

**Channel Islands Restoration
Los Padres ForestWatch
Santa Barbara Audubon Society
Santa Barbara Channelkeeper
Santa Barbara County Action Network
Urban Creeks Council**

June 16, 2023

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RE: Montecito Emergency Debris Flow Mitigation Project

Dear Officials,

The undersigned organizations collectively submit this letter regarding the Montecito Emergency Debris Flow Mitigation Project (Ring Net Project) for your consideration. In 2019 local residents responded to the threat of catastrophic debris flow following the Thomas Fire by forming The Partnership for Resilient Communities (TPRC). The aim of TPRC was to install up to 11 steel ring nets across three Montecito creeks for the purpose of increasing protection for downstream homeowners until the fire-scarred slopes had revegetated. Six ring nets were installed across San Ysidro, Cold Spring, and Buena Vista Creeks in 2019.

Our organizations acknowledge and express condolences for the community members who were terribly impacted by the 2018 debris flow. We respect and appreciate the project proponent's interest to provide additional protection and peace of mind for homeowners in the immediate aftermath of this tragic event. However, we believe that the time has come to terminate the temporary project and restore the creek corridors to their prior, unobstructed condition. Our position is based on (1) unsafe and environmentally detrimental conditions resulting from a 25-foot-tall accumulation of small debris behind the Upper San Ysidro ring net, which has not been abated as required by permit conditions, and (2) the upcoming expiration of the permits at the end of this year. We urge your agencies to use your authorities to begin taking steps towards the removal of the ring nets prior to the next rainy season.

Brief Project Background

In 2018, Santa Barbara County Planning Department granted the Ring Net Project an emergency permit¹ and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) exemption citing “the clear and imminent risk to life and property posed by the threat of debris flow events during the upcoming winter rain season”. The emergency permit was granted for installation of the nets and one year of maintenance as a “short-term project meant to prevent or mitigate the immediate threat to the Montecito Area,” after which point-in-time the nets were to be removed.

In March of 2019, an Escrow Account was established between TPRC and CDFW, using private funding, to maintain over one million dollars for the purpose of securing performance of Emergency Permit obligations including monitoring, maintenance, and removal of the nets. By June 2019, four nets were constructed. The Escrow Account was amended in December 2019 to substitute TPRC funds with Santa Barbara County public funds to enable TPRC to fund the construction of two additional ring nets². By November 2019, all six ring nets were constructed.

In March 2020, TPRC initiated additional permitting with Santa Barbara County and the Department of Fish and Wildlife to maintain the nets beyond the original one-year term. One year later, Santa Barbara County issued a Zoning Clearance³ to authorize continuation of the project. In September 2021, CDFW issued a Final Streambed Alteration Agreement⁴ (SAA), which incorporates the Zoning Clearance maintenance requirements.

Under these current permits, the ring nets are required to be removed by December 21, 2023.

Project Maintenance Requirements

Permit conditions established for the project incorporate a variety of requirements to avoid environmental impacts including construction related impacts. Maintenance requirements were also established, including the following actions to be performed following “major debris accumulation”:

- Nets will be inspected within 24 hours of each storm event.
- If the inspection indicates that a repair is required and/or that there is debris in a net, repair and/or removal of debris shall commence as soon as possible, preferably within 48 hours but no later than 72 hours after the net inspection.
- Heavy-lift helicopters will transport a Spyder excavator to the net locations.
- Under the supervision of a biologist, material is to be excavated and redistributed down channel to restore the low-flow channel to pre-event elevation.

¹ County Emergency Permit No. 18EMP-00000-00007

² Resolution of the Board of Directors of the Santa Barbara County Flood Control and Water Conservation District No. 19-223

³ County of Santa Barbara, Planning and Development, Zoning Clearance No: 20ZCI-00000-00158

⁴ Department of Fish and Wildlife, Final Streambed Alteration Agreement, Notification No. 1600-2020-0076-R5

Current Conditions

In January 2023, the net on upper San Ysidro Creek filled up with debris after the first major storm of the season. From all appearances, the net filled, *not* with the SUV-sized boulders the community was concerned about, but with smaller vegetation that backed up against the ring nets and then trapped thousands of cubic yards of cobble, gravel and sand that would have otherwise been transported to downstream beaches.

The structure currently serves as a 25-foot dam entirely blocking the creek, fragmenting sensitive wildlife habitat and posing a serious public safety hazard and liability. As of the writing of this letter, no maintenance has been performed nearly 6 months after the stream channel was originally blocked.

Lessons Learned

Environmentally, the Ring Net Project is a modern anomaly, cutting against decades of effort and millions of dollars invested locally to *remove* existing barriers from streams. The construction of new barriers in streams is currently almost unheard of due to the myriad of environmental impacts such structures are known to create and the harmful legacy of existing barrier structures constructed historically throughout this region and western United States. It is with these impacts in mind, that project conditions were established to ensure prompt maintenance following storm events.

Whether the nets can be efficiently and effectively maintained after filling with material has always been the key question raised by environmental groups, scientists, community members, and many public officials. Current conditions, however, clearly demonstrate that prompt maintenance is simply not feasible given the remote nature of the ring nets and an assortment of other limitations and factors.

As the creek remains blocked heading into the summer season, our organizations call upon local officials to re-examine the long-term future of the ring net program. Current circumstances demonstrate that the nets are not feasible to maintain. Public funds, better utilized for other purposes, are now being relied upon to implement the project. It remains unclear when and how San Ysidro Creek will be restored to pre-storm conditions. It's unclear what real amount of risk the nets mitigate for downstream neighborhoods or to what degree the nets may increase risk to downstream community members by providing a false sense of security. The mountains are now largely revegetated, and the risk of future catastrophic debris flows is very significantly reduced.

Under current restrictions, the nets are slated to be removed by the end of 2023, unless further extensions are granted. We find that this timing for removal coincides well with the lessons learned last winter regarding the infeasibility of maintenance.

The Ring Net Project was described as experimental by project proponents and always considered temporary by permitting resource agencies. We find that its purpose has now been served. It's time to restore our creeks and take down the ring nets.

We thank you for your support and prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

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CC (Via electronic mail):

Montecito Planning Commission c/o David Villalobos
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US Army Corps of Engineers, North Coast Branch/Ventura Field Office

Daryl Hodges, U.S. Forest Service, Los Padres National Forest, Santa Barbara District

Figures



Figure 1: Upper San Ysidro Creek ring net plugged with vegetation and debris - April 1, 2023



Figure 2: Upstream view of Upper San Ysidro Creek ring net - May 12, 2023