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**Lawsuit Opposes Wildlife Agency's Approval of Massive Newhall Ranch Project;
Development Would Devastate Wildlife Habitat, Cultural Resources Along Santa Clara River**

SAN FRANCISCO— A coalition of five environmental and Native American groups today sued the California Department of Fish and Game over its approvals of permits for the sprawling Newhall Ranch development — one of the largest single residential development projects ever contemplated in California — proposed for 12,000 acres along the Santa Clara River in northwest Los Angeles County. Newhall Ranch would create a city of more than 60,000 on a six-mile stretch of the river that is currently mostly rugged open space and agricultural land.

“It is appalling that the Department of Fish and Game, the trustee for all of California’s wildlife, approved ecological destruction on this scale,” said John Buse, a Center senior attorney. “Far less damaging options were available, but the Department brushed them aside.”

The Department’s Dec. 3 approval authorizes filling of the Santa Clara River and its floodplain on a massive scale; filling or concrete lining of nearly 20 miles of tributary streams; unearthing and desecration of Native American burial sites, sacred places and cultural natural resources such as the California condor; and the destruction of about one quarter of the San Fernando Valley spineflower population — a species found in only one other location — on and around the Newhall Ranch site, all in order to accommodate development at Newhall Ranch that has not yet been approved.

The suit was filed under the California Environmental Quality Act, California Endangered Species Act and several provisions of the California Fish and Game Code in San Francisco County Superior Court by the Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of the Santa Clara River, Santa Clarita Organization for Planning the Environment, Wishtoyo Foundation/Ventura Coastkeeper and California Native Plant Society.

The Santa Clara River is one of the few major Southern California rivers remaining in a relatively natural state. It flows for about 116 miles from its headwaters on the north slope of the San Gabriel Mountains near Acton to its confluence with the Pacific Ocean between Oxnard and Ventura; its watershed is home to a great diversity of rare species, including the unarmored threespine stickleback, the California condor, the least Bell's vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, California red-legged frog, arroyo toad, southern steelhead trout and the San Fernando Valley spineflower.

“We believe the Department of Fish and Game has much better alternatives for permitting stream alterations for Newhall Ranch,” said Ron Bottorff, chairman of Friends of the Santa Clara River. “The Department’s approvals would result in unacceptable impacts to some of the finest riparian areas to be found anywhere in Southern California — a region which has lost all but 3 percent of its historic river woodlands.”

Los Angeles County approved a plan for the Newhall Ranch development in 2003 but has not yet authorized any construction. Plans have been slowed by the bankruptcy of LandSource Communities Development — the predecessor of Newhall Ranch’s current developer. CalPERS, California’s public pension fund, lost \$970 million of state employees’ investment in Newhall Ranch with the LandSource bankruptcy.

“Before a single house has been built, Newhall Ranch has already cost California’s taxpayers and workforce, including the Department’s own staff, nearly a billion dollars of lost pension funds,” said Lynne Plambeck, president of the Santa Clarita Organization for Planning the Environment. “Although the state will never recover any of the largest single loss ever suffered by CalPERS, the state’s Fish and Game Department has once again endorsed this same development that will threaten the region’s water supply, worsen air pollution, and cause further gridlock on our highways.”

“The project will impart irreversible impacts to the ecological integrity and water quality of the Santa Clara River watershed and Ventura’s coastal waters, and harm the wellbeing of watershed residents and visitors for years to come,” said Jason Weiner, associate director and staff attorney at the Wishtoyo Foundation’s Ventura Coastkeeper Program. “The impacts to hundreds upon hundreds of our burial sites, and natural cultural resources such as the California condor that are such a vital component of our culture and religious practices, will be devastating and irreversible,” added Mati Waiya, a Chumash Ceremonial elder and executive director of the Wishtoyo Foundation.

The San Fernando Valley spineflower is an endangered plant that was once found scattered throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties but was believed extinct for decades until it was rediscovered in 1999. The spineflower’s entire remaining known range now consists of about 30 acres at two separate locations: Newhall Ranch and Ahmanson Ranch in Ventura County. The Ahmanson Ranch population was spared from development in 2003 when the site was acquired by the state for conservation.

“The Department’s proposed spineflower preserve is based on junk science that is as likely to lead the Newhall Ranch spineflower population to extinction as it is to save it,” said David Magney, president of the Channel Islands Chapter of the California Native Plant Society. “We need a preserve that actually preserves the species.”