

# County begins destructive four-year sediment removal project

## *Mindless of habitat value*

BY TIM BRICK  
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PHOTOS COURTESY OF ARROYO SECO  
FOUNDATION

**T**wenty-five years ago Pasadena dedicated Hahamongna Watershed Park at the mouth of the Arroyo Seco as a nature preserve. Now Los Angeles County Flood Control District (FCD) bulldozers and trucks are ripping into the precious habitat in the park, destroying the most vital environmental zone in our region. At the end of four years of devastation, the county will leave a massive 50-acre pit in the middle of the stream zone and again strip it of vegetation each subsequent year.

LA County has never fully recognized the significance of what Pasadena did when, in

1993, it established Hahamongna Watershed Park. For many decades the western portion of the basin had been a county park, Oak Grove Park, but the county turned it over to Pasadena, which set up an elaborate community planning process that eventually set lofty goals for the newly expanded Hahamongna Watershed Park. Today county engineers still refer to the area as Devil's Gate Reservoir, ignoring the fact that their 100-year-old flood easement is now in the middle of a Pasadena nature preserve.

Sediment is not a new problem in Hahamongna. It has plagued county engineers since the 1930s. Indeed, most of the accumulated sediment behind the dam has been there for 80 years. In the 1940s, the county had to drill a large tunnel through the dam for sediment release, and in the early 1970s the sand and sediment reached higher than the current level without any fear-mongering or disaster.

In recent decades instead of developing an ongoing sediment management program, the FCD engineers allowed the sediment to build



Making Hahamongna grade again

up to a dangerous level. Most everyone agrees a sediment management program is needed, but it should have begun 20 years ago. Instead the county has not removed any significant amounts from behind their dam since 1994, and that project was only about 10% of the current effort.

In other words, FCD's inactivity has compounded the problem, and now it wants to undo 100 years of sediment buildup in four. Its intensive "Big Dig," which will involve 425 diesel truckloads per day, will multiply the negative impacts on the nature in Hahamongna and on the local schools and neighbors, including all of us who live in this area.

Devil's Gate Dam was an early single-purpose experiment. Now faced with the challenges of climate change, a new, integrated approach to watershed management is needed to assure flood protection, but also protect wildlife, birds and habitat of this rare region, for the neighbors and for recreational opportunity.

County staff promotes the mandatory mitigation program as compensation for the damage they will do. But they will not be able to recreate the environmental value of the riparian and alluvial scrub zone that their big pit will destroy. They will plant similar species on slopes and in upland areas around the big pit and surround them with artificial irrigation systems, but that landscaping will not survive the next flood or the irresistible forces of nature. And the denuded big pit will



↶ Trees become trash



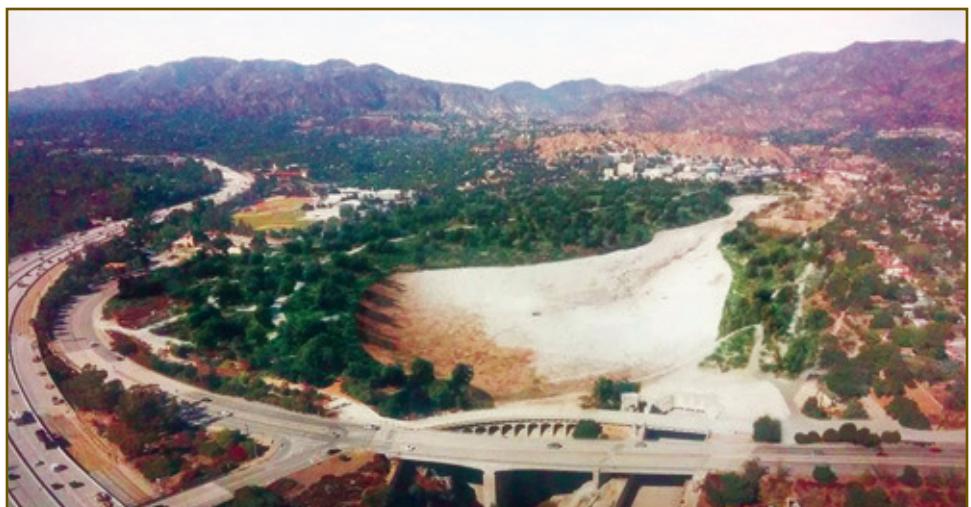
Staging for destruction

spread weedy, invasive species throughout the rest of Hahamonga, further degrading what is now a key wildlife and habitat corridor.

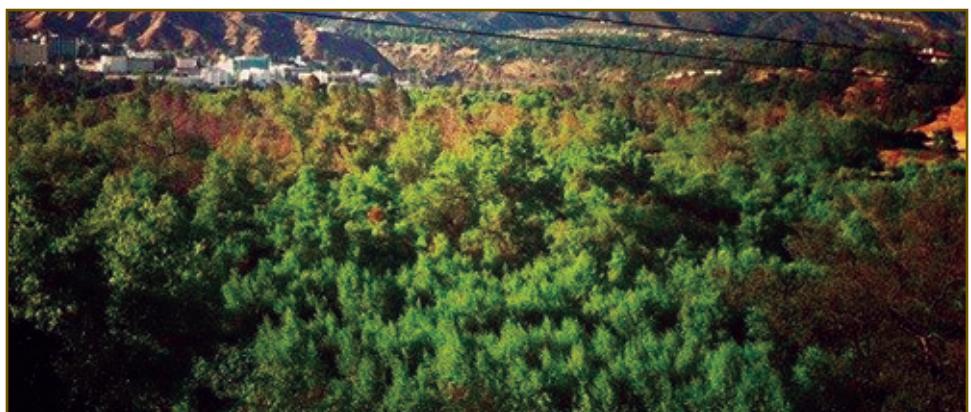
In the recent November election, the FCD promised voters nature-based solutions to stormwater programs to win support for Measure W, a tax that will give it and local agencies \$300 million annually to clean up and better manage the streams of LA County. Its Big Dig is an excruciating example of the wrong way to go.

The city of Pasadena, for its part, has been remarkably passive about the destruction of our region's greatest environmental treasure. After backing a more moderate and environmentally-sensitive sediment management program in 2014, city officials and staff have offered scant resistance to the destruction of Pasadena's largest park and to the enormous burdens that the county's project will impose on local residents including air pollution, traffic congestion, habitat destruction and lost recreational opportunity.

The Hahamonga dream sadly will be defeated as long as Pasadena and the courts permit the FCD to treat Hahamonga as a maintenance yard, rather than a river.



This is the county's rendering of what Hahamonga will look like after the sediment (and everything else) is removed



Something better: a dense forest of stream-zone habitat



County mitigation plan will not replace mature trees. *Photo by Bill Christian*

## Big Dig ‘mitigation’ plan is defective on all counts

BY BILL CHRISTIAN  
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The LA County Flood Control District’s (FCD) Hahamonga/ Devil’s Gate sediment removal project will remove about 70 acres of prime wetland and riparian habitat from the Arroyo Seco watershed. The plan to construct a large permanent working area in the basin will also significantly interfere with animal migration through the arroyo. Federal and state laws require projects that will displace habitat and adversely affect species to mitigate for such losses.

The FCD has agreed to implement mitigation actions to compensate for the impacts to habitat resulting from the sediment removal project. FCD, in consultation with state and federal agencies, has chosen two options. First, to improve habitat surrounding the pit by removing invasive plants and replanting with native species. Second, by purchasing rights to improve habitat on a private mitigation bank located in the high desert.

There are quite good reasons to be skeptical of FCD’s promise to restore and create habitat on site, and even better reasons to be dismayed about the selection of a site outside the Arroyo Seco and LA River watershed.

Attempts to establish or restore native habitat, especially riparian and wetland areas are fraught with difficulty. Historically, many mitigation projects have failed or delivered only a fraction of the promised benefits. Success for the sediment removal project mitigation will be significantly hampered by the absence of shallow groundwater and periodic surface flows to support groundwater dependent vegetation — willows, cottonwoods and other wetland and riparian species that are so important for birds and other animals. FCD will attempt native plantings, bolstered by irrigation, but long-term success is questionable. And the previous size species and density of the vegetation will not be reached.

The purchase of credits from the distant

mitigation bank (near Palmdale) to offset habitat destruction in the arroyo seems even less warranted. The privately owned and operated Peterson Ranch mitigation bank is managed for grazing. It lies nearly 2000 feet higher in elevation than Devil’s Gate. The terrain and ecological setting is greatly dissimilar to the arroyo.

Why, when mitigation rules strongly favor in-basin sites and there are so many excellent opportunities to improve the ecological functioning of the Arroyo Seco as well as in the wider Los Angeles River watershed, was this choice made?

Compensatory mitigation — to offset the destruction of habitat — is the very last step in arriving at acceptable conditions for project approvals. The cardinal requirements are to first avoid and minimize harm by taking as little habitat as possible. FCD’s plan fails to do that, taking far more habitat and more permanently than necessary.