

WHITE PAPER: Critical Habitat for the Santa Ana Sucker/Task Force

The San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District (SBVMWD) has been a leading agency of the Santa Ana Sucker Task Force. Formed in response to the US Fish and Wildlife Service's expanded critical habitat designation for the Santa Ana Sucker, the Task Force has been active over the past couple of years. Water agencies, cities and other affected entities along the Santa Ana River quickly realized that the Fish and Wildlife's expanded critical habitat designation would adversely affect the ability to secure additional local water supplies and undertake other important projects. The Task Force undertook an education campaign to make sure that citizens, government leaders and USFWS understood the potentially devastating consequences of the habitat designation. USFWS ignored the economic impacts of its decision and failed to coordinate with local agencies, both of which are required by the Endangered Species Act.

The protection of the Santa Ana Sucker is a priority for SBVMWD, and the agency is working closely with federal, state and local agencies in a collaborative process to protect the fish and its habitat. Many members of the Santa Ana Sucker Task Force have been collaborating for the past decade to study the fish and protect the Santa Ana Sucker's habitat. In fact, much of the habitat was already included in the Western Riverside County Multi Species Habitat Conservation Plan, a regional conservation plan with 22 participating agencies encompassing 1.26 million acres of territory. The US Fish and Wildlife Service should not have ruled as it did unless it found that the MSHCP was not being implemented, which did not happen.

Currently, the Santa Ana Sucker Task Force is appealing a court decision to try and maintain its legal challenge against the critical habitat designation. SBVMWD believes that the appeal should be successful because of the merits of our case and hopes that it can continue to brief legislators about the status of the court case. Critical projects to enhance local water supplies are at risk because of the USFWS decision, and SBVMWD has a legal obligation to ensure that water supplies are adequate to meet the growing demand for our region.