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Court Upholds Habitat Protections for Rare Southern California Fish

LOS ANGELES— A federal judge has upheld protections for 9,300 acres of critical habitat for Southern California's [Santa Ana sucker](#), a small native fish that has vanished from nearly 95 percent of its historic range since the 1970s.

Twelve water districts and cities had challenged the 2010 designation that protected sucker habitat in San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange and Los Angeles counties. The Center for Biological Diversity, California Trout, San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society and the San Gorgonio Chapter of the Sierra Club intervened in the case on behalf of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to assist defense of the habitat designation.

"This is a big win for the Santa Ana sucker," said Adam Lazar, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. "These protections will help make sure this tiny fish has a future, but they'll also protect all kinds of other wildlife that depends on these rivers for their survival."

Monday's ruling by U.S. District Judge James V. Selna bookends more than a decade of litigation over the Santa Ana sucker, including successful challenges by the Center and allies to get it listed under the Endangered Species Act and then secure protections for some of its more important habitat. The latest decision rejects a broad array of attacks on the sucker's critical habitat designation, including claims that the designation violated both the Endangered Species Act and administrative procedure. These claims were all thoroughly rejected by the judge.

"As part of the Santa Ana Sucker Conservation Team, I've watched the sucker population in the Santa Ana river decline to a point where its very existence is on the line," said Ilene Anderson, a biologist with the Center, which has been working to protect the sucker for more than a decade. "This ruling preserves the desperately needed designation of critical habitat for the sucker — the bare minimum the species needs to survive. And it'll ensure water quality and quantity for people too."

The designation protects habitat in stretches of three Southern California rivers and their tributaries: the Santa Ana River (in San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange counties) and the San Gabriel River and Big Tujunga Wash (both in Los Angeles County). Adequate critical habitat is a clear benefit for the fish; studies have shown that species with critical habitat are twice as likely to be recovering as those without it.

Background

The Santa Ana sucker is a small, olive-gray fish found in clear, cool, rocky pools of creeks, as well as gravelly bottoms of permanent streams with slight to swift currents. Many of these streams are naturally subject to severe seasonal flooding, which can decimate resident fish populations. The Santa Ana sucker possesses adaptations that enable it to repopulate its birth streams rapidly after such unpredictable events. The fish eats primarily algae, which it searches out with the large lips that gave it its common name. The species was well distributed throughout the Los Angeles, San Gabriel and San Bernardino rivers historically, but is now relegated to only a few stream stretches.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 450,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.



Photo by Paul Barrett, USFWS. [This photo](#) is available for media use.

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