

LOS ANGELES TIMES EDITORIALS



MARK H. WILLES, *Publisher*
 DONALD F. WRIGHT, *President and Chief Executive Officer*
 MICHAEL PARKS, *Editor and Senior Vice President*
 JANET CLAYTON, *Editor of the Editorial Pages and Vice President*

Saving Natural California

Our heritage is fast vanishing; lawmakers must act

As budget-writing time approaches in Sacramento, the interest groups are getting out their wish lists for a slice of a surplus that could run to \$2 billion or more. Before lawmakers divvy up the bounty, however, they should give special priority to the environment.

California resource and environmental protection programs have suffered at the budget table the past decade as pressures built for spending restraint and as the recession slashed revenues. Now is the time to begin to catch up.

In the state Parks and Recreation Department alone there is a \$500-million backlog of deferred maintenance and construction. The California Coastal Conservancy needs more than \$500 million for access and restoration of wetlands, riparian habitat and other projects. The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy is behind by more than \$300 million.

The state also lags in its commitment to local flood control projects, the acquisition of wildlife habitat and recreation lands by the Wildlife Conservation Board and funds for urban river parkways and open space. The story of unmet needs is repeated throughout the budget.

Assemblywoman Virginia Strom-Martin (D-Duncans Mills) has assembled a list of \$162

million in budget investments that should be considered a modest additional commitment to the environment this year. Most of the money would go to one-time projects that would not bind the state to additional spending in future years. This is a prudent course since the state legislative analyst does not expect budget surpluses to last beyond this year.

A coalition of environmental groups has urged lawmakers to allocate at least \$100 million to the Wildlife Conservation Board for purchase of critical natural areas, \$65 million more than Strom-Martin's proposal. The \$100 million would not be unreasonable if the budget surplus runs toward the high side of current expectations.

The cost of land escalates from year to year and some important properties—such as the link between Chino Hills State Park and the Cleveland National Forest—may be lost forever if they are not bought soon.

These are pieces of California's natural heritage that are impossible to replace. They benefit all interests: urban, rural, the economic, water quality, the wildlife and waterfowl and access for all to the best of what is left of natural California. We can pass on to future generations only what we can save now.

California resource and environmental protection programs have suffered at the budget table the past decade. Now is the time to begin to catch up.