

Testimony of Michele Zack
Historian and Chair of Altadena Watershed Committee
Regarding USACE Arroyo Seco Watershed Feasibility Study

I would like to offer this testimony in support of funding in the amount of \$600,000 for Fiscal Year 2007 for the General Investigations Account of the US Army Corps of Engineers for the Arroyo Seco Watershed Feasibility Study. This study will take into account data from previous studies, and identify 4 or 5 major projects on which the Army Corps can follow through.

Arroyo Seco: Natural, Historical, and Cultural Gem

The Arroyo Seco Watershed Feasibility Study presents the opportunity for a federal project to have unique and far reaching impacts: there is no watered canyon in Southern California with a more seminal history and no other canyon at the center of such a densely populated area. The Arroyo Seco watershed is relatively small, at under 47 square miles, yet it covers an area that meanders from high in the San Gabriels – among North America’s steepest, most dramatic mountains – down to the region’s urban heart in downtown Los Angeles.

The Pueblo of Los Angeles was sited on high ground above the confluence of the Arroyo Seco and the Los Angeles River to avoid the fierce, intermittent flooding that occurs there, but several communities have nested along the Arroyo Seco’s banks since Native American times. Then the Arroyo served as a highway up to the main entrance of a popular trade route crossing the San Gabriels in present day Altadena. Tar from the prehistoric La Brea pits, valuable for its water-proofing qualities, was traded by Indians and found its way via this route to points as far east as the Mississippi River.

In modern times the Arroyo Seco flows (mostly, but not exclusively, in concrete channels) through communities of Altadena, La Canada Flintridge, Pasadena, South Pasadena, and Northeast Los Angeles before it meets the L.A. River just north of downtown Los Angeles. Devil’s Gate was built across it just below the foothills as L.A. County’s first flood control dam in 1920. The ancient canyon is today home to such landmarks as NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena’s Rose Bowl, the Southwest Museum, and many parks and other open spaces on both sides of the Pasadena Freeway – originally called the Arroyo Seco Parkway. Four well-used recreational trail systems converge in the upper Arroyo, with one of them continuing down all the way to the L.A. River.

More than a half a million people from every socio-economic group live within sight of this urban canyon. Many of them drink local water, with those in the upper reaches, such as Altadena, relying on local sources for as much as 50 percent of their water.

Altadena: One Unique Community within the Arroyo Seco Watershed

Watersheds don't recognize city, county, state, or even national boundaries; that is why hydrologists, biologists, and other scientists can only analyze such a resource by considering each ecological area within it – its opportunities and challenges – while taking the whole system into account to devise an overall management plan.

A case in point is the section of the Arroyo Seco abutting Altadena. This community sits at the urban interface: the Los Angeles basin spreads out below, and the San Gabriel Mountains are at its back door. Sited atop a porous outwash plane of decomposed granite, soil conditions in Altadena create far greater aquifer recharge opportunities than in more urban, paved, clay-soiled, or densely populated areas to the south. Likewise, this area is crisscrossed by many trails leading up into Angeles National Forest, across the Arroyo, and into La Canada Flintridge, that provide recreational opportunities not just for Altadena and down-stream communities, but for the entire region. On the challenge side, as John McPhee points out in his book, *Los Angeles Against the Mountains*, every year roughly seven tons of rock, soil, and decomposing granite wash down from every acre of the San Gabriels off slopes averaging 65 to 70 percent grade – something to be managed in upper sections of the Arroyo Seco if catastrophe down below is to be avoided. McPhee concludes “. . .these mountains are not fooling with this city.”

The ecologies of the Arroyo Seco are as diverse as the humanity, architecture, and cultural resources along its banks. Only an overall management plan can begin to heal the degradation of water quality and habitat currently found there, or to develop the numerous opportunities afforded by this unique and historic watered canyon running through the massive conurbation of modern greater Los Angeles.

This Study Is Crucial, both to the region and to the Federal Government

Here we have a tremendous resource at risk, yet one that is within reach of being healed. Numerous studies, including one completed by the United States Army Corp of Engineers in 2002, have outlined in detail the importance of restoring

this watershed – and warned of the serious consequences of not restoring it. Water quality, supply, flooding, habitat, erosion, recreation, and conservation issues have all been identified, along with the federal government’s real and strong interest in using this particular watershed as a terrific “bang-for-the-buck” opportunity to develop a model of watershed management planning. Balancing the need for sustainable economic development with the need for protecting watershed resources *absolutely* go hand in hand – each supports the other – according both to science and current administration policies.

Nowhere do these two needs come together more dramatically, or with stronger potential to impact a large population, than in the Arroyo Seco.

The Los Angeles region needs federal assistance to meet the challenges of keeping its economy vital as three of its imported water sources are likely to be reduced in coming years. These looming reductions (from the Colorado River, the Owens Valley, and the California Water Project) throw into stark relief the importance of cleaning up watersheds, recharging aquifers, and implementing effective conservation efforts so that local water sources can meet more of our local needs. We need federal help in meeting the water standards that have been set.

All of these goals would be included in a holistic watershed management plan. The USACE Arroyo Seco Watershed Feasibility Study will take into account the findings of various local studies, its own findings, and **identify four or five specific projects** that will finally move us ahead in healing the Arroyo Seco.

That is why I strongly support funding of \$600,000 for Fiscal Year 2007 for this vital study. It seems a modest investment, and one that will reverse the discouraging trend of appropriating only \$100,000 in 2006 for it, and the current plan to eliminate it entirely from the proposed FY2007 federal budget.

Thank you for considering my testimony.