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LOS ANGELES RIVER

THREAT: Inadequate management, climate change and pollution

STATE:

California

AT RISK:

Clean water, healthy communities, wildlife habitat

SUMMARY

The Los Angeles River (LA River) is perhaps best known for its concrete. Some may not even recognize the flood control channel as a river, with 95 percent of its riverine habitat already lost to urbanization. However, the river's natural heart still beats and its future is at stake. As urbanization continues to impact the river's health, a number of public agencies— the LA Flood Control District chief among them— are considering plans that determine the river's fate. They must abandon plans that prioritize concrete and instead embrace a vision that prioritizes river health, equitable community access and climate resilience.

LOS ANGELES RIVER, CALIFORNIA

PHOTO: FRIENDS OF THE LA RIVER

THE RIVER

The Los Angeles River flows 51 miles through 17 cities, including Burbank, Glendale, Compton, Long Beach and Los Angeles, from its headwaters in the San Fernando and San Gabriel Valley of California to the Pacific Ocean. The river was once a water source for the region's Tribal Nations, including the Fernandeano Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, Gabrielino-Tongva, Gabrielino-Kizh and Chumash tribes.

The LA River is one of the only remaining semi-natural places accessible to the historically marginalized communities through which it passes. Los Angeles has distinct dry and wet seasons, causing the river to fluctuate between low and high flows during storms. The LA River is prone to floods in large storms and communities are put in harm's way as floodplains are developed. Following several devastating floods in the 1930s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spent 40 years channelizing in an attempt to control the river. Today, the Los Angeles County Flood Control District and the Army Corps govern the river, which is seen more as a flood control channel than a living river.

Some natural sections of the LA River do remain. Thanks to the advocacy of local organizations, volunteers and activists, as well as key investments by the City of LA and Army Corps, nature is reemerging. These areas serve as vital water-filtering, carbon-sequestering habitats that bolster biodiversity and provide millions of people access to nature.

THE THREAT

The LA River is at a critical crossroads with two vastly different visions for its future— one vision prioritizes nature and connecting communities; the other seeks to control nature and divert water from the river, possibly rendering it dry and leading to increased climate risks. While major cities across the globe are freeing rivers from concrete channels and creating more equitable access to nature, LA County is pushing a new Master Plan that is overly reliant on concrete and other outdated approaches and denies communities natural climate solutions that could ameliorate extreme climate impacts.

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LOS ANGELES RIVER, CALIFORNIA

PHOTO: FRIENDS OF THE LA RIVER

Simultaneously, the cities of LA, Glendale and Burbank are all embarking on significant water recycling projects that would stop the flow of water to the river if they are done without proper planning. Currently, the LA River is fed by water coming from wastewater treatment plants. In theory, recycling wastewater makes a lot of sense. However, if all of that water is recycled and none is returned to the river, then nothing will be left to sustain life in the river or provide the opportunity for water-related amenities for under-resourced communities along the river.

River management as proposed in the Master Plan and wastewater recycling plans would thwart future opportunities for ecological repair and seal the river's fate as a "flood control channel." These approaches are not in the best interest of the public. We must do better and invest in a healthy habitat that keeps the river flowing, filters water, air and recharges our aquifers.

River-adjacent communities have long demanded ecological restoration, environmental remediation and access to nature. Current plans for the river do not meet these demands. A healthy LA River with trees and other riverside vegetation is critical for protecting biodiversity and achieving climate resiliency through urban cooling and carbon sequestration, promoting greater community health and equity. The time is now for bold vision and bolder action.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Environmental and justice groups, Tribal Nations and community leaders are ready to begin the journey to restore the river and adjacent communities to health, but they need decision-makers to meet them halfway. This must start with the LA County Flood Control District halting their adoption of the Master Plan, and instead partnering with river adjacent cities, the Army Corps, and state and federal officials to establish a unified river governance structure. This body should then work with the community to adopt a holistic vision for a healthy river that prioritizes natural climate solutions for the river's frontline communities and promotes watershed permeability that allows stormwater to absorb into the ground. This process must be driven by frontline communities whose health and well-being depend on the river and must include strong anti-displacement policies and equitable access to the river.

In addition, the California State Water Control Board should determine optimal multi-beneficial river flows before cities can move forward with water recycling projects. These projects can be beneficial if they are done with consideration of river flows.

Lastly, LA City and County should expedite habitat restoration and clean-up projects to begin the long process towards a healthy LA River and resilient communities.