Big T Wash Line

Fall 2026

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Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area Overview

"Big T" is a conservation area located in the City of Los Angeles Sunland area (see Page 7).

The Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area (Big T) spans approximately 210 acres of sensitive habitat, including the Big Tujunga Wash and Haines Canyon Creek. Los Angeles County Public Works acquired the site in 1998 to offset habitat loss from other Public Works projects.

Since April 2000, LA County Public Works has been implementing the Master Mitigation Plan for Big T. The area protects one of Southern California's most rapidly diminishing habitat types: willow riparian woodland.

The site is home to several protected species of fish, including the Santa Ana sucker, Santa Ana speckled dace, and arroyo chub. It also contains habitat for sensitive bird species such as the least Bell's vireo and southwestern willow flycatcher.

This newsletter provides updates on ongoing programs and outlines upcoming site enhancement measures. Newsletters are published on a semi-annual basis in the spring and fall.

More information can be found at:
pw.lacounty.gov/wrd/projects/BTWMA

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Annual native and non-native species were prolific at Big T after heavy winter rains in 2024

The Return of El Niño: What Could It Mean for Big T?

As we look ahead to winter, El Niño is once again an important part of the seasonal weather conversation. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), El Niño conditions are strengthening, and this event could reach a level of intensity rarely observed in the historical record. While these forecasts give us a good idea of what may be possible this winter, they cannot tell us exactly how much rain Big T will receive. Even strong El Niño events can produce different weather patterns from one location to another.

So, what could a strong El Niño mean for Big T?

The habitats at Big T have developed under Southern California's natural periods of dry conditions followed by occasional wet years and large storm events. In other words, the overall ecosystem is adapted to change. A wet winter can provide important ecological benefits, while intense storms can temporarily create difficult conditions for plants, wildlife, trails, and site maintenance. Let's take a closer look at both sides of the rain.

Making the Most of the Rain

One of the most noticeable benefits of increased rainfall may be the response of native plants. Seeds that have remained dormant in the soil can respond to moisture and begin to germinate, creating opportunities for new native vegetation to become established. Additional water can also reduce drought stress on existing plants and improve conditions for vegetation along the riparian areas of the site.

More vegetation and water can have benefits that ripple throughout the local ecosystem. A productive growing season can provide additional seeds, fruits, insects, and other food resources for wildlife. Improved vegetation can also provide additional cover and nesting opportunities. These conditions may be particularly valuable for special status bird species that use the diverse habitats found at Big T. Additional rainfall may also provide longer-term benefits by helping replenish groundwater resources that support plants and wildlife during future dry periods.

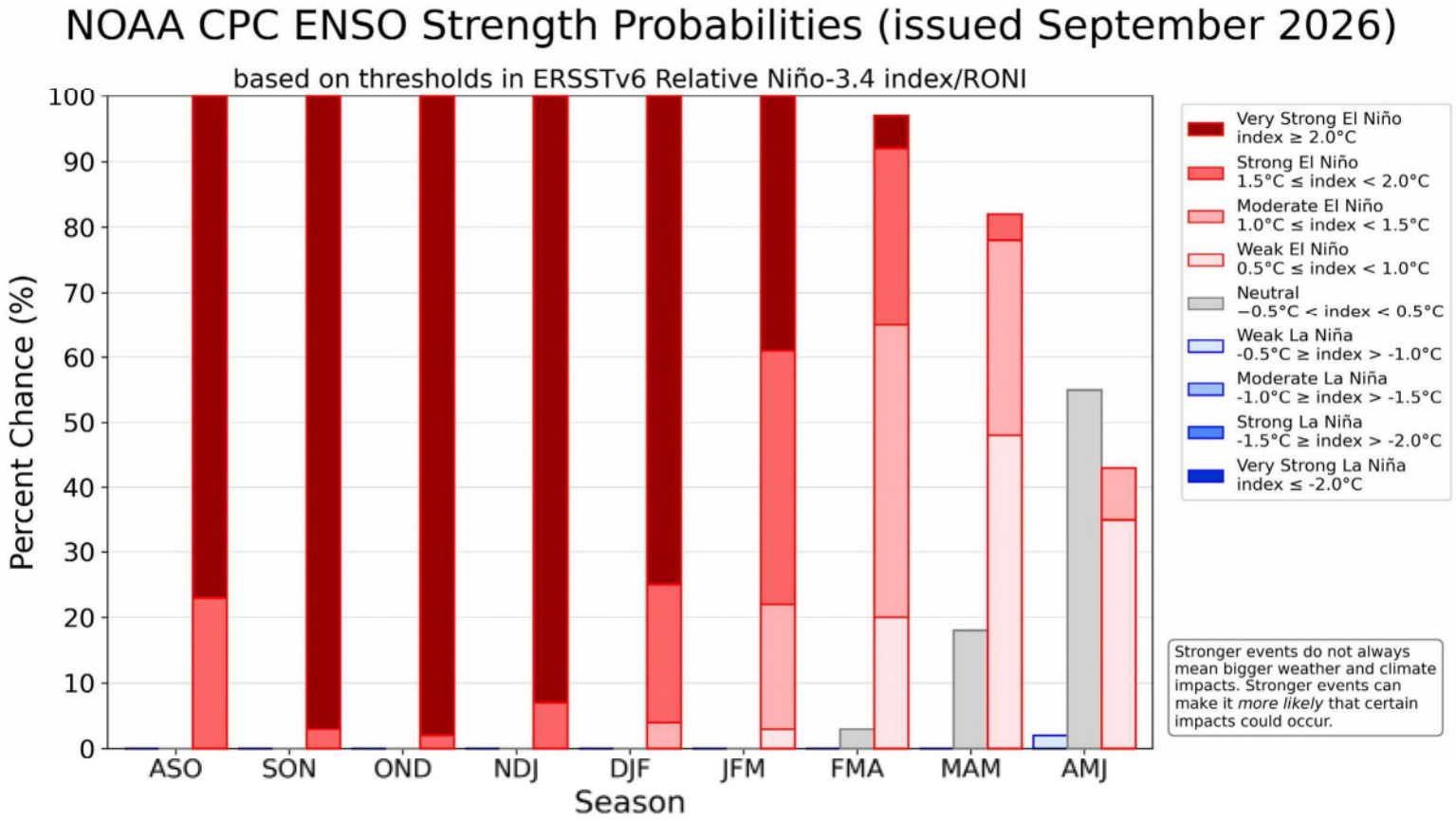
Navigating the Challenges of Rain

Of course, more rain is not always better. The same water that encourages native plants to grow can also trigger an explosion of invasive and non-native vegetation. These plants can grow quickly when water is abundant, competing with native species for sunlight, water, nutrients, and space. A wet winter can therefore create both an opportunity for native plant establishment and additional work to manage invasive species.

A particularly wet winter can also increase the amount of vegetation produced across the site. While this is generally a benefit, once that vegetation dries out during the warmer months, it can contribute to increased wildfire fuel loads. This is an important reminder that the effects of a wet winter can extend well beyond the rainy season.

Heavy storms present another set of challenges. Large amounts of rainfall over a short period can cause washes and creeks to rise rapidly, resulting in flooding, erosion, and movement of sediment and debris. Storm flows can reshape stream banks, erode portions of the landscape, and deposit material carried downstream. As a result, trails can be damaged, sometimes requiring repairs or temporary closures.

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Wildlife can be affected as well. Although periodic flooding is a natural part of the Big T's ecosystem, intense storms can temporarily displace wildlife, altering the places they use for feeding, nesting, and shelter. These impacts are generally temporary, and the ability of the habitat to recover from natural disturbances is an important part of the ecosystem's resilience.

A Natural Cycle at Big T

Ultimately, a strong El Niño should not simply be viewed as "good" or "bad" for Big T. It is part of the natural variability that shapes Southern California's landscapes.

A wet winter may bring new plant growth, improved habitat conditions, additional wildlife resources, groundwater recharge, and relief from drought stress. At the same time, it may bring invasive plant growth, increased future fuel loads, trail damage, erosion, flooding, sediment movement, and temporary wildlife disturbance.

The important thing to remember is that the habitats that compose Big T are a dynamic system. Floods, droughts, wet years, and dry years all play a role in shaping the habitat. A strong El Niño may bring some challenges, but it can also provide valuable opportunities for the habitats to grow, recover, and respond to the increased availability of water.

Flooding at Big T in February 2024 during the last strong El Nino event

As we move into the winter season, the restoration crew will continue to monitor conditions at Big T and observe how the site responds to rainfall. While we cannot predict exactly what each storm will bring, we can recognize that both the benefits and challenges of a wet year are part of the natural processes that make Big T such a unique and resilient landscape.

For the latest El Niño information and seasonal outlooks, visit NOAA's Climate Prediction Center and its El Niño/Southern Oscillation resources at:

https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/enso_advisory/ensodisc.shtml

Beneath Your Feet: The Living Soils of the Big Tujunga Wash



Exposed sandy and cobbly soils after the 2017 Creek Fire



Sandy and cobbly soils within the Big Tujunga Wash



Trail section within the western riparian area prior to maintenance to remove rocks and cobble

When you explore Big T, you may notice the sprawling native vegetation, wildlife, and scenic views of the San Gabriel Mountains. However, one of the most important features of the landscape lies directly beneath your feet. The soils that support the plants and animals of Big T tell a fascinating story of water, floods, and the natural processes that continue to shape this unique ecosystem today.

Much of Big T is underlain by Soboba and Tujunga soil types, which are described as gently sloping soils that are frequently flooded. While frequent flooding may sound undesirable, it is actually one of the key reasons the Big Tujunga Wash supports such a distinctive habitat.

Unlike many soils that remain relatively stable for centuries, the soils within Big T are constantly changing. During winter storms, rainfall in the San Gabriel Mountains flows downstream through Big Tujunga Creek, carrying sand, gravel, cobbles, and other sediment. As floodwaters spread across the wash, they deposit these materials and reshape portions of the landscape. In some areas, storms may bury existing surfaces beneath fresh sediment, while in others they may scour channels and expose older deposits. This ongoing process means that the Big Tujunga Wash is a landscape continuously under construction. Every major storm helps create the broad sandy and gravelly wash that characterizes the area today.

These soils also play an important role in the region's water resources. The coarse sands and gravels found within Soboba and Tujunga soils allow water to infiltrate rapidly into the ground. Rather than flowing entirely downstream, a portion of stormwater can percolate through these porous soils and contribute to groundwater recharge. In this way, the wash functions as a natural filtration system, helping move water from the surface into underground aquifers.

The characteristics of these soils also influence which plants are able to survive in the wash. Conditions are often dry, nutrient-poor, and periodically disturbed by floods. Native species that thrive here have evolved remarkable adaptations that allow them to establish deep root systems, withstand sediment deposition, and recover from periodic flooding events. As a result, the vegetation communities within Big T differ from those found on nearby hillsides and mountain slopes.

Many wildlife species also benefit from the dynamic nature of wash soils. Freshly deposited sandy areas provide open habitat, while older, more stable portions of the wash support established native vegetation. This variety of conditions creates a mosaic of habitats that can support a diverse array of insects, birds, reptiles, and other wildlife.

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Trail section within the western riparian area after maintenance to remove rocks and cobble

Perhaps one of the most interesting facts about the soils at Big T is that every grain of sand has a story. The sediments found throughout the wash originated as rock in the San Gabriel Mountains. Over thousands of years, weathering, erosion, and flood events have broken these rocks into smaller pieces and transported them downstream. The sand and gravel beneath our feet are records of the powerful natural forces that continue to shape Southern California's landscapes.

The same soils that support the unique ecology of the Big Tujunga Wash also create ongoing challenges for trail maintenance. The Soboba and Tujunga soils that dominate the wash are composed of loosely deposited sands, gravels, and cobbles that have accumulated through centuries of flood activity. As rainfall, seasonal flooding, erosion, and trail use continually rearrange these sediments, larger rocks that were once buried beneath the surface gradually become exposed. These cobbles can create rough trail conditions for hikers and equestrians, prompting periodic maintenance to remove hazards and improve accessibility. However, because Big T is an active floodplain shaped by dynamic natural processes, maintaining completely cobble-free trails is difficult. In many ways, the rocky sections of trail serve as a reminder that Big T remains a living landscape, constantly reshaped by the same forces of water and sediment that have defined the wash for thousands of years.

The next time you hike or horse ride through Big T, take a closer look at the ground beneath you. The rocks, sand, and gravel that make up the wash are more than just trail surfaces. They are evidence of an active landscape that is continually shaped by water, weather, and time. Each flood, storm, and season adds a new chapter to the ongoing story of the Big Tujunga Wash.

Plant Spotlight: Davidson's Bushmallow *(Malacothamnus davidsonii)*



Davidson's bushmallow plant
© *Elizabeth Lockhart*



Davidson's bushmallow flower
© *Elizabeth Lockhart*

Davidson's bushmallow, also known as Tujunga bushmallow, is a rare California native shrub found only in Los Angeles County, making it a true local treasure. Known for its soft, velvety leaves and clusters of light pink flowers, this beautiful plant adds color to Southern California hillsides and canyons for much of the year. Blooming from summer into winter, it provides an important nectar source for pollinators when many other native plants are not flowering.

This species grows in chaparral, coastal scrub, woodland, and riparian habitats, often on slopes and along canyon systems in the Sunland-Tujunga area and nearby foothills. As a California endemic, Davidson's bushmallow occurs nowhere else in the world.

Despite its adaptability, Davidson's bushmallow faces a number of challenges. Habitat loss from development, invasive plants, altered fire patterns, trail construction, and other human activities has reduced and fragmented many populations. Because of these threats and its limited distribution, the California Native Plant Society ranks the species as Rare Plant Rank 1B.2, meaning it is considered rare and moderately threatened in California.

Protecting Davidson's bushmallow helps conserve the unique biodiversity of Southern California. Its continued presence in local foothills and canyon habitats serves as a reminder that even in one of the nation's largest urban areas, remarkable native plants still persist and deserve protection.

Sources: California Native Plant Society Rare Plant Inventory, Calflora, and Jepson eFlora.

Join us for the 18th annual

Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area

TRAIL CLEANUP DAY



December 5, 2026 | 8 a.m.

Water, snacks, and trash bags will be provided.

PLEASE BRING:

- Comfortable, closed-toe shoes
- Gloves
- Hat
- Sun block
- Bug repellent

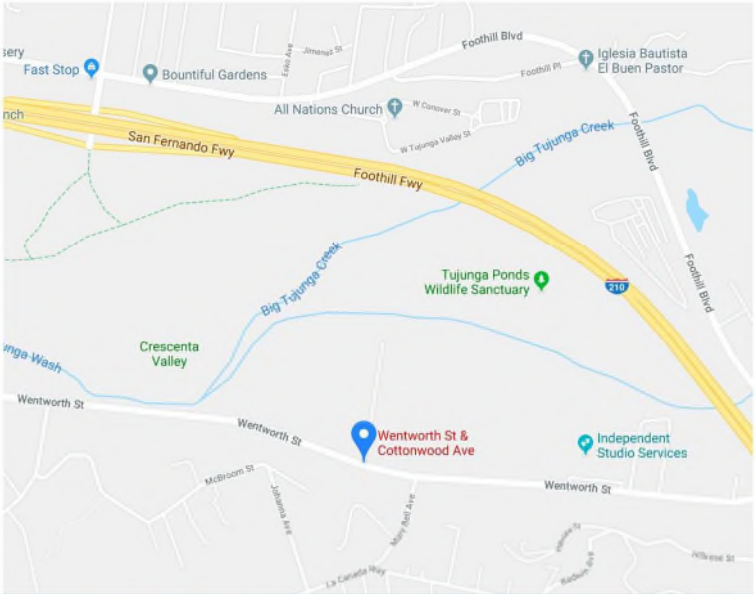
If there is rain or poor weather, the event will be rescheduled.

For more information email:
btwma@pw.lacounty.gov

ADA and Title VI Accommodations: Individuals requiring reasonable accommodations, interpretation services, and materials in other languages or in an alternate format may contact the Public Works coordinator at (626) 458-7901. Requests must be made one week in advance of the scheduled meeting date. Individuals with hearing or speech impairment may use California Relay Service 711.

Public Works
LOS ANGELES COUNTY

LOS ANGELES COUNTY FLOOD CONTROL DISTRICT



Meet at the Cottonwood entrance (Wentworth St. / Cottonwood Ave.)

Kid'S Corner

Draw Your Own Flood Plain

Draw Big T before and after a storm.
Include **SAND**, **GRAVEL**, **COBBLES**, **WATER**, **PLANTS**, **WILDLIFE**, and **TRAILS.**
How did the storm change the landscape?

Before the storm

After the storm

Report emergencies and major incidents (like fires) by calling 911

- *To report minor incidents or regulations infractions contact Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Parks Bureau Trails Team at (323) 845-0070. (Please DO NOT use 911.)*
- *Do not attempt to enforce regulations yourself; please allow law enforcement to handle the situation or incident.*
- *For emergency follow up or to report minor incidents, obtain information, or get questions answered (8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Thursday), please contact:*

Los Angeles County Public Works
900 S. Fremont Ave
Alhambra, CA 91803
Email: BTWMA@pw.lacounty.gov

(English) For reasonable ADA and Title VI accommodations, interpreting services, and other materials in other languages, please contact Public Works at btwma@pw.lacounty.gov. This service is free.

(Spanish) Para acomodaciones razonables de ADA (Ley de Estadounidenses con Discapacidades) y Adaptación del Título VI, servicios de interprete y materiales en otros idiomas, por favor contactarse con Obras Publicas al btwma@pw.lacounty.gov. Este servicio es gratuito.

(Chinese) 如果您需要合理的便利安排、口譯服務和其他語言的材料，請聯繫公共工程部，電話 btwma@pw.lacounty.gov 此服務為免費服務

Where is the Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area?

Downstream of Big Tujunga Canyon, in Lake View Terrace and south of the 210 freeway, there is a native riparian (water loving plant) natural area filled with cottonwoods, willows, and pools of water that support many native aquatic species.

For more information, scan the QR code to visit the Big T website.

