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Drain Handles The Rains, But Public Cooperation Is Needed To Save Habitat

By Angela Bonfiglio Allen, Environmental Planner, Ventura County Watershed Protection District

When people litter, what harm is done? When people allow their contaminated runoff to flow into a drain, what cost is imposed on the public?

One person's litter, or one person's runoff may not be significant. However, because of the harm to the environment caused by an entire city's litter and runoff, government agencies are looking for ways to incorporate environmental protection into public works.

For example, last month, the Ventura County Watershed Protection District completed enlargement of a drain handling runoff from Hueneme Road to Ormond Beach. This drain has many features (described later) to reduce the damage caused by litter and runoff. When undertaking a project to protect residents and businesses from a flood, Ventura County is also required by law to protect the Ormond Beach Lagoon.

The drain serves as a flood control channel, improving on a drain originally constructed in the autumn of 1956 as an emergency measure to protect approximately 203 homes and one school in south Oxnard and east Port Hueneme from the imminent danger of flooding that winter.

Since construction of the channel in 1956, the Ormond Beach Lagoon has expanded substantially. This has translated into development of extensive habitat for native fish and wildlife, including endangered tidewater gobies (a tiny fish) and California least terns (migratory birds). Gobies inhabit and reproduce in the lagoon year-round, with breeding peaking annually in the spring and fall. Terns are seasonal residents, typically arriving in early May and departing by September each year.

Given the presence of such important species at Ormond Beach Lagoon, the Watershed Protect District had to ensure enlargement of the J Street Drain protects not just residents and businesses from flooding, but also protects fish and wildlife. This included implementing measures such as dewatering the channel while terns were at their wintering grounds, conducting weekly surveys during the bird nesting season, and assembling a crew of biologists with expertise in handling the endangered tidewater goby to relocate them during the channel dewatering. In all, an estimated 14,221 gobies were successfully relocated from the J Street Drain to the adjacent Ormond Beach Lagoon during the course of construction!

Also ensuring continued use as an endangered species habitat, the recently constructed part of the drain is constructed as an open channel, rather than being buried underground.

Other portions of the drain to be reconstructed in the future, where there are no endangered species, will be buried underground, perhaps with a lineal park on top, providing a safe travel route for pedestrians and bicyclists, offering a public gathering place for South Oxnard residents, and beautifying the neighborhood along J Street.

Most importantly, a substantial amount of trash currently reaches the J Street Drain from the streets of Oxnard and Port Hueneme, ultimately flowing to the Ormond Beach Lagoon and eventually the Pacific Ocean. By covering the J Street Drain, trash will no longer be able to blow into the channel, and litterers will not be able to dump large items directly into this section of the channel.

Expensive species protection, as part of expansive infrastructure, is sometimes necessary to reduce the harmful effects of development, pollution, litter, and runoff, while still protecting residents and businesses from floods. Even when these projects are implemented, lagoons, the ocean, fish, and wildlife still rely on us all to keep our eye on the environment, dispose of trash responsibly, and prevent contaminated runoff.

On the net:

For more information about endangered species, visit <http://www.fws.gov/ventura/>

For more information about the J Street Drain, visit www.jstreetdrain.com

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