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Is the State of California Plotting the Ballona Wetlands' Demise?

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BY JOSEPH
TSIDULKO



David De Lange of the Audubon Society at the mouth of Ballona Creek
PHOTO BY TED SOQUI

Late last month, as L.A. residents got ready for the holidays, 40 impassioned environmentalists and Westside residents donned lime green T-shirts declaring their cause at a meeting of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors: "Don't Bulldoze Ballona."

They took turns beseeching the five supervisors to not allow the County Department of Public Works to expedite a project that would drastically alter the mouth of Ballona Creek adjacent to Marina del Rey, as well as its surrounding 600-acre wetlands ecosystem.

Which was strange because, according to two county Public Works officials who testified immediately after, there is no project slated for the Ballona Wetlands or Ballona Creek, which originates nine miles east of the ocean at La Cienega Boulevard and drains water from the Los Angeles Basin into Santa Monica Bay.

Public Works deputy director Massood Eftekhari at first danced around the question, saying he was before the supervisors simply to request funding to expedite a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers review of a number of flood-control projects.

"This is not an authorization at all about the project known as Ballona Creek," he told them.

But Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky seemed as baffled as the activists. So he proposed a simple solution: Remove the Ballona Wetlands Restoration Project from the list of 12 "priority" projects across L.A., named in a draft Memorandum of Understanding between county Public Works and the federal Army Corps.

"What harm would it do, to what you're trying — what we're collectively trying — to achieve?" Yaroslavsky asked.

Eftekhari answered definitively: "No harm whatsoever."

"This is not approving any kind of a project — that's what you got through saying," Yaroslavsky reflected. "That's what you've been telling us and the public for several weeks," he added, explaining that he wanted to be clear because Public Works wouldn't come before the elected board "unless you're going to start doing something."

Eftekhari reiterated: "The removal of reference to Ballona Creek does not impact the process at all."

But then Eftekhari conferred with Public Works assistant deputy director Gary Hildebrand and reversed himself. Ballona needed to be on the priority list, Eftekhari said, but he cryptically insisted: "It's only authorization to work on 'whatever.' "

The crowd of environmentalists jeered, prompting another round of incredulous examination from Yaroslavsky. He asked why he should believe "there is no project" or view the project's opponents as inventing "these conspiracy theories that this is really a secret way to get this project going."

"If I wait five minutes, maybe you'll give me a different answer on that?" Yaroslavsky asked. Eftekhari's response: "This is a very complex project."

Public Works spokesman Kerjon Lee later told *L.A. Weekly* that his department is just "assisting an administrative review" on behalf of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, an autonomous state agency governed by a 37-member board of state and federal officials, scientists and citizens, whose mandate is to protect Santa Monica Bay and its 130 square miles of watershed.

Lee insists that Public Works favors no particular vision for restoring

Ballona's sensitive coastal estuary, wetlands and protective uplands.

One of a handful of coastal wetlands that has survived development in L.A. County, Ballona was the focus of a long war waged by environmentalists against the L.A. City Council and Army Corps of Engineers. By 2003, the activists had saved 600 acres, which were obtained by the state and designated a protected area.

Lee tells the *Weekly* that any proposed project to alter the estuary is a long way from an Environmental Impact Report and public comment.

But outraged activists from several environmental groups believe the obscure Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, part of California's Environmental Protection Agency, is quietly pushing through its preferred alternative. They say the expedited review the Corps wants county supervisors to fund would clear a key hurdle to dramatically reconstructing Ballona Creek — a project that John Ulloth of the Ballona Institute colorfully described to county supervisors as one that would "break that condom."

On paper, the project looks like one wildlife enthusiasts would love — a man-made, meandering stream instead of the man-made channel that spills Ballona Creek's freshwater into the salty wetlands and estuary.

The remake would require tearing down the earthen levees that encased Ballona Creek more than 70 years ago.

But some who study the state-protected wetlands say removing the levees is a formula for environmental disaster in the flora- and fauna-rich ecosystem.

David De Lange, former president of the Los Angeles Audubon Society, says the "so-called restoration" is derided as the "bathtub plan" by many environmentalists, because it would transform the estuary into a flood basin with constant tidal flow, destroying habitat for rare and

endangered plants, birds, marine life and other wildlife.

Nor will a curvy, prettier stream return the habitat to its condition of 70 years ago, when the Corps built the levees to end storm flooding, according to University of Southern California geographer and environmental scientist Travis Longcore.**

Removing Ballona Creek's levees would let excessive ocean surge into seasonal freshwater and brackish habitats, Longcore wrote in a letter imploring officials to reject the plan. He says the "full tidal system" envisioned by the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission is the opposite of restoration: It creates something that has never existed, at least in the last 2,000 years.

Marcia Hanscom, who chairs the Sierra Club's Ballona Wetlands Restoration Committee, says removing the levees would also drain urban runoff into the ecological reserve.

So is the state's Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, which includes such powerful figures as Gov. Jerry Brown's Secretary for Environmental Protection, Matt Rodriguez, advancing a plan many environmentalists oppose — or not?

The commission's executive director, Shelley Luce, insisted in a written statement to the *Weekly*, that no specific plan exists — merely an agreement between the Army Corps and the county's Flood Control District to "pay for some Corps staff time" so the Army's engineers can review "certain county projects."

"The state is drafting several alternative designs for the wetlands restoration" Luce insisted, and once the Environmental Impact Report assessing those designs is made public, anyone can offer feedback.

Luce said the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission and its nonprofit partner, the Bay Foundation, are working on the restoration

plan with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, which controls the land.

Luce is also executive director of the Bay Foundation, and the state commission and private foundation seem to share much of their other staff. Bay Foundation staff "carry out the wetlands science and education related to Ballona," according to Luce.

But the *Weekly* obtained written details of the "county projects" that suggest Luce may not be speaking forthrightly.

In the proposal Public Works submitted to the Corps, six pages are devoted to an extensive and detailed project to create "a more sinuous channel" by removing the levees. Of six other alternatives suggested for study, only two don't call for remaking Ballona Creek. Each of those two alternatives is described in only a brief sentence.

Representatives of the Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Grassroots Coalition, the League of Humane Voters and other organizations suggest that Luce and others who work for the Bay Foundation and Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, without its 37-member board's approval, have chosen the first option, and with the imprimatur of the Department of Public Works are making premature claims to the Corps that reconstructing Ballona Creek is an "environmentally acceptable and technically sound project," De Lange says.

Hanscom alleges, "They have been going about planning this whole project behind the scenes."

Hanscom helped lead the battle that saved 600 acres at Ballona Wetlands — after a group calling itself Friends of Ballona Wetlands had signed a legal settlement with Playa Capital that protected far less land from the developer's ambitions.

But Eftekhari and Hildebrand, of the county Department Public Works, appear to be shrugging off the activists' demands. This month, they are

expected to again ask supervisors to approve the list, including Ballona Creek.

Hanscom says she's not about to let an ill-advised new project undermine the last decade's victory. "We've saved this land once before," she says.

**An earlier version of this article incorrectly identified University of Southern California geographer and environmental scientist Travis Longcore as a geologist.