



NEWS RELEASE

VALLEY DISTRICT BOARD APPROVES PLAN TO BREED SANTA ANA SUCKERS IN CAPTIVITY AND RELOCATE THEM INTO REMOTE SAN BERNARDINO MOUNTAIN STREAMS

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif., Oct. 21, 2015 — San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District has approved a plan to populate three remote San Bernardino Mountain streams with Santa Ana suckers.

Valley District's Board of Directors on Tuesday approved spending \$140,000 to hire Dudek, a San Diego-based environmental and engineering firm, to develop a "translocation plan" that would initially involve breeding approximately 1,500 Santa Ana suckers and placing them in three remote San Bernardino Mountain streams where they could flourish and multiply.

"We think this is going to be the best thing we can do not only increase the numbers of Santa Ana sucker fish, but ensure their long-term survival," said Valley District President Mark Bulot, adding, "This shows that we're not out to decimate the environment. We're doing everything we can to actually help a species recover."

Dudek is expected to complete the translocation plan by next summer so that it can be incorporated into the Upper Santa Ana Watershed Habitat Conservation Plan, which Valley District is developing with nine other agencies to protect Santa Ana suckers and other threatened or endangered species along the Santa Ana River in San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

The translocation plan will need to be approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Forest Service before it can be implemented.

However, once it is approved it will be a powerful addition to the Upper Santa Ana River Habitat Conservation Plan. And once the latter plan is approved by state and federal environmental agencies, Valley District and other Inland Empire water agencies will be able to receive an "incidental take permit" from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which will enable them to move forward with new water capture, groundwater recharge and flood control activities along the Santa Ana River that have been frozen for the past four years because of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concerns about the current status of the Santa Ana sucker population and their ability to authorize incidental take of the species.

The federal agency doubled the critical habitat area for the sucker in 2011, presenting an additional hurdle to obtaining required permits for construction of new water supply projects and preventing Valley District and Western Municipal Water District from taking advantage of newly secured water rights on the Santa Ana River.

But while water agencies have challenged the Service's decision to double the critical habitat area in court, the water agencies have cooperated with federal agencies and invested millions to improve habitat conditions for the Santa Ana sucker and to ensure the species' long-term survival.

Valley District is asking Dudek to evaluate seven remote San Bernardino Mountain streams to see which ones have the best potential to provide permanent habitat for Santa Ana suckers. These include City Creek, Alder Creek, Lytle Creek, the Santa Ana River behind the Seven Oaks Dam, Plunge Creek, Mountain Home Creek and Mill Creek.

"We need biologists to go out and evaluate the habitat in each of these mountain streams to make sure that there are enough food sources and sufficient habitat areas to sustain the fish during each of their life stages," said Heather Dyer, a former U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fish biologist who now works as a water resources manager for Valley District.

Once the evaluations are completed, Valley District will select the three best stream locations as new habitats for the Santa Ana sucker.

Dyer said the plan would ensure that thousands of Santa Ana suckers are bred in captivity and then placed in remote natural mountain habitats that are free of non-native predators, such as largemouth bass, black bullhead catfish and green sunfish, and other threats that Santa Ana suckers face downstream as the Santa Ana River flows through the populated areas of western San Bernardino and Riverside counties.

"This plan will enable us to not only establish new population centers for Santa Ana suckers, but individual fish should be healthier and the population more resilient since they will be living in a more natural environment free of many stressors present in the current habitat," Dyer said.

As it stands right now, most of the known Santa Ana suckers live along a two-to three-mile stretch of the Santa Ana River between the Rialto channel in Colton and the Mission Avenue Bridge in Riverside.

However, Santa Ana suckers that live in this lowland stretch of river face numerous threats, including being eaten by non-native fish. Santa Ana suckers feed on algae that covers rocks and gravel on the river bottom. But the algae suckers normally feed on is often covered by red algae, a tropical plant from fish aquariums that has somehow been introduced into the river. Suckers also face threats from pollution and the destruction of their habitat by homeless camps as well as off-road vehicle enthusiasts.

Santa Ana River water temperatures are also known to rise to levels that are too warm for Santa Ana suckers.

"It's degraded habitat," Dyer said. "The water is really warm, sometimes up to 90 degrees. It's barely tolerable in places. So the fish in the Santa Ana River are probably smaller in size and

less healthy than they would otherwise be if they were living in more natural surroundings in the mountains. These fish are also probably not producing as many eggs because they are essentially using all their energy reserves to survive in degraded habitat rather than produce large amounts of eggs. We expect that the translocated fish will successfully reproduce, survivorship will be high, and the populations will expand rapidly in the upper watershed because of the high quality habitat available in these creeks,” Dyer added.

Water agencies have spent the past few years working to restore habitat along Tequesquite Arroyo, a tributary to the Santa Ana River in Riverside. Inland Empire water agencies have also committed \$9 million, including \$4 million in Proposition 84 grant funds, to restore habitat in four tributaries that feed into the Santa Ana River during the next two years. These tributaries include Anza Creek, Hole Creek, Old Farm Creek and Hidden Valley Creek.

Heather Dyer
San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District
(909) 387-9205
heatherd@sbrvmwd.com