

May 30, 2024

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Subject: 2024 Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area Community Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes

Morgan Newcomb,

The Community Advisory Committee (CAC) Meeting held on Thursday, May 30, 2024, from 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. via Zoom is summarized in the meeting minutes below.

Meeting Minutes

I. Welcome/Introduction/Housekeeping Rules

Attendees:

- Bill Eick
- Gina Cruz
- Debbie C.
- Olivia Miseroy (LA County Parks and Recreation)
- Morgan Newcomb (Public Works)
- Maria Lee (Public Works)
- Paul Morrissey (Chambers Group)
- Jackie Mayfield (Chambers Group)

- a. Morgan Newcomb began the meeting by providing the Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area’s email address to attendees: BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov.
- b. Paul Morrissey (Chambers Group biologist) provided a brief timeline of Chambers Group’s history working at the Mitigation Area from its inception in 2000 to 2006, and from 2017 until present.

II. Review of Meeting Agenda

III. Summary of 2023 Eradication Program

- 1. Brown-headed cowbird trapping
 - a. Discussion of brown-headed cowbird (BHCO) life history and their impacts on native songbirds.
 - b. Description of BHCO traps, how they function, and how they are maintained.
 - c. In 2023, BHCO trapping occurred between April 2 and June 29 to reduce nest parasitism on songbirds during their prime nesting season (April 1 to June 30).
 - d. Traps are maintained daily, and any non-target species captured are released.
 - e. Fifty-eight BHCOs were captured and removed from the Mitigation Area in 2023 including 17 males, 41 females, and no juveniles.
 - f. It’s very important that female BHCOs are captured as each female can lay between 40 and 60 eggs per season.



- g. Trap 2 near the Tujunga Ponds was vandalized on April 15, 2023. An opening was cut in the trap mesh and one male BHCO decoy escaped. The escaped decoy was recaptured the next day.
 - h. After least Bell's vireo (LBVI) were documented nesting on site in 2020 for the first time since the inception of the Mitigation Area, Trap 2 was moved near the Tujunga Ponds and closer to LBVI habitat in 2021.
 - i. LBVI have been observed nesting and/or present in the Mitigation Area every year since they were first observed using the site in 2020.
2. Exotic Plant Eradication Program
- a. In 2023 exotic plant eradication efforts were conducted from January through December.
 - b. A brief history of the Exotic Plant Eradication Program was provided.
 - c. The main purpose of this program is to remove non-native and invasive plant species from the Mitigation Area, thus increasing resources for native plants to establish and thrive.
 - d. Biologists are onsite with the restoration crews during removal efforts to make sure sensitive resources are avoided (such as nesting birds and LBVI), to make sure that the correct plant species are being targeted for removal, and that native plant species are being avoided.
 - e. In 2019, LA County banned the use of herbicides and only mechanical removal methods were used thereafter. On June 9, 2023, LA County approved the use of certain herbicides once again. Glyphosate continues to be banned.
 - f. A mix of mechanical and herbicidal removal methods are typically used on the site. Herbicide was only used in the Mitigation Area in June 2023.
 - g. Annual species were hand pulled or cut with weed whippers. Shovels and digging bars were used to remove long-lived annuals and perennials from the root. Seedless plant material is left to decompose on site, and any viable seed heads are collected and disposed of offsite.
 - h. Target species included non-native grasses, mustards, Russian thistle, poison hemlock, sow thistle, tocalote, and others.
3. Exotic Wildlife Removal Program
- a. Efforts to remove exotic, aquatic wildlife are conducted multiple times of year to target different life stages. The main reason for exotic species removal is to help protect the federally threatened Santa Ana sucker and other special status fish species found in Haines Canyon Creek and the Tujunga Wash including arroyo chub, and the Santa Ana speckled dace.
 - b. In 2023 exotic removal efforts occurred from January through March, May through August, and October through December.
 - c. A brief life history discussion of non-native fish and why it's important to remove them.
 - d. Discussion of exotic species removal methods. Dip-netting, hand-capture, Hawaiian sling, and seining methods were used in the creek, and seining and spearfishing methods were used in the ponds.

Question (Q) 1, Gina Cruz – (paraphrased) As equestrians frequently ride through the areas around the ponds, is any notification posted along the trails leading to the ponds so that equestrians can stay out of the biologist's way and so the horses are not surprised by the work occurring at the ponds?



Answer (A) 1, Paul Morrissey – (paraphrased) We’ve never done that. We usually access the ponds by way of an access road that is often flooded and generally has low equestrian and pedestrian traffic. We usually have at least three vehicles and a boat that are pulled to the side so that the trail is not being blocked. Every time we are working in the ponds we come across hikers or equestrians that stop and ask what we are doing, and we answer their questions and let them know we are trying to improve the habitat quality for our native species. We are highly visible when we’re out there and we are hard to miss.

Comment (C) 1, Gina Cruz – Okay great, thank you.

- e. Species captured in 2023 included American bullfrog, bluegill, common carp, green sunfish, goldfish, largemouth bass, red swamp crayfish, and western mosquitofish.
- f. Largemouth bass are voracious predators and can be detrimental to the native fish populations in Haines Canyon Creek. Largemouth bass can lay up to 2,000 eggs per pound of body weight. The largest bass captured in the Tujunga Ponds in 2023 was 10 pounds. Removing gravid females is key to reducing the non-native fish population.
- g. 22,689 exotic aquatic individuals were removed from the Tujunga Ponds and Haines Canyon Creek in 2023.
- h. Rock dams, built by site users to cross the creek or create pools in Haines Canyon Creek, prevent migration of native fish and reduce foraging opportunities. Large pools created by the rock dams provide prime habitat for predatory largemouth bass and can become filled with bacteria and parasites when site users swim/recreate in the pools. These bacteria and parasites can be detrimental to native fishes. Chambers Group removes rock dams when encountered and tracks the location of dams to see where problem areas are occurring.
- i. The exclusionary screens between the ponds and creek are critical in keeping largemouth bass and other large, predatory fish out of native fish habitat within the creek. Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation helps to maintain/repair the screens. The screens are cleaned monthly during the dry season and weekly during the wet season to make sure they are free of debris and allowing natural creek flow without flooding.

4. Trails Maintenance Program

- a. All authorized trails on the site have been approved by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Keeping the trails clear is key to reducing the formation of new, unauthorized trails and detours into native habitat.
- b. Examples of work conducted by trail crews include the removal of downed trees and the removal of cobble and rock that turns up in the trail over time. This includes regrading and delineating the trails to make the trails more comfortable for horses and safe/passible for all site users.
- c. Flood events also move sediment and expose cobble and rock in the trails. Cobble and rock in the trails can make navigating trails difficult for both horses and hikers.
- d. Maintenance crews primarily cut back non-natives encroaching on the trails but will also cut back natives such as poison oak.
- e. Trash and bulky debris are also removed from the site when encountered.
- f. Occasionally signage and non-barbed wire fencing is installed to help keep site users safe and on authorized trails.



- g. The 15th Annual Trails Cleanup Day occurred on December 2, 2023. Each cleanup day event lasts about 4 hours, and at the end, Public Works helps remove all the collected trash, bulky debris, and any hazardous materials collected from the site. The 16th Annual Trails Cleanup Day is planned for fall 2024.
5. Public Outreach Program
- a. The Community Awareness Program includes public outreach weekend site visits, the distribution of the biannual *Big T Washline* newsletter (typically distributed in the spring and fall) and the Community Advisory Committee Meeting that serve to help educate and inform the community about the Mitigation Area.
 - b. Chambers Group bilingual biologists conducted four outreach efforts during peak-use weekends in 2023 to interact with the public, survey the public about how they use the Mitigation Area, answer any questions, and hand out educational brochures.
 - c. All site incidents are recorded and reported to Public Works and/or the appropriate law enforcement agency as appropriate.
 - d. Public outreach efforts will continue at the Mitigation Area in summer 2024.
6. Water Quality Monitoring
- a. We have four water quality monitoring locations that are sampled every fall.
 - b. Water is tested for pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals that could be detrimental to aquatic species. We want to make sure that we are protecting sensitive fish species and site users.
 - c. The water samples are collected and taken to a lab where they are professionally analyzed. The lab results are published in an annual water quality monitoring report.
7. Incident Monitoring
- a. Incident monitoring was ongoing throughout 2023. Chambers Group biologists and maintenance crew members documented information on any incidents encountered, including incidents reported to them by site users.
 - b. Any issues that were easily remedied (such as rock dams) were taken care of as soon as practicable by Chambers Group personnel. Any issues that required a larger effort or agency/law enforcement assistance were reported to Public Works.

Q2, Gina Cruz – (paraphrased) So, when it comes to these prohibited activities and issues out there, who should we tell people to report these to? Because we kind of have an ongoing issue for all the equestrians out in the (Hansen) dam area as to which law enforcement agency to report incidents to. So, on the county side, I assume we're contacting the sheriff if it's a law enforcement issue, right?

A2, Paul Morrissey – (paraphrased) If it's an absolute emergency leave the site and when you're in a safe location contact the sheriff.

Q3, Gina Cruz – (paraphrased) Do they (the sheriffs) have the ability to get in there? Will they show up with offroad vehicles? Do they really get in there and police it? This is an issue we're having on the city side as well. They often find dammed up areas and sometimes some of the riders will stop and try to move things out of the way because they know they shouldn't be dammed up. Who do we contact when we find something like an issue on the trail or an area of the creek that's been dammed up, is that the Public Works email?



A3, Morgan Newcomb – (paraphrased) If you have an emergency call the sheriff and then follow up with Public Works and let us know so we can coordinate with law enforcement, as necessary. The Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation email is the best way to contact us, but we are not police so if you have a pressing issue contact the sheriff. If there is a maintenance issue or non-urgent site issue, please contact Public Works and we can coordinate a response with Chambers Group or our maintenance team. We monitor the Mitigation Area email daily during the work week and should be able to get any information but again, if there is a pressing issue, please call the sheriff. We don't want anyone to get hurt out on site.

Q4, Gina Cruz – And just to let you know in case you're not aware, we've been having a huge problem with ATVs out near the dam. It's been a huge problem on the City parks side. About a week ago, a friend of mine who was out there on her horse caught video, 11 dune buggy style, huge ATVs passing right in front of her. This occurred on the City side, but I'm sure they're entering the County side as well, so I think there needs to be some kind of meeting of minds to work on this issue. I think we need the County to join in with the City side and work on securing the area, because these guys are finding ways to get in. They've pushed boulders out of the way, they've broken down chains, and they take off. We're having a really tough problem with law enforcement. I'm not sure how secure your side of the dam is. I'm not sure if you have anything to do with the gate at the Wheatland offramp?

A4, Morgan Newcomb – Yes, we've been trying to get it fixed.

Q5, Gina Cruz – Is that your gate?

A5, Morgan Newcomb – (paraphrased) No that is not our gate. I've been calling the City every day for the last two weeks. The gate is more than likely the Department of Water and Power's, which is the City, but separate. We are actively working on trying to find someone to take ownership of the gate. The inside, yellow gates are ours, but the main gate at the offramp is not ours. We have little control over reporting ATVs unless it's on our site. If you get any more information, find spots in the gate where they're coming through, or find tire tracks, take pictures and send them to the Mitigation Area email and I will log them. If they are cutting through the chain-link along where the County side meets the City side, please let us know.

C2, Gina Cruz – (paraphrased) I will put a message out to everyone on our Facebook page that if they see anything in the Mitigation Area to please let us know and then we'll report it back to you.

Q6, Gina Cruz – (paraphrased) I've noticed a number of times when I've been driving by, that the gate to the Cottonwood entrance has been wide open. I worry about possible illegal access when it's open. Do you normally leave it open when you're working or close it behind you?

A6, Paul Morrissey – (paraphrased) It depends on what we're doing. We use the Cottonwood Avenue entrance. We have a Conex shipping container that holds all our equipment. We're onsite daily between February and June or July. We have a crew of between 3 and 8 workers on site, so if there are ever any trail maintenance issues, you can head to the container and let the crew know and they can help you. Most of the time we close that gate. We do have a daily presence at Big T through July and then several times a week through the rest of the year. We do have staff onsite and you can approach them and let them know any concerns. Chambers Group staff will pass any concerns on to me, and I will pass them on to Morgan and Maria (Public Works).

Q7, Gina Cruz – (paraphrased) Do your vehicles have official markings so that when people are on site hiking or riding, they know that it's a vehicle that's supposed to be there?

A8, Paul Morrissey – (paraphrased) Yes, there is typically at least one vehicle with a Chambers Group logo on it. We do have workers that come from other areas and may not have our logo, but all our crew park in the same place near the shipping container, and they all back in. The vehicles are most often four-door pickup trucks (with either open bed, or canopy). That area is our staging area, so if you need to talk to our crew, please do.



C3, Gina Cruz – Great, thank you.

Q8, Bill Eick – (paraphrased) This goes back maybe 10 years, there was an article in the LA Times about the County employees raising bullfrogs at the Big Tujunga Dam and then letting them go. I don't know if they are still doing that, but you might want to go up there and make sure they aren't doing that again.

A8, Paul Morrissey – (paraphrased) Bullfrogs are on our target species list and we are required to remove them not breed them. Our biologists know the difference between native frog and bull frog tadpoles, and we remove the bullfrog tadpoles in addition to the adults.

C3, Bill Eick – (paraphrased) They were breeding big bullfrogs up at the Tujunga Dam, and that may be the source of some of that stuff (invasive species). The other thing is, there is an article in the LA Times about the least Bell's vireo. It was a good article. See if maybe you can get the Times to allow you to reprint that and put it on your page.

C4, Morgan Newcomb – (paraphrased) I just have to go through the process of confirming internally and with LA Times because the article is technically behind the paywall. If I can get that approved to put on our site, I think it would be good supplemental information I just have to go through the process of seeing if they'll allow it. But I do have it bookmarked. Thank you so much for sharing that.

C5, Bill Eick – No problem. That's it.

C6, Paul Morrissey – Ever since the fire (Creek Fire) blew through the area in 2020, we haven't had many bullfrogs but were starting to see a few bullfrogs come back and we're taking care of them. If it ever gets to the point where we're hearing multiple bullfrogs, we'll have a crew come back at night to remove them, but they're definitely on our list of species to remove. We don't want them there.

Q9, Bill Eick – By the way, have you found any problems with pesticides from the golf course seeping into the water?

A9, Paul Morrissey – We have not. And that (the golf course) is one of the reasons we have to do water quality monitoring. There are certain monitoring thresholds at the state and federal level that we have to stay within, and we are within those thresholds. It's something that we monitor on a regular basis. Haines Canyon Creek becomes surface at the Tujunga Ponds, it's not flowing in from an outside source, so typically that water is pretty clean. Our crew gets in the ponds to spearfish in that water, so we want to make sure it stays clean. The water quality samples we've collected since 2017 have been very good.

C7, Bill Eick – Well that's good. Good to hear that.

C8, Morgan Newcomb – Thank you for your questions, Bill.

IV. Current Status of Programs for 2024

1. Brown-headed cowbird trapping
 - a. Same program and methods for 2024 as 2023.
 - b. Four traps (same locations as 2023) began operation on April 1. Trapping will continue daily through June 30, 2024.
 - c. Twenty-nine BHCs were captured and removed from the Mitigation Area in April 2024 including 7 males, 22 females, and no juveniles. Very close to what we did last year.
 - d. No trap vandalism had occurred as of the end of April.



- e. So far, we have two pairs of least Bell's vireo on site and a solitary male (total of 5). Our biologists monitor them to make sure no work occurs within 500 feet of any territory, and as of May 30, we had at one nest successfully fledged.
- 2. Exotic Plant Eradication Program
 - a. Eradication efforts have occurred monthly since January 2024.
 - b. A highly wet 2023/2024 rainy season has led to extensive weed germination.
 - c. Chambers Group restoration crews are onsite daily to monitor weed growth and developmental stage, prioritize work areas, time removal/treatments appropriately, and adapt our strategy as needed.
- 3. Exotic Wildlife Removal Program
 - a. Exotic wildlife eradication efforts have occurred in January, March and May so far in 2024.
 - b. Efforts have focused on spearfishing and removing large non-native adult fish before they start laying eggs.
 - c. Thirty-four exotic fish have been removed from the ponds as of the end of March, including 32 largemouth bass, 1 brown bullhead, and 1 goldfish.
- 4. Trails Maintenance Program
 - a. Big T had a lot of rain in February. The volume of water that enters the site during storm events can wreak havoc on the trails. Trails become washed out, boulders get washed onto the site, and trails can become impassible. Chambers Group crews worked to clean up the trails, remove any fallen trees and debris, and re-delineate the trails.
 - b. Site users should use caution when on the site during a rain event, or if there are rain events occurring upstream of the site as the site is prone to flash flooding.
- 5. Public Outreach Program
 - a. Public Outreach efforts will continue this summer.
 - b. The Community Advisory Committee meetings will continue to be held annually in the spring.
 - c. Incident monitoring is ongoing. If you let Chambers Group know of any issues when you see us on site, we will document it and take care of it as soon as possible.

V. Comments, Questions, and Answers

1. The floor was opened to the group for additional comments and questions.

C9, Gina Cruz – (paraphrased) On behalf of equestrians who use the dam, I just want to thank you because the trails in the County area that your group maintains are in great shape and we appreciate all the work that you do. I don't get over to that side very often, but every time I've been over there the way that the trails are clearly laid out and marked and maintained is just wonderful, so I just want to thank you for all your work.

C10, Paul Morrissey – (paraphrased) Thank you, Gina. That's very nice. I will let the crew know. They will love to hear this because it is a lot of hard work, and the positive feedback makes life a little easier for them.

Q10, Gina Cruz – (paraphrased) Back when the Creek Fire happened, I know there was a lot of concern about a bunch of trees and vegetation that was possibly piled up behind Gibson Ranch that was considered part of the habitat area that some folks were blaming for the reason Gibson Ranch burned so badly. Whether that was the



case or not, has that been mitigated? Are we careful about keeping the area around the structures that are adjacent to the Mitigation Area cleared? How is that being managed now that we're in an almost year-round fire season? How do you handle fire risk?

A10, Paul Morrissey – (paraphrased) That's a great question and a good point you're bringing up. It's a fine balance. We want to make sure we cut down weeds but that we still leave nutrients for the plants. But, with that said, we do have specific clearance areas that we have to observe including trimming native species around structures like near the equestrian areas. Around two years ago, we assisted Public Works with some assessments of trees that had burned in the fire that were considered nonviable due to being burned so badly. They were still standing, but we actually cut down 30-plus large trees that could have fueled future fires and removed them from the site. So, we not only clear the area around the equestrian center structures but have also conducted larger operations on site to manage the fuel load and reduce fire risk.

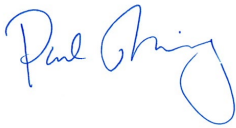
C11, Gina Cruz – Thank you.

2. Closing comments and reminders.

If you have any questions regarding this record, please feel free to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

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