

Staples Ranch Environmental Group Asks for Investigation into Filling of Wetlands

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The Alameda Creek Alliance has asked the San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board to investigate the apparently unpermitted filling of seasonal wetlands at the Staples Ranch site in Pleasanton. A public records request and investigation by the Alameda Creek Alliance revealed that wetlands on the Staples Ranch site were filled without required permits from the Water Board.

"The wetlands on the Staples Ranch site were potential breeding habitat for the threatened California tiger salamander and were documented to support a population of a rare plant, the San Joaquin spearscale," said Ralph Kanz, Conservation Director for the Alameda Creek Alliance.

The City of Pleasanton is currently proposing a development project for the Staples Ranch site. During environmental review for the Staples Ranch development, the Alameda Creek Alliance learned that construction of the Arroyo Las Positas Realignment/Arroyo Mocho Widening Project in 2003 filled wetlands in the northwest portion of Staples Ranch with surplus soils.

A 1994 wetland delineation identified this area as having all the features of an alkali sink or vernal pool, including San Joaquin spearscale, a rare plant usually found in alkaline soils. A portion of the wetlands was filled with 6-12 inches of water, potentially enough to provide breeding habitat for salamanders. The California tiger salamander depends on ephemeral vernal pools for breeding. In recent decades, 95 percent of California's vernal pools have been lost, and at least 75 percent of the salamander's habitat throughout the state has been eliminated.

"Although the filled area will never again provide habitat for wetland species, the impacts of past and future activities should be properly mitigated, especially when habitat for threatened and rare species is altered or destroyed," said Jeff Miller, Director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. "The City of Pleasanton and Alameda County must fully mitigate for wetland habitat loss on the Staples Ranch site."

The Alameda Creek Alliance and the Center for Biological Diversity filed and won a lawsuit challenging an inadequate environmental review for the Staples Ranch development project in 2009.

A settlement with the City of Pleasanton resulted in a supplemental review of the project's effects on sensitive plants and wildlife in December of 2009. This supplemental review is also considered deficient by the Alameda Creek Alliance since it did not fully disclose the impacts to wetland species and habitat.

According to the settlement, after completing an environmental study, the city must reconsider the project approvals, in light of its new information. If the city rescinds the project approvals it can either drop the project or adopt new or revised findings, an updated mitigation and monitoring program, and a revised Staples Ranch Specific Plan Amendment.

If the city does not rescind the approvals, the conservation groups can re-file the lawsuit challenging the February 2009 approvals and the certified report, with the supplemental report not admissible in the case. The conservation groups retain the option of challenging any new or revised project approvals, limiting any challenge to the extension of Stoneridge Drive through the project area, biological impacts, greenhouse gas emissions, and cumulative impacts associated with a nearby mining operation.