are expected in December.

Ironically, governments and charities have spent millions to protect wildlife corridors between the Cleveland National Forest and Chino Hills State Park, work that would be jeopardized by new roads through the forest.

To reach the Orange County toll roads, the proposed tunnel road would have to cross land owned by the Irvine Company, which opposes the route. A study done for the company in April 2004 concluded that the tunnel route would cost an astonishing \$6 billion, requiring tolls of \$20 each way.

Others point out that it's not enough to know how many cars travel between the counties. It's more important to know where those drivers are headed.

A 2003 study by the Orange County Transportation Authority showed that a road under the forest would not significantly improve traffic on the 91, because most Riverside commuters are driving to northwestern Orange County or Los Angeles County.

Riverside County Supervisor Bob Buster rejects the assumption that a new road is needed at all. He says it makes more sense to bring high-quality jobs to Riverside County than to waste billions on another road for long-distance commutes.

The small town of Silverado could be severely disrupted by a proposed route through the forest, from Cajalco Road south of Corona to the 133/241 intersection in Orange County. Residents are fiercely opposed.

"So many people come up here on weekends with their kids, their bikes, to find some peace and get in touch with nature," says Chay Peterson, co-founder of the Canyon Land Conservation Fund and a leader in the Silverado mountain biking community. "What is sacred and special about this area, and so beneficial to the residents of Orange County, is going to be lost forever if it's paved over."

The Forest Service has an increasingly important role to play in protecting the public forest by more proactively defending the recreational, wildlife and air quality values the freeway would put at risk. In its draft management plan, the agency recommend little new wilderness in the Trabuco Ranger District. In its final plan, it should recommend more wilderness – including Ladd and Coldwater Canyons – and designate land use classifications that would discourage the sacrifice of the forest to solve a problem created by failed

A highway and tunnel system could go through Bedford Canyon (pictured below) and other scenic canyons in the Santa Ana Mountains.

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Preserving Our Magnificent

Protecting Pleasant View Ridge and its Canyons



“It was a first time experience for me, visiting such a pristine area that is little more than an hour’s drive from Los Angeles. I could hear the birds, smell the tall Jeffrey pines, and gaze out into the Mojave Desert for 50 miles.”

— Juana Torres, on her first visit to Pleasant View Ridge in July 2005

Along the 60 miles of the Angeles Crest Highway between La Canada and Wrightwood, you will encounter scenic vistas that seem to improve with every passing mile. As the vast urban expanse of Los Angeles slips from view it is replaced by ever more dramatic mountains and unspoiled backcountry in the heart of the Angeles National Forest.

One of the most beautiful backcountry areas is Pleasant View Ridge, which includes 8,200 foot Mt. Williamson, several other impressive peaks, formidable cliffs and some of the most magnificent canyon country in the forest. It is located adjacent to the Angeles Crest Highway, west of Wrightwood, where the forest slopes north to meet the Mojave Desert.

The Pleasant View Ridge area can be enjoyed many ways. By car you can see excellent views and stop to picnic at colorful spots like Eagle’s Roost. Venture a little further and you can stay overnight at Buckhorn Campground. Walk a quarter mile from the road along the historic Pacific Crest Trail National Scenic Trail and you will be rewarded with overlooks of open canyon country and Little Rock Creek. Continue on and you can enjoy the unique experience of hiking into Pleasant View Ridge’s superb backcountry wilderness.

As large areas of undeveloped open space dwindle in urban southern California, our ability to enjoy beauty and solitude in our nearby national forests becomes all the more important. “The Forest Service has a golden opportunity to lead in the effort to preserve our remaining wilderness quality areas,” says Anthony Portantino, mayor of La Canada.

The Forest Service acknowledges that over the next two decades demand for recreation in undeveloped forest backcountry like Pleasant View will likely outstrip supply. Since the Forest Service can’t create more wilderness quality land, it behooves the agency to do as much as possible right now to preserve what we have left.

Only 12% of the Angeles is currently protected by wilderness status, a congressional designation that permanently bars harmful development such as oil wells, power transmission lines, and highways. Although the Pleasant View Ridge area has been proposed as a wilderness area by members of the public, it has yet to be recommended to Congress by the Forest Service.

As the area north of the Angeles National Forest grows and develops from Palmdale east across the Highway 18 corridor towards

Forest Backcountry

Victorville (see “Too Close for Comfort,” page 8), there will inevitably be proposals for development on Pleasant View Ridge, perhaps even including the addition of off-road vehicle areas. The era of easy decisions is over for the Forest Service – when they could just do more of everything, a few more off-road vehicle trails here and a new transmission line, highway, or antenna site there. We are running out of forest.

In its draft forest management plans that came out in April 2004 the Forest Service recommended a scant two percent increase in the amount forest land to be protected by wilderness designation across the four southern California forests. The Forest Service has the opportunity to recommend up to 20% more of the Angeles National Forest for wilderness protection since that much forest is eligible for consideration under federal standards.

Just how much additional wilderness is recommended in the final forest plans is one important measure of how serious the Forest Service is about protecting our remaining undeveloped forest areas.

“The Forest Service has a golden opportunity to take the lead in the effort to preserve our remaining wilderness quality areas.”

— Anthony Portantino,
Mayor of La Canada.

Wilderness has many values, from providing for unique recreational experiences to preserving scenic vistas for passersby. It also protects habitat for endangered species such as the Nelson’s bighorn sheep and watershed that provides clean drinking water for wildlife and city dwellers alike.

But there is more to the wilderness story.

Wilderness has a spiritual value, connecting people to the land. Said the Sierra Club’s Juana Torres, “I want to bring my church youth group up here to Pleasant View Ridge. This area of the forest inspires a reverence for the land and a connection to God’s creation.”

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A Road Only A Developer Could Love

**Bautista Canyon, Paving and Widening in
San Bernardino National Forest**



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Lower Bautista Canyon holds the greatest concentration of threatened and endangered species in the whole San Bernardino National Forest, according to the Forest Service's own reports. Ironically, the proposed \$10 million for paving a single road is five times more than the Forest Service spends annually on the entire San Bernardino National Forest to manage for wildlife species and habitat.

As development spreads across inland southern California and pushes up against our national forests, more demands are popping up for roads across the forests.

One of the most unlikely of these is Riverside County's proposal to widen and pave a narrow dirt road that meanders eight miles through gentle Bautista Canyon, in the southwest corner of the San Bernardino National Forest.

Recently, using funding from the Federal Highway Administration, the Forest Service put \$10 million on the table to pave this lonely road, which carries only about 60 vehicles a day between the towns of Hemet and Anza. Paving the road would do little for residents or forest visitors, but would make it easier for developers to transform semi-rural Anza into just another far-flung bedroom community. For that reason and others, many local people don't want it paved.

Although the paving project was put on the back burner at a meeting of concerned agencies in March, it remains a threat. Riverside County staff told the *Idyllwild Town Crier* that "public opposition [was] stronger than expected" and conceded that "it's just not a viable project in the short run." Current cost projections exceed \$20 million, and the county, for now, refuses to pick up the tab. Nonetheless, given incessant development pressure, the project is expected to reemerge as soon as funding materializes.

At a public meeting in September 2004, local residents were plainly underwhelmed by the paving proposal. Anza residents, including a former state senator, protested that paving the road would increase traffic congestion in a school zone, and increase illegal off-road vehicle trails. Others said paving would not significantly improve emergency response times or even increase convenience for Anza locals, who shop in Temecula.

The project would multiply daily vehicle trips nearly twenty-fold, from the current 61 to a projected 1,150 trips per day by 2025. Trespass by off-road vehicles and dumping of garbage, already rampant problems in Bautista Canyon, would only worsen. Paving the road also would increase the risk of fires, endangering people and property.

The canyon is also part of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail managed by the National Park Service, which has consistently opposed paving.

BAUTISTA CANYON IS ALSO VALUED BY LOCAL NATIVE AMERICANS, WHO GATHER PLANTS THERE FOR FOOD, BASKETMAKING AND MEDICINE.

They have voiced concerns that paving would impact the serenity of the canyon and their spiritual attachment to the area. The study area for the road encompasses at least 24 documented Cahuilla Indian archaeological sites.

"They would have to move artifacts and fence off our basket material area, things we consider private and sacred," says Cahuilla elder Donna Largo, president of Nex'wetem/Southern California Indian Basketweavers Organization. "They were going to remove the mountain mahogany trees, there are only one or two in there. We are preservers of those things, not destroyers. But this road would only destroy."

And then there's wildlife. Lower Bautista Canyon holds the greatest concentration of threatened and endangered species in the whole San Bernardino National Forest, according to the Forest Service's own reports. The canyon was designated an "area of high ecological significance" in the agency's species survey, the "Southern California Mountains and Foothills Assessment."

"The Forest Service knows this canyon is one of the main 'biological hot spots' for wildlife on the entire forest," says Monica Bond, wildlife biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "More and faster traffic would kill wildlife, cause more fires and pollute Bautista Creek – so why on earth would they put up money to pave it? It just makes no sense from any angle."

In its draft management plan, the Forest Service failed to designate Bautista Canyon as a "Critical Biological Zone" for protecting imperiled species. The designation generally keeps facilities to a minimum but still allows dispersed uses such as hiking and hunting.

Rather than try to mitigate damage from paving Bautista Canyon road, the Forest Service should oppose paving, and proactively manage the canyon as an enduring wildlife area. In the final management plan due this fall, Bautista Creek should be designated a Critical Biological Zone to give rare plants and wildlife the long-term protection they need, while preserving sustainable Native American use and low-impact recreational opportunities.

"More and faster traffic would kill wildlife, cause more fires and pollute Bautista Creek – so why on earth would they put up money to pave it? It just makes no sense from any angle."

– Monica Bond, Wildlife Biologist, Center for Biological Diversity

Preserving the Wildlife Connection



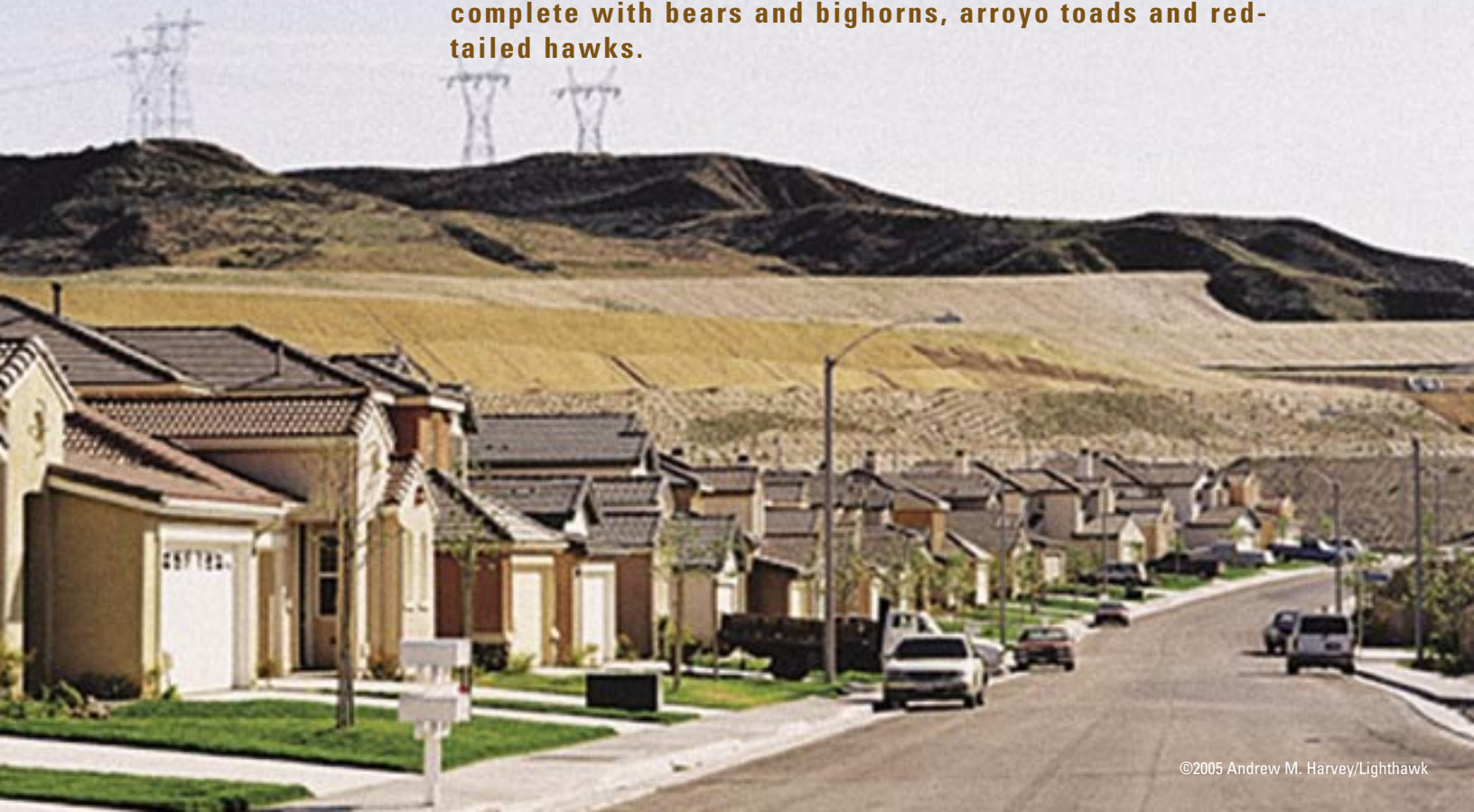
- **Why did the bighorn**
- **sheep cross the road?**

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A: Because it had to – to forage for food, dodge a predator, and find a mate

Habitat Linkages Critical to Ecological Integrity of the 4 Southern National Forests

As sprawl and development gobble up land, the last stronghold for many unique southern California plants and animals is in our national forests. The forests are islands of nature where we can still take our children to see wild California, complete with bears and bighorns, arroyo toads and red-tailed hawks.



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But wildlife and plants need more than just islands of nature. They also need connecting corridors of natural land in between – habitat linkages – to allow free movement of animals, plants and seeds, and other natural processes.

For many species, this habitat connectivity is critical for survival. Bighorn sheep need to migrate to recently burned open areas to find food or safety from predators. Mountain lions – a solitary breed – need to range over large landscapes to find prey and to mix with other populations of lions for reproduction. Plants and animals need habitat linkages to reestablish their presence from a distance after fires or floods.

Development of land in between the national forests can block these connections and isolate plant or wildlife populations, threatening them with extinction.

“Habitat fragmentation is *the* major threat to our southern California native wildlife,” says Kristeen Penrod, director of the nonprofit conservation group South Coast Wildlands. “Our four southern national forests have 76 threatened, endangered, and sensitive species. It’s critical that we keep our wild areas connected.”

The 10-mile gap separating the two halves of the Angeles National Forest is one of several key wildlife linkages that could be lost forever if nothing is done to protect them. This area, where Highway 14 and the Santa Clara River twist through the mountains, is known as the San Gabriel Mountains to Castaic Ranges Linkage. The wildlife corridor is threatened by subdivisions marching eastward from Santa Clarita and westward from Palmdale, development expanding near Agua Dulce (see “Too Close For Comfort,” page 8), and a huge gravel mine planned for Soledad Canyon.

Lands in the San Gabriel–Castaic Linkage are owned by a multitude of private landowners and public agencies. With growing pressure for development, the Forest Service has its work cut out protecting the central wildlife corridor of the Angeles.

“We understand connectivity, but we just don’t have the resources,” explains Angeles National Forest resources officer Clem Lagrosa. “We have no funding for acquisitions of wildlife habitat.” It’s also a matter of priorities, Lagrosa says. The forest’s acquisitions are focused on inholdings and the Pacific Crest Trail, not on the broader wildlife corridor. “We would have to hire a biologist full time to work on wildlife linkage issues,” Lagrosa says. “We are just busy dealing with daily issues, dead trees, storm-damaged roads and a lot of other

priorities.”

But the Forest Service could do much more to protect its own lands, and to provide leadership for a strategy to save linkages critical to the ecological integrity of the forests. The agency’s draft management plan for the Angeles National Forest fails to recommend wilderness protection in the Castaic Ranges or around Magic Mountain. The draft plan is virtually silent on wildlife linkages.

“As a landowner doing their long-range plans now, the Forest Service has an obligation to look at threats not only to their land, but also to adjoining areas,” says former California Secretary of Resources Mary Nichols, now Director of the UCLA Institute of the Environment.

As the Forest Service readies final management plans for all four Southern California national forests, it needs to take a leadership role in collaborating with state and local agencies, land conservancies, and developers to safeguard the forests’ vital wildlife corridors for generations to come. It needs to make a major educational outreach effort to the public about how important it is to protect our wildlife corridors. And it needs to provide the strategic vision for achieving these goals.

An effort in San Diego and Riverside counties shows the way. On the Cleveland National Forest, the Forest Service is part of a large public/private partnership making great strides to preserve the Santa Ana to Palomar Mountains Linkage.

Other threatened linkages to the national forests include the Santa Monica Mountains to Sierra Madre (Los Padres National Forest), Eastern to Western Sierra Madre (Los Padres and Angeles), Tehachapi Connection (Sequoia, Angeles and Los Padres), San Gabriel to San Bernardino Mountains (Angeles and San Bernardino), San Bernardino to Little San Bernardino Mountains and San Bernardino to San Jacinto



“As a landowner doing their long-range plans now, the Forest Service has an obligation to look at threats not only to their land, but also to adjoining areas.”

– Mary Nichols, Director of the UCLA Institute of the Environment.

Sprawl on the Mountain

Urban Development Schemes on the Rural San Bernardino National Forest

On Big Bear Lake, folks in Fawnskin wake each day to small-town peace and quiet: lake lapping the shore, breeze in the pines. Anglers and bald eagles spy the lake, while a curious coyote might wander down Main Street. This rural refuge attracts thousands of visitors each summer, because while the lake's south shore is densely developed, the north shore remains mostly San Bernardino National Forest, surrounding quiet Fawnskin.

Above Lake Arrowhead, Cedar Glen is another quiet village of single-family homes surrounded by national forest. The devastating October 2003 Old Fire destroyed about 325 homes here, and residents now are struggling to rebuild their small town.

But both these mountain communities could soon lose their rural way of life forever. Proposed developments would quadruple both Fawnskin and Cedar Glen with sprawling new subdivisions.

In the nation's most populated national forest, rural residents are increasingly skeptical of intensive, urban-style development.

"The reason people come up here for recreation is to get away from the congestion down in the city," says resident Sandy Steers, leader of Friends of Fawnskin, a 600-member group opposing the development. "If we add the same congestion up here, it's no longer an escape from anything."

In Fawnskin, population 400, two controversial new projects are seeking county permits. The proposed Marina Point development would erect 133 time-share condominiums with 175 boat slips, greatly increasing traffic, noise and pollution, and completely changing the small town's character. The proposed Moon Camp gated community of 93 homes would ruin eagle habitat and relocate scenic Highway 38 away from the lakeshore, walling off townspeople and visitors from the lake.

Fawnskin resident Dave Hough, 62, has seen a lot of change on Big Bear Lake. "I'm a retired city planner from Monrovia, so I know some development has to happen. But this is crazy. We



Developers admit their Moon Camp tract would have "significant, unmitigatable impact" on the eagles. But when forest biologists reported eagles at the site, the developers sued the Forest Service and Friends of Fawnskin under a "racketeering" law. The suit was tossed out of court, and many saw it as an attempt to intimidate foresters and townspeople.

don't have the water, sewer, fire defense or utilities to support this kind of development."

More traffic would threaten people's safety in the event of wildfires. During the 2004 evacuation, just getting out of Big Bear Valley took people six hours to two days on the handful of narrow, congested mountain roads. "If the fire had come into this valley," says Steers, "we would have had a disaster, and probably fatalities."

Wildlife would lose, too. American bald eagles, a threatened species,

could be built. Development of that size would quadruple the village and squeeze thousands more people onto mountain roads in the next evacuation. It also would threaten a key wildlife migration corridor, designated in the county's general plan as "the last major undeveloped portion of the mountain rim."

What's happening in Cedar Glen and Fawnskin brings up larger questions for the 100,000 people in the San Bernardino National Forest mountain communities. Their population is projected to double, according to county and city plans. But in light of recent fires, is



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hunt from lakeside trees. Developers admit their Moon Camp tract would have "significant, unmitigatable impact" on the eagles. But when forest biologists reported eagles at the site, the developers sued the Forest Service and Friends of Fawnskin under a "racketeering" law. The suit was tossed out of court, and many saw it as an attempt to intimidate foresters and townspeople.

In Cedar Glen, population 439, residents want nothing more than to rebuild their homes and lives after the devastating 2003 fires.

However, the San Bernardino County Redevelopment Agency has bigger ideas. County planners recently told Cedar Glen residents that instead of just replacing 325 burned homes, up to 2,000 new homes

it right to put tens of thousands more people in harm's way? How much growth makes sense for rural communities? And what is the Forest Service doing to safeguard public forests from development impacts?

In its draft management plans for the San Bernardino, the Forest Service acknowledges growth is a major challenge, but fails to say how it will cope. More people will cause more fires. Developers will want infrastructure on forest lands, and homeowners will want trees cut. Illegal off-road vehicles will proliferate. Water quality will decline. More species will be threatened, and wildlife trails blocked between forest areas.

The Forest Service needs to address these challenges directly in final

"I'm a retired city planner from Monrovia, so I know some development has to happen. But this is crazy."

– Dave Hough, Fawnskin resident



Tar and Feathers

Oil Drilling and ORVs Threaten Condor Country in Southern Los Padres National Forest

From the famed Big Sur coast to the Sespe Wilderness in Ventura and L.A. counties, the Los Padres National Forest is enjoyed by 1.5 million visitors a year and provides local communities with clean water, tourism, and economic vitality. With ten wilderness areas and 84 miles of Wild & Scenic Rivers, the forest is a haven for hiking, camping, fishing, and hunting.

The Los Padres is perhaps best known as the site of efforts to reintroduce the California condor, North America's largest bird and one of the world's most endangered.

Unfortunately, the Los Padres is also becoming known for two growing threats to its wild character, particularly in its southern Ojai and Mt. Pinos ranger districts. Oil drilling has polluted waterways, spoiled scenic vistas, and threatened the condor and other wildlife, yet the Forest Service is now expanding drilling. Off-road vehicle (ORV) abuse is rampant on the forest and is a leading cause of water pollution and

cultural resource destruction.

The Los Padres is California's only national forest with commercial quantities of oil and gas. Currently, 240 active oil wells are spread over 4,800 acres. Most drilling occurs in the Sespe Oil Field, which borders both the Sespe Condor Sanctuary and the Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge – two wildlife areas essential for the California Condor Recovery Program.

It's increasingly evident that oil drilling is incompatible with condor recovery. The first condor chick hatched in the wild in nearly two decades was threatened recently when its father inadvertently smeared it with crude. For the past three years, condor hatchlings have died after ingesting screws, bolts and other trash typically strewn about oil sites.

Despite these threats, in July the Forest Service opened an additional 52,000 acres to oil and gas leasing, including 4,200 acres for surface occupancy – nearly doubling the forest's drilling acreage. These areas include condor habitat, lands bordering the condor sanctuaries north of Ojai and Fillmore, and the upper Cuyama River watershed, a major



For the past three years, condor hatchlings have died after ingesting screws, bolts and other trash typically strewn about oil sites.

condor flight path the agency itself calls an “area of high ecological significance.” Drilling activity would bring new oil wells, well pads, roads, power lines, waste pits, and various fuels and chemicals that threaten water quality.

“The loss of even one bird has to be considered as jeopardizing the condors,” says Bruce Palmer, former California Condor Recovery Program coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Any new drilling would impact endangered condors in three ways, Palmer says – direct disturbance, dangerous acclimation to people, and ingested garbage – and proposed buffer zones won’t stop the curious birds from investigating oil sites or eating trash.

New drilling also could increase flooding and spoil fishing, says Gary Bulla, a Santa Paula business owner and fly-fishing guide whose home is on Sisar Creek. “New drilling means new roads and land clearing, and that’s my main concern, we are so prone to erosion here.” Erosion also would hurt endangered steelhead trout, Bulla says, by silting up creeks and gravel beds used for steelhead spawning.

The Forest Service estimates the new drilling would produce less than one day’s supply of oil for the nation.

The Los Padres National Forest is crisscrossed by 880 miles of designated off-road vehicle routes and other jeep roads, plus a fast-growing network of more than 160 miles of illegal user-created ORV trails.

The proliferation of ORV routes has damaged cultural sites, eroded hillsides, and choked waterways with sediment. The State Water Resources Control Board recently identified ORV recreation as a major cause of water quality problems on the Los Padres. Forest Service whistle-blowers recently revealed “almost daily” damage to prehistoric rock art and other archaeological sites. In 2004 alone, there were 742 documented ORV-related violations on the Los Padres, mostly in the Mt. Pinos district.

“Damage and noise from ORVs are inflicting lasting harm on our

public lands, and causing major conflicts with hikers, equestrians, and wildlife,” says Jeff Kuyper, director of Los Padres ForestWatch in Santa Barbara. “The Forest Service needs to protect our wildlands now from further encroachment.”

The Forest Service admits that it is unable to enforce existing ORV routes, yet it continues to push for opening pristine areas. The forest’s draft management plan released last year would allow up to 494 additional miles of ORV roads in the Los Padres.

In its final management plan expected this fall, the Forest Service should make ecological integrity, particularly for the California condor, a priority above oil and gas leasing. These plans should not open new areas to off-road vehicles.



Photo courtesy of Los Padres ForestWatch

Sespe River, a federal Wild & Scenic River. New oil drilling will be allowed immediately upstream of this area. The Sespe Condor Sanctuary is in the background.

“The loss of even one bird has to be considered as jeopardizing the condors.”

– Bruce Palmer, Former California Condor Recovery Program Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



*Bringing People Together to Protect Our
Forests for a Generation to Come*



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